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Faith Seeking Understanding: A Reply to Radenovic's "Philosophy of my Faith"

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Abstract

Ljiljana Radenovic's "Philosophy of my Faith" (2021) makes the valuable point that for a philosophical account of religious belief to be satisfactory it must adequately address what it is like to have religious belief. The challenge, Radenovic notes, is that contemporary philosophical debates about religion are at times different to, or have no serious interest in, discussions about what it is like to believe. This division needs to be bridged, but I think that the way how Radenovic goes about doing so is unsuccessful. It is therefore only fitting, due to my support of the method but disagreement with the conclusion, to write a reply which follows suit—let us conduct our own meditation on religious belief and then compare our conclusions with Radenovic's ... [please read below the rest of the article].

Meditation on Religious Belief

There are several puzzles which surround the question of God's existence, and the one which we shall consider is that of belief. What is a belief in God like—must a belief in God be religious and what do we mean to mark by the term 'religious'? To begin, let us make sure that we have the right sort of question in mind.

We are not asking about God's existence per se, but rather the belief in God's existence; what is a belief in God like? The most basic answer is that a belief in God is an ordinary sort of belief—it is the assenting to the proposition which asserts the existence of that which 'God' references—or in other words, to believe in God is to think that the proposition 'God exists' is true. If a belief in God is a belief of this sort, then the whole matter seems rather simple to resolve—a belief in God is a matter-of-fact belief that the object which 'God' references exists, and this is either factually true or false. But this lacks something which Radenovic's article does so well to draw attention to—religious belief is not reducible to a series of propositional claims which you agree with.

If I was asked whether a belief in God is reducible to the belief that the Principle of Sufficient Reason adequately establishes the existence of a necessary being upon which all contingent things have their existence accountable to, I would say yes and no. Yes, insofar as people do present the Principle of Sufficient Reason as an argument in favour for the existence of God and therefore as a reason for belief, but I also want to say no because Christ did not come preaching about necessary and contingent existences. My objection here is not as basic as the bible does not use this as a proof, but that a belief in God strikes me as something distinctly different to a belief in an answer to an equation, or an acceptance of an outcome of a formula, or the assenting to a proposition in a syllogism.

Likewise, if I was asked whether a belief in God is reducible to Pascal's Wager—that one is motivated to believe in God in hope (or fear) of potential consequences—I would again say yes and no. Yes, insofar as people do seem to find this compelling, but also no. There's something off with thinking that you can gamble your way into heaven. Once more my

objection is not meant to be trivial, but instead a point about the nature, character and quality of what a belief in God is like. In my mind, it is a joke to imagine a person reading a Cosmological Argument and then falling to their knees and confessing their belief in an unmoved mover.

My point is not that these arguments are false or that no one believes them, but that there's more to religious belief than the mere acceptance of an argument's conclusion, and the philosophical debate needs to recognise this. A person might say that they believe because they find the Principle of Sufficient Reason or the Ontological Argument convincing, but a belief of this sort lacks the depth, immediacy, and illusiveness which Radenovic describes. They are not quite the same, and I would argue, as Wittgenstein puts it, that even if I was presented with a compelling argument for the existence of an unmoved mover and believed that it was true, I would not for a moment say that I have a religious belief (Wittgenstein 1966, 56). Radenovic's article motivates me to push this intuition further—what is a religious belief like?

Belief-That and Belief-In

I would want to champion Price's distinction between beliefs-that and beliefs-in, and in doing so highlight that Radenovic's article begins with a reflection on her belief-in God and ends with a discussion about how those reflections apply to the philosophical debate about believing-that God exists (Price 1965). A belief-that is the familiar sort of belief that such and such is the case—I believe-that London is the Capital of England or that Russia is to the East of Germany; whilst a belief-in is more dispositional—I believe-in my child or my husband. The distinction is clear when the two miscommunicate, such as where I might tell a friend that I believe in them, and they might turn to me and say that I cannot know for certain whether they exist independently of my mind. There is debate about whether this distinction is merely semantic or whether beliefs-in are reducible to beliefs-that, but even then, there is a non-trivial point to make when we say that a belief-that London is the capital of England has nothing to do with emotions, attitudes or dispositions, whilst your belief-in your marriage has everything to do with emotions, attitudes and dispositions. A belief-that God exists might therefore be different to a belief-in God's existence, and it is worth further exploration.

There is no reason for why a person could not have a belief-in God as well as a belief-that God exists, and perhaps we might argue that the legitimacy of the former depends upon the presupposition of the latter. We are not as interested with whether belief-in is reducible to belief-that as we are interested with what this distinction brings to our understanding and study of religious belief, and even if belief-in God presupposes or is reducible to a belief-that God exists, we can nonetheless appreciate the connotational distinctions. Most notably, beliefs-that appear propositional and require grounding whilst beliefs-in are not as obviously propositional or in need for evidence.

The sensibility of believing-that London is in England is proportional to evidence, whilst the sensibility of believing-in your partner is not proportional to evidence, indeed it makes no

sense to speak of evidence in that way. A person might ask their partner to prove that they still believe-in their marriage, but a person cannot ask their partner to prove that their belief-in the marriage is true or false. I am willing to say that a religious belief might be composed of belief-that and belief-in, but I am not willing to say that a person could possess a religious belief without also possessing belief-in. To the extent that there is something which it is like to be religious is the extent to which I am committed to saying that religious belief is more than belief-that.

To express this, consider how some beliefs are broadly treated as being trivial (like the belief that there is an even number of hairs upon my head) whilst others are treated as being that meaningful that those who don't grasp the meaning are described as having not grasped the belief (that God exists). This is captured by Phillips who asks whether the following two statements mean the same thing: 'I know that Mars exists, but I don't really care', and 'I know that God exists, but I don't really care' (Phillips 1967, 65–66).

Phillips argues that we do not need to care about planets in order to account for what Mars is, what the consequences of its existence are and how we can learn these facts, but this is not the case when one speaks about God. One cannot 'find out' that God exists and shrug it off as a trivial matter of fact, as one can do with planets. If a person were to explain that the existence of God has only trivial consequences such that a belief either way doesn't really matter, then we'd likely say that they have missed the point of the matter (Phillips 1967, 68–69).

Returning to Radenovic's description of her faith, she makes it apparent that she had no decisive argument which proved the existence of God or that God listened to her prayers. Those sorts of concerns did not feature in her life, hence why her father's comments left her unmoved. To her, the reality of God was so immediate and felt that it was unquestionable—there was no place for doubt about it, there was no need for evidence to prove it, there were no beliefs-that but only beliefs-in.

Irrespective to whether belief-in presupposes or is reducible to belief-that, I would go so far as to say that those who claim to have a religious belief-in God because of their belief-that the Principle of Sufficient Reason is successful are fooling themselves. They are mixing the terms of the discussion up, and the fact that they do not see this only reaffirms their blindness to the reality of religious meaning. What matters is the fact that Radenovic had a form of belief which was not concerned with proving the truth of the belief-that God exists, and if we wish to understand religious belief then we must engage with it in its own terms. To these ends—being an attitude or disposition which carries connotations of hope, confidence and motivation—beliefs-in are by nature non-trivial, without need for grounding in evidence, and relatable to Radenovic's descriptions of her faith. This also holds when we consider prayer.

The gap between believing-that God exists and believing-in God is not so large that it cannot be bridged, but it is helpful to perceive this gap being wider in some contexts than in others. Sometimes our doubts about God's existence leads us to doubt the sensibility or

point of prayer (there is, after all, an absurdity to saying that God does not exist whilst praying) but that is not to say that we pray to the degree that we think we could prove God's existence (Winch 1977, 207). This can be applied to Radenovic, who writes that she once saw the point to praying when young, but lost sight of it in her late-twenties and early-thirties. It is not that she stopped praying in consequence of being given a compelling argument against the truth of her belief-that there is a listening deity, in fact I can imagine people praying to God because their rational arguments which were taken as proofs of God's existence have been undermined.

Losing sight of the point of prayer is an aspect of losing one's belief-in God (Winch 1977, 207). Just as how we might say that a person no longer believes-in their marriage if they no longer see the point behind certain gestures and actions, so too do we say that a person no longer believes-in God when they no longer see the point to praying, lighting candles, and attending rituals. One does not stop seeing the point to picnics and evening walks in consequence of disproving the existence of their marriage, rather one realises that they no longer believe-in their marriage when they notice that they no longer see the point in it all.

As odd as it might sound, I think that the person who prays because the Principle of Sufficient reason has convinced them of the likelihood that there is a listening deity is doing something less religious than the person who does not pray because they are convinced that they are unworthy of God's audience.

Taking Stock

The first part of Radenovic's article reminds us of the immediate and yet illusive nature of religious belief, and this must be addressed in a robust philosophical account. Although we should apply this meditative approach to the more abstract philosophical debate, I do not think that the approach which is taken in Radenovic's article is the right way to do it. The article outlines the philosophical views of David Hume, Wittgenstein, and D. Z. Phillips, and concludes that they lead to agnosticism or relativism which are deemed dead ends. My contention is that the article, perhaps for sake of brevity, provides a rather narrow and questionable interpretation of each philosophical view which unfortunately knocks the remainder of the article off course.

The Devil in the Detail

Two things stand out in Radenovic's (2021) question:

Is it the case, as Hume used to think, that our religious beliefs are of the same kind as any other empirical beliefs, and since we cannot find legitimate empirical evidence for them, the best thing to do is to discard them as irrational and simply be agnostics, if not full atheists (16)?

Firstly, it is disputable whether Hume concluded that religious beliefs were the same as any other empirical belief, secondly, it is doubtful that Hume would think that the best thing to

do is discard them as irrational. In “Of Miracles”, Hume reasons that the authority of Christian scripture is determinable to the legitimacy of the apostles’ testimonies which claim that Christ performed miracles which proved his divine status (Hume, 10.1).

Hume argues that testimony can never suffice as sufficient evidence for a miracle, and if the rationality behind the belief that Christ was divine depends upon the belief that he performed miracles, then in virtue of doubting testimony we must also doubt his divinity. Therefore, if it is the case that Hume used to think that our religious beliefs are empirical and in need of empirical evidence, then we should expect him to conclude that these sorts of beliefs are irrational because they depend upon a form of evidence which can never hold up to scrutiny—but he does not reach this conclusion. Hume instead states that he is pleased with his reasoning because he thinks:

[I]t may serve to confound those dangerous friends or disguised enemies to the Christian Religion, who have undertaken to defend it by the principles of human reason. Our most holy religion is founded on Faith, not on reason; and it is a sure method of exposing it to put it to such a trial as it is, by no means, fitted to endure (Hume, 10.40).

It is difficult to balance Radenovic’s portrayal of Hume understanding religious belief as empirical, with Hume not only making room for faith but going so far as to call those who try to defend Christianity through human reason (including empiricism) ‘dangerous friends or disguised enemies’. This does not mean that Hume would agree with how I have described religious belief, but it does show that there is more to his understanding than what Radenovic’s article considers, and a similar thing can be observed in its portrayal of Wittgenstein.

Radenovic’s article claims that Wittgenstein had what Malcolm and Phillips called a ‘fideist view’ towards religion; that religious faith has its own form of life and logic, and only those who possess it can understand the meaning of religious concepts and beliefs. Despite saying that she will leave it for Wittgensteinians to determine whether Malcolm and Phillips are correct to attribute fideism with Wittgenstein, Radenovic (2021) not only affirms that Phillips attributed it but spends the remainder of her article in response to it:

[T]he immediate worry arising from this stance is that if science, religion, and other areas of human endeavour are independent, have their own “logic”, and can be understood only from within, they all necessarily have their own “truths”. This kind of compartmentalization of our human world and the resulting relativism do not sit well with our intuitions (16).

We could sympathise with this worry if it were agreeable that Phillips was a fideist or attributed fideism with Wittgenstein, but it is difficult to reach this view because even in the text which is cited in Radenovic’s article, Phillips states that ‘Wittgenstein did not hold this view, and neither is it held by those influenced by him in the philosophy of religion’ (Phillips 1993, 30). Moreover, he describes Wittgensteinian Fideism as an ‘ill-conceived notion’ which

have ‘misgivings [which] are unjustified, do not follow from a proper reading of Wittgenstein's remarks, and take us away from the central questions which Wittgenstein was raising.’ (Phillips 1993, xi, 81). Radenovic might have only wanted to say that some philosophers understood Wittgenstein as a fideist which is addressed by Phillips, but it is incorrect to describe Phillips as either supporting or attributing fideism with Wittgenstein.

It would be unreasonable to expect Radenovic to go into intricate detail about the complexities of Hume and Wittgenstein in such a brief article, but it is worth emphasising that the way how the article portrays them is disputable and by no means the default view. The remainder of the article responds to the worries which Radenovic has about how Hume supposedly leads into agnosticism and how Wittgenstein supposedly leads into fideist relativism.

Radenovic suggests that we could avoid both Humean agnosticism and Wittgensteinian relativism if we were to strip religious belief of epistemological value, but this was quickly ruled out because doing so would render a great deal of talk about religious ‘truth’, ‘knowledge’ and ‘facts’ bunk. Radenovic wants to avoid this noncognitive outcome, and so the question is rephrased to ask whether we can maintain the regulatory function of religious belief (belief-in) without rendering its epistemological value illegitimate or relativistic (belief-that). The article's solution is based on hinge-beliefs, hinge-commitments and social cognition, and although this likely fails to reach Radenovic's desired ends, the whole matter can be easily avoided because this is not ‘the question’ of the philosophical debate but the outcome of the article's portrayal of Hume and Wittgenstein, and as this is disputable and avoidable so too are many of Radenovic's concerns.

Hinge-beliefs ‘are the most basic general ‘presuppositions’ of our world views which make it possible for us to evaluate certain beliefs or doubts as rational’, and therefore offer Radenovic two things: they provide a regulatory function within life and they can avoid empirical delegitimization because they are, under some interpretations, not only groundless by nature, but often presupposed by empiricism (Ranalli 2020, 4975, 4977). A belief, therefore, is either itself a hinge or it is something which presupposes a hinge, and so there's two possibilities: religious belief is either a hinge or it is something which presupposes a hinge.

Hinges should not be thought of as cognitive beliefs which possess epistemological value, but as noncognitive commitments which regulate our worldview. Consequently, religious belief would lack epistemological value if it was a hinge because there are no truth-conditions for hinges—a hinge is what regulates and sets the conditions for whether something is to be deemed true or false. But if religious belief is not a hinge, then it lacks the regulatory function which only hinges possess. In effect, Radenovic wants religious belief to possess both epistemological value as well as regulatory function, and hinges cannot provide this.

A Way Forward

We wouldn't be in such a conundrum if religious beliefs were like ordinary beliefs, yet we face compelling arguments on all sides. There are plenty of people who tell us that they literally believe that God exists and have a range of arguments to prove it, and there are just as many, like Radenovic and me, who think that there is more to it than that. We need to think more about what it is like to be religious than what we currently do if our philosophical studies are to be successful, but the success of this endeavour also requires us to have a refined understanding of the philosophical debate. Building accounts around hinge-beliefs, hinge-commitments and social cognition may yet prove to be successful, but we must first ensure that they are built upon steadier foundations than what we find in Radenovic's treatment of Hume and Wittgenstein. More work should be done on the difference between what it is like to believe-in God and whether it is rational to believe-that God exists, and it would not surprise me to hear that religious belief is composed of both just as how the human condition is of both mind and heart.

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