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THEISM AND ATHEISM: JUSTIFIED BELIEF-DECISIONS FOR OR AGAINST THE CONCEPT OF GOD

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Abstract

In earnest, the debate between theism and atheism is related to the essence of God--the de re necessity of God, and not the mere in re existence of God. The de re necessity of God is an abstraction conjectured from the de dicto necessity for God inferred from the contingency of the universe. As long as the universe exists, the de re necessity or essence of God will be debated. Causal necessity of the universe establishes the de dicto necessity for God, however, the attempt to stop the infinite regression or the chain of causation, postulates the de re necessity or non-contingent existence of God. Beliefs related to God are belief-decisions – decisions for or against the essence of God. Questions and concerns related to conscious life necessitate such beliefs. So the meaning of religious beliefs is not tied up with establishing the veracity of their truth, but with the relevance of the questions that make such beliefs necessary. While a good question can make millions think, a good answer can make millions debate its truth. When theists argue for the existence of God, they argue for the existence of an existing being, and not for the existence of a non-existing being. However, if atheists argue the non-existence of God, then they cannot argue for the non-existence of an existing being, nor argue for the non-existence of a non-existing being. So what theists and atheists accept or reject is related to the existence or

non-existence of a non-contingent being. However, an atheist is an atheist not because of the presence of theists, nor is a theist a theist because of the presence of atheists. Both theists and atheists address the same questions that necessitate decisions for or against the concept of God.

Keywords

Theism, Atheism, Belief, Belief-Decisions, *Dennett, Harris, Sartre, Chalmers, Swinburne, Plantinga*

1. Introduction

The meaning of religion is related to the essence of God, namely the *de re* necessity of God. The *de re* necessity of God is associated with the questions that project the *de dicto* necessity for God, inferred from the contingency of the universe. Religion is about meaning (Macintyre & Riccer, 1969), for what the *in re* existence of God denotes, is important only in the context of what the essence of God connotes—the *de re necessity or non-contingent existence. Apriori* (Descartes), or *a posteriori* (Kripke, 2008) investigation into the nature of the universe postulates both the notion of causal and ontic necessity. ‘Necessity’ when understood as a fundamental part of the universe, posits the *de dicto/de re* distinction (Quine, 1960). *Dedictio* necessity for God is distinct from the *de re* necessity of God. If the idea of necessity relates to a statement then the modality is *de dicto*. If it relates to the predicate of a statement, the modality is *de re* (O’Texts). With reference to God, *dedictio* necessity deals with causal necessity, as it relates to the universe, and *de re* necessity deals with ontic necessity, as it relates to the non-contingent existence of God. Hence, *de re* necessity defines the *essence of God’s existence*, and *de dicto* necessity defines the *need for God’s existence* as it relates to the existence of the universe. *De re* necessity requires defining God as being immortal. To acknowledge God as being immortal is to understand God as the uncaused cause or as being non-contingent. It is the abstraction of God’s non-contingent existence that provides the basis for the debate between theists and atheists. If the contingency of the universe defines the *de dicto* necessity for God, then as long as the universe exists, the debate for the *de re* necessity of God will continue. Both belief and disbelief in God would be inevitable, regardless of whether the rationale or abstraction for ontological necessity is logical, modal or factual (Swinburne, 2004).

Understanding beliefs related to God independent of the questions which foster these beliefs is a meaningless task. Beliefs related to God and science are answers to existential

concerns. God is not a substitute for science, nor is science a substitute for God, for it is fundamental to both science and religion to understand what defines and constitutes conscious life. It is important to juxtapose what Tillich (1999) calls the “ultimate concern” of humans, with Dawkins’ (2006) “God hypothesis”, which posits God as being a “delusion” in the context of the ontic necessity of God. The greatest contribution the human race has made to its own existence is religion/metaphysics, which attempts to address fundamental questions related to conscious life. The singular contribution of the western world to the human race is secularism, which purports that we cannot be dogmatic about religious or metaphysical claims, and that all theists must learn to live and respect each other’s freedom of conscience and thought. This must also include atheism, for we must acknowledge that these questions necessitate both belief and unbelief. Questions that necessitate the need for religion and science are about origin (Dawkins, 2006) and a good-life, and we cannot juxtapose one against the other, nor replace one for the other.

Atheists, like theists, are interested in origins, and if theists and atheists alike are interested in the well-being of humans, then there should be no conflict between the two. (Kant, I.1998). Theists define life in the context of the soul, the self, and the sacred, whereas atheists define life independent of the soul, the self, and the sacred. However, if theists and atheists become fundamental or dogmatic about their beliefs, then their debate becomes detrimental and militant. The intent of this presentation is to respect both the attempts of theists and atheists to understand origins and what constitutes a good life. Morals are fundamental to a good-life, which is why every law is understood to have a moral content (Murphy & Coleman, 1990). Laws attempt to regulate behavior, but they cannot legislate morality. So, religion should be defined as a system of beliefs that not only attempts to give an account for the origin of the physical universe, but provide an explanation for the need for a moral life. This working definition allows us to understand different explanations related to both the origin of the universe and the necessity for a good life – with or without God. So theism, atheism, materialism and all the ‘isms’ in the world are paradigms by which we live when they address the fundamental questions related to the origin of the universe and the presence of consciousness.

2. The Easy and Hard Question to Address

To know whether God *in re* exists is an easy question to address, but to know whether God necessarily exists (*de re*) is a hard question to address. While the principle of falsification

(Popper, 1959) purports that beliefs can be falsifiable, the abstraction that God necessarily exists is unfalsifiable. Certain attributes of God like the corporeal existence of God can be tested and falsified. But the abstraction related to modal or factual necessity for God cannot, thus the ontological necessity that God necessarily exists is an unfalsifiable conjecture. God's *in recorporeal* existence can be falsified by setting up a date and time to meet, and if God does not show up, we can argue that by disconfirmation God in incorporeal form does not exist. However, if belief in God implies that God necessarily exists, then the conjecture of necessity is unfalsifiable. The question is not whether there is evidence for the corporeal existence of God; the question is, what constitutes as evidence for God's necessary (*de re*) or non-contingent existence?

The abstraction of the *de dicto* necessity of God, related to the *existence of the universe*, is easier to address than the *de re* necessity of God's existence. Contingency of the universe establishes the ontological need for causal necessity. The reason why this causal necessity is understood as being non-contingent is to prevent causal regression. But to establish the *de re* necessity or non-contingent existence of God would be difficult. However, while we cannot make the ontological distinction between essence and existence with reference to God, the *dedicto* and *de re* distinction allows us to distinguish between God's necessity and God's 'necessary' existence. Neither the principle of confirmation, nor the principle of falsification can establish the *de re* or *de dicto* necessity for God's essence and existence. The notion of necessity is an abstraction, which is why we cannot from the mere *in re* existence of 'God', confirm or disconfirm that 'God' is truly God or that 'God' is not truly God. Hence the question to address is; why do we choose to believe or disbelieve in God when neither confirmation nor falsification can establish the truth or falsity of God's ontological necessity? The abstraction of the ontological need /necessity, can provide some justification for understanding the essence of God in relationship to the universe. When we address the question of origin and the nature of consciousness, we are cognizant of the importance given to questions related to 'contingency' and 'necessity' (Burgess, 2013). Two abstractions can be gained from observing the universe, that – things could have been otherwise, or things could not have been otherwise. From this we explicate the ideas of contingency and necessity – the notion that some things are true in a given world, and some things are true in all possible worlds. The *de dicto* necessity for God, based on modal necessity, defines ontological need, whereas *de re* necessity of God, based on factual

necessity, deals with God's being or identity. However, it is not identity that dictates necessity, it is the brute contingency of the universe that demands necessity. So the conjecture of God's necessity is easier to acknowledge than to establish God's necessary existence.

What human conditions necessitate such beliefs? The nature of sentience or consciousness, and the human awareness of the presence of the universe, are central in understanding the human condition. Many attempts have been made to define what the nature of consciousness is, or what this human condition entails. Hindus believe that the human soul, or Atman, is part of the divine self, Brahman – *Tat tvamasi* – “Thou art that” (Noss & Noss, 1990), and that the human self is in actuality part of the Divine self. Christians argue that what is common in each human is the soul or the image of God and that the self is the individual soul. (Plantinga, 2000). Sartre (1977) claimed that consciousness is real, but not a thing, and argued for the immateriality of consciousness. In contemporary thinking, consciousness is defined as ‘mental states’. Dennett (1991) claims that there are no mental states, and that, all states are brain states. Place (1956) states, that there are mental states but they are reducible to brain states. Searle (1992) argued that there are mental states but they are irreducible to brain states. Searle further contends that consciousness is an emergent, though irreducible. Others have said that consciousness supervenes on brain states (Horgan, 1993).

Understanding how insentient matter becomes sentient or conscious is a difficult question to address (Chalmers, 2002). However, we are not only cognizant of our sentience—we are cognizant of why we choose to believe or disbelieve in God. Should God exist, what evidence can count as proof that can validate non-contingent existence? None that can guarantee belief, or establish ontological necessity. Necessity cannot establish the identity of God (not that God does not have an identity), and identification of God does not enhance the ontological need for God. Ontological necessity, while not a proof, is a comprehensive argument that can address the question of origin and the nature of conscious life. God is not an object to be identified or detected (Haught, 2008), but a *de dicto* necessity, and a subject to be acknowledged if one is to understand the questions related to origin and conscious life. As such, if we have an issue accepting God as a necessary being and a subject, then our own subjectivity – the self, along with freedom – can be questioned (MacIntyre & Riccer, 1969). Atheists, who deny the sacred, will in many instances, also reject the idea of the soul and the self.

3. We are Not Born as neither Theists nor Atheists

Humans choose to be theists or atheists because ontological concerns necessitate both belief and unbelief, and beliefs for or against God are considered as “justified belief-decisions” (Samraj, 2007). All our questioning has relevance, because all humans end up believing in something, be it science or God. The ‘truth’ of theism and atheism is tied to human concerns, which is related to questions. Existential concerns provide the reasons as to why we choose to believe or disbelieve. To question and not believe is a meaningless exercise. However, to deny or affirm what is unfalsifiable is the challenge. In science, we can only believe discoveries and natural laws, we cannot afford to disbelieve; but with reference to God, there can be belief and unbelief instead of belief or no belief (Macintyre & Riccer, 1969). While science begins with observation, religion begins with inherent concepts based on questions. Grounded on the concept of the essence of God, decisions for or against God can be made independent of whether the corporeal existence of God is empirical or not. If we could not comprehend the essence of God, the corporeal existence of God would mean nothing. This is why the debate between theists and atheists cannot be on whether God’s existence *in re* is corporeal. God’s corporeality cannot necessitate belief in the essence of God, nor can it establish certainty that who we could or would see is God, for we do not have any known ID for God. Is it possible to know about God, but not be able to identify God if he should show up? Yes, it is possible to know about God and not be able to identify God. The *Electra paradox* (as defined by Eubulides a Greek philosopher famous for paradoxes), illustrates this well. Electra knew that she had a brother named Orestes but not that the person before her was her brother although he was Orestes. “This shows the predicate ‘knows’ to be intentional, that Electra’s knowledge here is *de dicto*, and that the statement of it yields an opaque context” (Collins English Dictionary). While the ‘is’ of identity establishes the essence of being or identity, the ‘is’ of abstraction establishes the meaning of the conjecture. That is why *a posteriori* necessity (Kripke, 1980), with reference to water, is associated with identity (i.e. *Water is H₂O*) and *a priori* necessity, with reference to God, is associated with meaning (Quine, 1967).

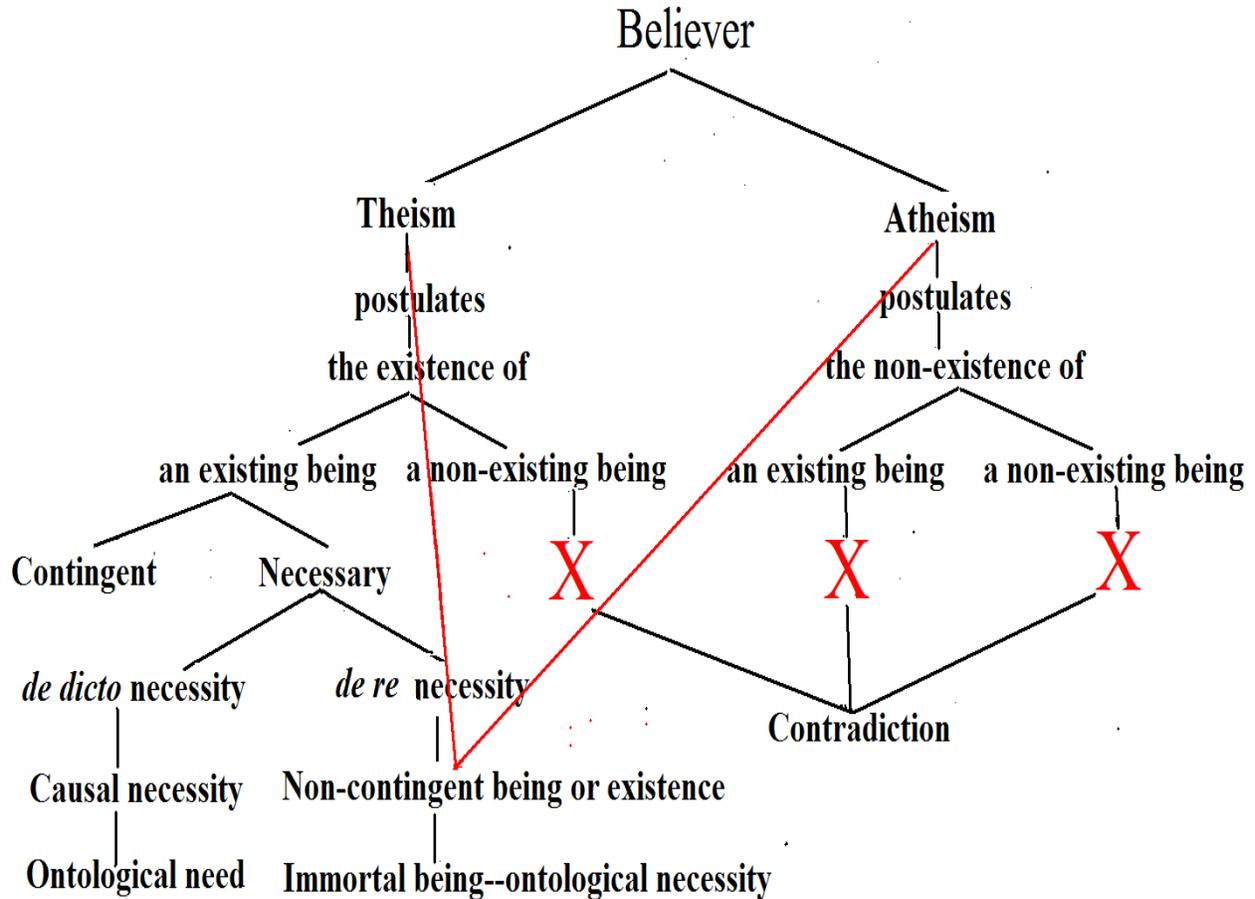


Figure 1: Mental Mapping of the Debate

All believers, be they theists or atheists, must accept the fact that the *in recorporeal* existence of God is not proof for the essence of God. All arguments, ontological, cosmological and teleological, can only establish the basis for causal necessity of God, from which we abstract the need for non-contingent existence to stop the infinite regression or the chain of causation. Arguments only avoid *lucky believing*; they cannot establish ontological proof for belief in the essence of God. Thus, a theist is a theist not because he or she has ‘seen’ God, nor is an atheist an atheist because he or she has ‘notseen’ God. Theists and atheists choose to be believers or disbelievers when confronted with the abstraction of the ‘essence of God’ in relationship to the universe. What must be noted is that comprehension of the essence of God precedes both belief and disbelief, and both are justified belief-decisions for or against the essence of God. Comprehension must always precede believing, for we can comprehend without believing, but we cannot believe or disbelieve without first comprehending the essence of God.

What is significant about ontological necessity is that it can be accepted or rejected regardless of whether one is able to physically *in re* see God or not. Adam, who saw God, needed faith to believe that who he saw was God, just as anyone who could or would see God would have to have faith to believe that who they see is God. Since we have no verifiable ontological proof for the essence of God, we must resort to existential reasons to justify why we choose to believe or disbelieve in God. Sartre argued that God cannot exist, therefore does not exist. Kierkegaard claims that the believer is the strongest argument for the existence of God, which conversely means that the disbeliever is the strongest argument for the non-existence of God. To live is to either live believing or disbelieving in God (Tolstoy, 2009), thus to live is to live in the context of “justified belief-decisions.” Justified belief-decisions register the significance of why we choose to believe or disbelieve in God, knowing well that even if the corporeal existence of God is falsifiable (if God does not show up) the essence of God is unfalsifiable. The meaning associated with belief-decisions for or against the essence of God is tied up with the idea of ‘necessity’, which is a fundamental abstraction of the mind related to the existence of the universe.

4. The Good Life, God and Science

The awareness of the need for a good-life is also related to belief or disbelief in God. Theists see God and goodness as being related; atheists, like Hitchens, Harris, Dennett and Dawkins, think that science can address the questions that posit the need for a good life (Hitchens, 2008; Harris 2011; Dennett 2006 and Dawkins 2006). Intellectual atheists address the question of morality in the context of science instead of metaphysics. They claim that the need for God related to a good-life, can be explained independent of God. So, while they argue against God, their stance is not devoid of arguments for morality or a good life (Harris, 2011). Thus science is just as much a religion as religion is a science. While religion attempts to answer *why* the universe exists, science tries to explain *how* the universe exists. Is the reason why *we* exist (Ward, 2008) in any way tied up with why *the universe* exists? Atheists argue that an unintelligent cause can be responsible for an intelligent life; theists argue that only an intelligent cause can be responsible for intelligent life. Atheists claim that we evolved into moral beings; theists claim that we were created to know God and to be moral (Plantinga, 2000). Dawkins contends that God is a meme (Dawkins, 2008) and an evolutionary delusion, and that the origin

of life is to be explained in terms of the anthropic principle. Dennett says that God is an illusion created by insentient neurons in the same way that ‘consciousness’ is an illusion (Dennett, 2006). Others argue that spirituality is a natural expression in human life (Haught, 2008), in that we understand some innate things are intrinsically wrong (Harris, 2011). The new atheism represented by the big four posits that we can argue for a good life independent of God.

5. The Inevitable Continuity of the Debate

As long as the questions that posit the need for God remain relevant, this debate will always remain a part of the human condition. Understanding the concept of God, as projected by the questions that necessitate belief in God, will always result in some paradigm—theism, atheism and materialism to name a few. However, as long as theists hold that *what each* believes is *the truth*, atheists will have reason to debate with all theists alike. If theists truly understand the questions that necessitate the ontological need for God, there should be no conflict between them. If theists cannot understand fellow theists, then they cannot expect atheists to understand theistic claims. There is no reason for theists to expect atheists to stop their attacks when theists themselves are divided over what they believe. Harris and Dawkins have reason to attack or raise questions against theists for the way theists act or live out their beliefs. Instead of being intellectually honest theists tend to be dogmatic, fundamental and divided. Fighting over the veracity of religious truth cannot and should not be the priority. Theists have an enormous responsibility to present the meaning of their belief, instead of debating over the veracity of what is believed.

The divisiveness between theists is a key reason why the debate between theists and atheists will continue. The atheism that Harris and Hitchens represent argues that religion becomes divisive when a believer’s purport that their religion is ‘true’ and that all other religions are ‘false’ (Harris, 2005). Harris argues that what is intrinsic to every religion is the notion that all religions other than what one believes are false, so “intolerance is thus intrinsic to every creed” (Harris 2005). The discussion between theists and atheists in the beginning was considered as a debate, but today it is a battle, for both sides want to preach, practice and propagate their ‘ism’. It is imperative to understand why this debate has become militant. When religion is reduced to the truth of its beliefs, it loses its meaning. What Tillich calls the “ultimate concern” is not about the mere existence of God, but about the questions that necessitate the reality of God. The atheists

sees the conflict between believers or religions as a basis to attack all believers. The rise of fundamentalism is the cause of many civil wars in the world, so a right understanding of religion is important if wars fought in the name of God are to end.

Secularism is the best solution, because while we have the right to believe, the legal aspect of this right must ensure that we do so without calling other religions pagan, heathen or false. Governments around the world promote secularism, which gives people the right to live by the dictates of their own conscience, thus secularism cannot support a fundamental state. What we believe not only divides us, but is the basis for fundamentalism (Haught, 2008). The greatest challenge of secularism is to convince theists that monotheism simply means there is *one* God; as such, it cannot be reduced or restricted to belief in *one's* God. When believers fight with fellow believers over what they believe, it gives atheists enough grounds to be united against theists as a whole. So believers must stop putting emphasis on *what* they believe and must instead put emphasis on *why they choose* to believe. The existential concerns related to the facticity of death, the need for morality, the quest for immortality, and the meaning of life necessitate us to posit the need for God. If there is no God, the debate between theism and atheism would be meaningless. The question of whether the reality of God can address our existential concerns will propel this debate well into the future. Both theism and atheism must be respected as decisions for or against the concept of God, as this would give believers and nonbelievers alike a chance to understand the questions that defines them to be theists or atheists.

6. Conclusion

The detestation between believers and fellow believers is similar to the detestation between believers and non-believers--or between theists and atheists. We noted that we cannot establish the *de re* necessity of God as we can establish the *de dicto* necessity for God. *De dicto* necessity grounded on causal necessity deals with the contingency of the universe, whereas *de re* necessity based on factual necessity deals with the ontological necessity of God. The *de re* necessity of God entails that God is immortal. To believe that God is immortal is to believe that God is the uncaused cause or that God is non-contingent. As long as the universe exists, the debate related to the unfalsifiable conjecture and abstraction of the *de dicto* necessity for God, and the *de re* necessity of God, will continue. The mere *in re* existence or the *de dicto* necessity for God cannot impose the *de re* necessity or the non-contingent existence of God. That is why it is

easy to establish God's necessity, but hard to establish that God necessarily exists. The idea of non-contingent existence is an abstraction that is conjectured to end the notion of infinite regression. If God is an object that can be sensed then there can only be believers; but since the *in re* existence of God is not sense-evident and the *de re* essence of God is only self-evident, there will always be believers and non-believers. To live is to live believing or disbelieving in God. Regardless of how we comprehend the concept of God or whether we can physically 'see' God, belief and disbelief in God will always remain as "justified belief-decisions" for or against the concept of God. So what theists and atheists accept or reject is related to the existence or non-existence of a non-contingent being

Science like religion, seeks to understand conscious life in the context of the universe. But unlike religion, which uses both the 'eye of reason' and the 'eye of faith' to accept religious claims, science remains committed to only what the principle of confirmation or falsification can establish. Religion, like science, provides answers to existential concerns and questions. But unlike science, where every answer can be tested by the principle of confirmation or falsification, religious claims cannot be established by these principles. What must be avoided is being belligerent over the veracity of religious claims. Answers must be accepted for their meaning, not necessarily for their truth. The challenge for us is to explain why the unfalsifiable abstraction of ontological necessity, along with the need for a good-life, is part of the human condition. It is not 'atheism' as Dawkins, Harris and Dennett suggest, that can end the 'problems' of religion, but rather an educated understanding of secularism that can settle conflicts between believers and disbelievers. Since both theism and the new atheism represented by the Big Four posit the need for a moral life, theists and atheists alike should put emphasis not on merely the decision for believing or disbelieving in God, but on behaving well as authentic individuals.

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