

CHAPTER 1

The Justification of Negative Atheism: Some Preliminaries

What must be shown in order to support negative atheism with respect to the existence of the Christian–Hebraic God? How does one justify the view that one ought not to believe in an all-good, all-powerful, all-knowing God who created the universe? Must anything be shown? **Is** the burden of proof really on theists to provide reasons for their belief? What sort of reasons must theists provide to support their case and must atheists undermine to establish their own? **Is** it sufficient that theists provide reasons showing that belief in God is beneficial to them? Or it is necessary that they provide reasons showing that belief in God is true? Do atheists who demand that theists provide reasons showing that their belief in God is true assume an unacceptable objectivist epistemology? In this chapter these preliminary questions are addressed in order to set the stage for the arguments that follow.

A Presumption of Atheism

In “The Presumption of Atheism”¹ Antony Flew maintains that the burden of proof is on the believer: “Until and unless some such grounds [for claims of knowledge of God] are produced we have literally no reason at all for believing; and in that situation the only reasonable posture must be that of either the negative atheist or the agnostic.” It may be argued that in the chapters that follow I have things backward. I argue that negative atheism is not justified until it is shown that God talk is cognitively meaningless or, if God talk is cognitively meaningful, that the reasons for believing in God are inadequate. **Does** not this way of arguing the case for negative atheism put the burden of proof on the wrong group? Atheists, it might be argued, should not be required to

show that religious language is meaningless and the reasons for believing in God are inadequate. The burden of proof instead should be on believers, since negative atheists are not making any claims to knowledge and the believers are.

This objection to my way of arguing my case for negative atheism is misplaced. I have chosen to remain neutral on whether there is a presumption in favor of atheism; for even if there is, theists have put forth reasons for believing that religious language is cognitively meaningful; and they have given arguments that an all-good, all-powerful, and all-knowing being exists. Negative atheists must show that these reasons and arguments are inadequate. To be sure, if theists had never given reasons for supposing that God talk is meaningful or that God exists, perhaps negative atheists would not have to produce refutations to be secure in their nonbelief. But this is not the case. Thus even if Flew is right about the burden of proof, this does not affect to any significant extent what negative atheists must do. They must undermine reasons and arguments produced by theists before their position is secure. If they need not make the first move, they must make the second.

The Ethics of Belief

The thesis that without adequate reason one should not believe that an all-good, all-powerful, and all-knowing being exists has been interpreted as a special case of the more general thesis that without adequate reason one should not believe anything.' This general thesis can be given a broad or narrow interpretation. In the broad interpretation we can understand that good reason for believing something is true includes reasons that make the belief likely as well as ones that benefit the believer and others. Let us call the first sort *epistemic* reasons and an argument based on these an epistemic argument. Let us call the second sort *beneficial* reasons and an argument based on these a beneficial argument. Beneficial reasons can, in turn, be either moral or prudential. In "The Will to Believe" William James argued that in very special circumstances it is permissible to believe for beneficial reasons. More recently, Roderick Chisholm has also adopted the broad interpretation. Other philosophers argue that one should base one's belief on epistemic reasons. In other words, they accept a narrow interpretation according to which the only reasons are epistemic ones.

A hypothetical example should make the distinction between epistemic and beneficial reasons clear. Let us suppose the available evidence indicates that the Mormon religion is very probably based on a hoax perpetuated by Joseph Smith. If good reasons are interpreted narrowly as purely epistemic ones, then clearly no one, including present-day Mormons,

should believe that the doctrines of the Mormon religion are true. But let us suppose that reasons are understood broadly. In this case, some advocates of the use of beneficial reasons might argue that at least Mormons should continue to believe, for example, on the grounds that from a utilitarian point of view there are significant benefits to Mormons to believe Mormon doctrines.

It could be argued from a more inclusive utilitarian perspective, however, that the decision to base belief on beneficial reasons is problematic. Maintaining one's belief in the light of clearly negative evidence because of the benefits that result could have a profound effect on one's entire belief system. Indeed, in order to keep a system of beliefs intact in the face of negative evidence, it may be necessary to change other beliefs in the system that in turn have profound and damaging psychological effects. Moreover, if change in a belief system is allowed when there is a clearly worthwhile social goal, it could set a precedent for change when there is no obvious and immediate social benefit. Further, one person's example might induce others to maintain or change their beliefs for the slightest whim or the most selfish motive.

It is perhaps because of the potentially dangerous implications of believing for beneficial rather than epistemic reasons that some philosophers have argued that it is always morally wrong to believe in anything unless one has adequate epistemic reasons. W. K. Clifford, in "The Ethics of Belief," argues that "it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything on insufficient evidence." Clifford maintains that believing on insufficient evidence has a variety of harmful consequences: It corrupts our character, undermines public confidence, 'leads to irresponsible action, and fosters self-deception. Although Clifford's fears may have been exaggerated, there is surely a great deal of truth in what he says: There are indeed great dangers in believing something because it is beneficial to do so. Although basing your belief on what is beneficial to you and others is not necessarily morally wrong, as apparently Clifford thinks, there are certainly moral dangers in doing so, and as a general social policy it should be avoided. Moreover, Clifford overlooks an important point. His argument for using purely epistemic reasons is itself a moral one. Thus, ironically, his reason for not using beneficial reasons in justifying belief is apparently based on one type of beneficial reason: the undesirable moral consequences of doing so.

In addition, Clifford should have argued that there is an independent epistemological duty to base one's beliefs on purely epistemic reasons. If one does not base one's beliefs on purely epistemic reasons, one is epistemologically irresponsible. To be sure, under some circumstances this epistemological duty may have to give way to moral considerations,

and at times there should be what Lorraine Code calls a "teleological suspension of the epistemic."⁵ But this does not mean that there is not an epistemological duty that must be outweighed by moral considerations. Although Clifford gives strong *moral* reasons why in general this suspension is impermissible, he does not consider the initial *epistemological* duty that these reasons must outweigh.

Some philosophers who do not take as strong a stand as Clifford have attempted to circumscribe carefully when belief based on beneficial reasons is morally permissible. However, it is not completely clear that they, any more than Clifford, clearly separate the epistemic and moral duties. Roderick Chisholm for one, in arguing against Clifford, maintains that a proposition is innocent until proved guilty; that is, it is unreasonable for us to believe a proposition only when we have adequate evidence for the contradictory of the proposition. "Chisholm's view is compatible with the thesis that it is not unreasonable to believe a proposition on the basis of beneficial reasons if there is no adequate evidence for the contradictory. This idea rules out appeals to beneficial reasons for believing that p only if the epistemic reasons support believing that $\sim p$. In our hypothetical example, Chisholm's requirement would prevent Mormons from believing that Mormon doctrines are true on the basis of the benefits of believing them only if the evidence supports the proposition that they are false. Since by hypothesis there is such evidence, Chisholm's requirement would entail that Mormons give up their belief that their doctrines are true. On the other hand, if we change the example and suppose there is no adequate evidence indicating that Mormon doctrine is false, then Mormons could believe their doctrines are true if it was beneficial to do so. William James, whose views are discussed at length in Chapter 9, also put restrictions on the use of beneficial reasons. Certainly he would not advocate that Mormons continue to believe their doctrines if the evidence indicated that they are probably false; he would agree with Chisholm that believing that p was true on the basis of beneficial reasons is not permissible when the evidence supports $\sim p$.

However, it is unclear if Chisholm recognizes an independent epistemological obligation to believe on the basis of purely epistemic reasons. Is he saying that it is *epistemologically* or *morally* permissible for someone to believe p if there is no adequate evidence for $\sim p$? On one plausible interpretation he could be saying that although there is an *epistemological* duty to believe that p on the basis of purely epistemic reasons, it is *morally* permissible to believe p on beneficial grounds only if there is no epistemic reason to believe $\sim p$.

No matter how Chisholm's suggestion is interpreted, it may be too restrictive in one respect and not restrictive enough in another. It may

be too restrictive in that it may undermine certain important social relationships that one wants to preserve. For example, **on** moral grounds it may be reasonable up to a point to believe that one's friend is truthful even when there is adequate evidence for believing otherwise? At the same time the suggestion may not be morally restrictive enough in actual practice. Psychologically it may be difficult for the average person who is blind to negative evidence against his or her own views to distinguish a situation in which the evidence is against a proposition he or she believe from a situation in which it is not. Given this blindness, it may be all too easy for the person to claim that it is permissible to believe p on beneficial reasons because there are no adequate epistemic reasons to believe $\sim p$. Thus in application Chisholm's principle could lead to some of the morally undesirable consequences that worried Clifford.'

Nevertheless, both Clifford and Chisholm have a point. Given the moral dangers of believing for purely beneficial reasons pointed out by Clifford and the independent epistemological duty to base one's beliefs on purely epistemic reasons that he did not recognize, there is a strong presumption that in justifying belief one should only use epistemic reasons. Let us call this the presumption of the primacy of epistemic reasons. So Clifford was at least partially correct. Further, because of the independent epistemological duty to base one's beliefs on purely epistemic reasons and the need to guard against the moral dangers of believing for beneficial reasons, there is a strong presumption that if beneficial reasons are used to justify p , the available epistemic reasons should not justify $\sim p$. In one special case, beneficial reasons can be used to decide whether to believe p or $\sim p$ when there are equally strong epistemic reasons for p and $\sim p$. Let us call this the presumption of the purely supplementary role of beneficial reasons. So Chisholm was partially correct as well.

It should be noted that both presumptions allow that in special circumstances it is morally permissible for people to believe something because of beneficial reasons and without adequate epistemic reasons and that in *very* special circumstances it is morally permissible for people to believe something for beneficial reasons even when there are strong epistemic reasons to believe the opposite? Clearly, however, candidates for these special circumstances must be scrutinized *very* carefully *in* terms of both the likely benefits that will result from belief in terms of beneficial reasons and the possible long-term adverse effects **on** society, its institutions, and human personality and character.

How do these presumptions affect atheism in the sense of nonbelief in the Christian-Hebraic God? On what kind of reasons should belief or nonbelief in a good, all-powerful, all-knowing being be based? There is a presumption that these should be based on epistemic reasons. There is

a presumption that they should be based on beneficial reasons only if the issue cannot be decided by epistemic reasons. Although there may be very special and unusual circumstances that defeat these presumptions, the candidates for circumstances that do **so** must be examined with great care. Let us consider some possible cases.

An obvious special circumstance that would defeat our presumptions is the imminent danger of a great disaster because one did or did not believe. Suppose you are an atheist and are kidnapped by a religious maniac with access to nuclear weapons who will kill you and blow up New York City, London, Paris, and Tokyo unless you accept God. You have good reason to suppose that if you undergo two months of rigorous religious indoctrination, you will accept God. To make the case crystal clear, let us suppose that few people will know of your conversion, that the fanatic will die in three months, that he has no disciples to carry **on** his work, and that the effects of the indoctrination will disappear in four months. Presumably in such a case there would be good reason for submitting to the religious indoctrination. Even the most militant atheist would admit that under this circumstance, refusing to convert would serve no purpose—indeed, would be an act of insanity.

An analogous case can be constructed for not believing in God on beneficial grounds. You, a theist, are kidnapped by a maniac with access to nuclear weapons who will kill you and blow up New York City, London, Paris, and Tokyo unless you give up your belief in God. You have good reason to suppose that you will cease to believe in God if you undergo two months of rigorous atheistic indoctrination. To make the case crystal clear, let us suppose that few people will know of your conversion, that the maniac will die in three months, that he has no disciples to carry on his work, and that the effects of the indoctrination will wear off in four months. In such a case too there would be good reason for submitting to the atheistic indoctrination.

Let us now consider a more realistic case in which the question is whether beneficial reasons for believing in God should count. On her deathbed Mrs. Smith, an 89-year-old atheist and former Catholic, is not completely reconciled to the possibility of there being no afterlife and, as a consequence, of not seeing her dead husband after her own death. Her last few days will be more content and happy if she believes that God exists and that she will **soon see** her husband. It is clear that her mental state is such that with only a little encouragement from a priest she will embrace her old faith once again. Should she ask for a priest to visit her? The answer may seem obvious, but it is not until many questions are resolved. For example, given her present situation, is she competent to make the choice? Will this case set a precedent for other cases? Will other people know of her return to the fold and be encouraged to do the same?

In order to simplify the case, let us assume that there are **no** more epistemic reasons to believe than not to believe that there is a God and an afterlife, that her return to Catholicism would set **no** precedent, that she has only a few days to live, that she would be much happier if she did believe, that few people would ever know about her return, and that her choice to return was competent, rational, and uncoerced. We may conclude that under these assumptions she should send for a priest. But these are big assumptions to make and cannot be assumed as a matter of course.

It may be asked: If we grant the presumption of the primacy of epistemic reasons and the presumption of the purely supplementary role of beneficial reasons, is there not still a presumption that, in those rare cases where it is legitimate to use beneficial reasons to decide what to believe or not to believe, belief in God is to be preferred? A detailed answer is given to this question in Chapter 9, where we examine two of the most famous attempts to base belief in God on beneficial reasons: Pascal's wager and William James's argument in "The Will to Believe."

The Evil Demon and Objectivist Epistemology

It may be objected that in our statement of what needs to be shown to establish that negative atheism is true, we are assuming something that we cannot assume; that in adopting a presumption that only epistemic reasons should be used, we are supposing that there is a close connection between having adequate epistemic reasons and truth. In particular, Jonathan Kvanvig has claimed that advocates of objectivist epistemology must assume that proposition *p* is more likely to be true if proposition *e* is true and is evidence for proposition *p* than if *e* were not true." But this assumption is mistaken, Kvanvig argues, since it "runs afoul of Cartesian evil demon considerations." According to this argument there is a possible world containing an evil demon who deceives inhabitants about the truth of what they believe. In this possible world there is **no** close relation between the evidence that people have for a proposition and the truth of the proposition, although it seems as if there is. Since a world with such a deceiving evil demon would be indistinguishable from one without it, there could be no reason to suppose that our world does not have such a demon and, consequently, no reason to suppose that our evidence has any close relation to truth. Once it is seen that this basic assumption of a close connection between evidence and truth is questionable, the argument proceeds, one can develop a more pragmatic and subjective approach to epistemic warrant according to which it is rational to believe in God although there is **no** adequate evidence.

What can one say about this argument? First, if one takes the evil

demon hypothesis seriously, then instead of claiming that belief in God can be rational, one would have to say that **no** belief at all is rational. Even belief in an external world, in other minds, and in the past becomes questionable and problematic, given this hypothesis. Surely, acceptance of the Cartesian evil demon argument or of similar considerations cannot lead to the rationality of religious belief in any normal sense of the term "rationality." It can only lead to the most profound skepticism concerning the rationality of all beliefs. Indeed, if the evil demon hypothesis were true, paradoxically it would seem to entail that we could never be justified in thinking that it was.

Second, it is difficult to see how theists in particular could accept the view that there could be **no** connection between evidence and truth. For if God is all-good, all-powerful, and all-knowing, why would He systematically deceive us into thinking that there is a connection or allow an evil demon to do **so**? Although it may be barely conceivable that an evil demon could deceive us, the idea that God does or would allow an evil demon to do **so** surely verges on incoherence.

Third, even if belief in God is compatible with rejection of objective knowledge, the skeptical arguments that lead to this rejection are **so** controversial¹⁴ that it seems ill-advised for theists like Kvanvig to attempt to support their position indirectly by accepting them. At the very least a refutation of these criticisms of the skeptical arguments is needed. None is provided by Kvanvig.

Fourth, what possible reason could one have to consider seriously either the evil demon hypothesis or similar ones? It cannot be to save theism from the charge of being irrational, for given the evil demon hypothesis, unless one radically alters the meaning of "rational belief," no belief is justified. There is no more evidence supporting this hypothesis than the alternative one that there is a close connection between evidence and truth. What is more, the alternative hypothesis surely is much simpler than the evil demon hypothesis. Therefore, on grounds of simplicity alone the evil demon hypothesis should not be seriously considered." In addition, the evil demon hypothesis has a low initial probability. Given the possibility that an evil demon could have any of an infinite number of purposes and motives, it is unlikely that it would have and continue to have precisely those purposes and motives that would explain what we experience." Furthermore, the evil demon hypothesis does not give a plausible account of human survival. If there is no connection between evidence and truth, it is difficult to see how the human race has survived to date. We base the actions that we need to perform in order to survive on what we believe is true, and we believe this latter **on** the evidence. But then, if there were no connection between truth and evidence, our survival would be a mystery.¹⁵ In addition, the

evil demon hypothesis is usually formulated in a way that is not falsifiable; in other words, there is **no** empirical evidence that could refute it. If there is a connection between testability and factual meaning, as in Chapter 2 I argue there is, then such a hypothesis is not genuine at all, for it asserts **no** factual claim. Thus **on** the standard scientific criteria of simplicity, explanatory power, and testability the evil demon thesis has no claim to serious consideration.¹⁶

Fifth, the alternative view has absurd implications. Consider the following subjectivist account of justified belief proposed by Kvanvig as an alternative to the standard objectivist account:"

S is justified in believing p if (i) there is a general human tendency to believe p when e; (ii) it is acceptable for S that e is evidence for p; (iii) S believes p **on** e without ground for doubt; and (iv) e.

According to this view there is a natural human tendency to believe **on** the basis of certain evidence that God exists, just as there is a natural tendency for people to make inductive inferences **on** the basis of past constant conjunctions." For example, there is a natural human tendency when "contemplating the majesty of mountains, the starry heavens, or the beauty of a flower" to respond with a belief in God.¹⁹ Further, the circumstances that prompt this response are normally accepted by persons with a belief in God as evidence for their belief, and they normally are without grounds for doubt since, for example, they may accept nothing as counting against their belief in God.²⁰

Now, one may well question whether there *is* a natural tendency to believe in God or whether the tendency is based on cultural and social training. If there were such a natural tendency, one would expect belief in God to be statistically uniform in different cultures. However, it varies widely across cultures?"

More important, if there is a natural tendency to believe in God, one can argue equally well that there is a natural tendency to believe in occult explanations. Furthermore, this belief is justified in terms of Kvanvig's theory. However, this is a *reductio* of Kvanvig's theory, since we have excellent reason to suppose that such occult explanations are not true.

We know, for example, that people tend to explain things that they cannot understand by postulating ghosts, ancient astronauts, extrasensory perception, psychic powers, and the like.²² In most instances this tendency seems to be prompted by a circumstance such as Uri Geller's appearance on television apparently doing feats of psychokinesis. Thus condition (i) of Kvanvig's theory is met. It is certainly acceptable to the typical occult believer that the circumstances that prompt the occult beliefs is evidence for them. Thus condition (ii) is met. Further, for many occult believers their beliefs are without ground of doubt in the sense of

that term employed here, since they accept nothing as counting against their beliefs although there may be overwhelming evidence that in the very cases prompting the beliefs a fraud was committed. For example, the evidence is rather clear that Geller's TV feats of seeming psychokinesis were done by sleight of hand,²³ and yet many people refused to accept this evidence. Thus condition (iii) is met. Suppose Geller again appears on TV and this prompts belief in occult explanations of his feats. Then condition (iv) is met. Thus on Kvanvig's subjectivist account of justified belief, believers in occult explanations of Geller's powers would meet all Kvanvig's conditions and thus would be justified in their beliefs. Other examples could be given in which, according to Kvanvig's account, people would be justified in believing in explanations in terms of ghosts and little green aliens although strong objective evidence showed that fraud and deception prompted the beliefs. Surely this suggests that something is seriously wrong with Kvanvig's account of justification.

Conclusion

I have remained neutral on the question of whether there is a presumption in favor of negative atheism. Since theists have given reasons for their belief, negative atheists must refute these to be secure in their position. But what sorts of reasons are relevant? I have argued that there is a presumption that belief in God should be based on epistemic reasons and a presumption that beneficial reasons for believing in God should have only a supplementary role. Assuming that God talk is meaningful, the first order of business in defending negative atheism is to undermine the epistemic reasons that have been offered by theists. But suppose that the conditions are met for using beneficial reasons. The second order of business in defending negative atheism would be to undermine these reasons. I have rejected the argument that, in establishing negative atheism in the way that I propose, I will be assuming an unacceptable objectivist theory of knowledge. The arguments against such a theory are weak and the proposed alternative to it unacceptable.

I just said *assuming* that God talk is cognitively meaningful, the first order of business in defending negative atheism is to undermine the epistemic reasons offered by theists. But this assumption we cannot make. Indeed, I argue in the next chapter that religious language is cognitively meaningless. If this argument is successful, negative atheism is established and there is no need for negative atheists to undermine the reasons that theists give for belief in God. Let us suppose I am mistaken, however, and that God talk is cognitively meaningful. If so, theists must give reasons for their belief in God. I show in the chapters that follow that no such reasons are available. In Chapters 3 through 5, I show that the

classical traditional arguments for the existence of God fail to provide good epistemic reasons for belief. In Chapters 6 through 8, I show that other arguments also fail to provide such reasons. In Chapter 9, I consider some classical beneficial arguments for the existence of God and argue that they do not in general provide good reason for belief in those cases where I have allowed that their use is normally appropriate. However, theists might argue that belief in God does not need either epistemic or beneficial grounds. Belief in God, they might say, is basic or should be based on faith, not reason. In Chapter 10, I argue against this view.

Although the part of my argument that involves undermining the reasons given for belief in theism is by far the most extensive and detailed, it is not conclusive. It might be the case that a new argument will be developed that could support a belief in an all-good, all-powerful, all-knowing being. This possibility seems unlikely, however. To be sure, philosophers and theologians still are developing arguments for the existence of such a being, but these seem to be merely subtle variants of arguments that have been around for centuries, and they add little to the standard reasons. It seems unlikely, then, that future philosophers and theologians will develop anything but more variants of the old reasons.

Nevertheless, although a conclusive case cannot be made for negative atheism, if a good case can be made for supposing that belief in God should be based on reason and that all the available reasons for believing in an all-good, all-powerful, and all-knowing being are inadequate, negative atheism in the narrow sense will be justified as much as it can be in relation to our present knowledge. If we have good grounds for supposing that all available reasons for believing in an all-good, all-powerful, and all-knowing being are inadequate when such reasons are needed for justified belief, then people would be justified in having no belief that such a being exists.