

## THE FUNDAMENTALIST ATTRIBUTION ERROR : A SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGICAL TAKE ON GOD

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*The fundamental attribution error consists of overestimating the contribution of personal factors, relative to that of situational factors, to events. The same psychological process may partly explain the pervasiveness of beliefs in supernatural entities for which there is no evidence. Thus the error of attributing the creation of the universe and human beings to a Creator rather than to natural forces could aptly be labeled the fundamentalist attribution error.*

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The tribe of social psychologists, to which I belong, tends to swear by the shibboleth of the fundamental attribution error, the idea having come from Fritz Heider<sup>1</sup> and the label itself from Lee Ross<sup>2</sup>. Heider had talked about the behaviour engulfing the field, suggesting that when we are trying to understand causes of behaviour we have a strong bias toward a personal causation rather than a situational one. The most poignant example perhaps is the subject in Stanley Milgram's<sup>3</sup> obedience research who, at the experimenter's behest, goes on to the level of 450 volts in shocking an innocent person for making mistakes. As Milgram argues, this is not because the subject is an inhuman sadist, but because of the situation in which he finds himself, such that he is unable to disobey the experimenter who orders him to go on shocking. The most famous real-life counterpart to Milgram's subject might be Adolf Eichmann who claimed he was not responsible for the deaths of the inmates of the Nazi concentration camp he administered because he was merely obeying the orders of his superiors, a defense supported by Milgram's experiments and interpretation as well as the analysis of Hannah Arendt<sup>4</sup>, who wrote about the banality of evil in the sense that ordinary people can commit atrocities merely because they are under situational constraints.

### **Agentive Thinking**

The point of the fundamental attribution error is that people attribute causes of events to persons rather than situations. Because of the way human beings have interacted among themselves and with their environment, our brains seem to have evolved into making adaptive causal attributions which tend to be more strongly personal than situational.<sup>5</sup> This evolutionary development would make personal attribution a default, automatic attribution, and situational attribution a delayed, effortful correction.<sup>6</sup>

If something happens we want to know *who* caused it rather than *what* caused it. If there is a fire, we want to know who the arsonist is. This tendency is reflected in primitive religions in which different events had different gods responsible for the events, like a god of fire or a god of rain. Then at some points of time and in some places people might have stumbled on the convenience of making one single attribution to the effect that God is responsible for everything that happens. This was intellectually economical and emotionally expedient, because it was much easier to pray to or placate one entity in all situations rather than figure out which entity to appeal to in different situations. Monotheism is preferable to polytheism plausibly because it reduces the human cognitive load, not because it is logically more defensible than the latter.

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### **God as a Hypothetical Construct**

It is argued here that the idea of God has originated in our ignorance of the wherefores of our existence and the dread of our nonexistence. It is extremely comforting to have a personal God that looks after all of us, now and forever. Spinoza's God, endorsed by Einstein, was simply Nature, with both words presented here with beginning capitals for equivalence. Thus, in the terminology proposed by MacCorquodale and Meehl<sup>7</sup>, Spinoza's God is an intervening variable, an abstractive concept securely anchored to observables on both sides of a causal relationship, and not a hypothetical construct with surplus, existential meaning. Admissible intervening variables sometimes imperceptibly morph into inadmissible hypothetical constructs, as exemplified by Freud's demonological designations of admissible psychological processes with names of inadmissible homunculi, such as Id, Ego, and Superego. As a further example, mind may be admissible as an intervening variable representing the functioning of the brain, as it is probably viewed by neuroscientists, but it is an inadmissible hypothetical construct as touted by parapsychologists. Soul, of course, is definitely a hypothetical construct, like God, and conjointly indefensible.

Spinoza's impersonal God does not cut ice with the mass of human beings. Even the deists' idea of a macromanaging God can hardly be as emotionally gratifying as the theists' idea of a micromanaging Deity that intervenes in human affairs. Incidentally, Spinoza's conception of God is tautologous, like all intervening variables, even though much more sensible and justifiable than the idea of a nosy, meddlesome, and busybody God, who hands out rewards and punishments to muddling men and women.

### **God as First Cause**

The most plausible argument for the existence of God, especially in light of the vacuity of Anselm's ontological proof, is the existence of the universe, which seems to clamor for explanation in terms of a Creator. How can something exist if it is not created by somebody? The most famous exposition of this argument, known as the argument by design, is probably William Paley's<sup>8</sup> example of a man finding a watch on the heath. If there is a watch on the heath, there must have been a watchmaker who made that watch with all its complexities. The human eye must be a result of design rather than accident. If there is a universe, there must be a Creator of that universe. If

something happens something else before it must have caused the later happening, which takes us back all the way to the First Cause.

But people do not stop to think that if we need to go back to the Creator or First Cause, logically we cannot stop there because we need to explain the provenance of the Creator or First Cause. If the Creator or First Cause does not need an explanation, why would the universe need an explanation in terms of being created by a Creator or generated by a hypothetical First Cause? The serious flaw in the argument by design is that we have an infinite regress on our hands here such that there is absolutely no logical justification for stopping at the First Cause. Instead of taking the argument back to an unverifiable entity like God and stopping there, we would be much more justified in stopping at the obviously verifiable universe itself and saying that it does not need a Creator for its existence. We can thus cut the infinite regress right at the pass, so to say. Nature is all there is, and there is no need to muddy the conceptual waters by equating Nature to God, *pace* Spinoza and Einstein. Cosmology can tackle the problem of the beginning of our universe, and Darwin's theory of evolution and subsequent developments in biology have given us a fair idea as to how life might have begun and evolved into the complex animal known as the human being. God did not create human beings in his image; human beings have created God in their image.

### **The Fundamentalist Attribution Error**

I would like to introduce a new label, *the fundamentalist attribution error*, for the old argument by design. Human beings have a need to explain events in terms of personal causation. With advances in science, we know how most things happen, and so we now do not need Jupiter to explain lightning or Neptune to explain sea storms. But the basic tendency to explain events in terms of personal or agentive causation is very strong and appears to be a part of our evolutionary heritage. This partly explains the prevalence of God in spite of all contrary evidence. Neither empiricism nor rationalism can account for the idea of God, but our emotional needs including our fear of death seem to demand his existence for solace.

Pierre Simon Laplace, questioned by Napoleon as to the place of God in Laplace's world system, famously replied, "Sire, I do not need that hypothesis." Even more to the point is the following quotation from the encyclopedist contributor to the Enlightenment, Denis

Diderot, an older contemporary and compatriot of Laplace:

Wandering in a vast forest at night, I have only a faint light to guide me. A stranger appears and says to me: "My friend, you should blow out your candle in order to find your way more clearly." This stranger is a theologian.<sup>9</sup>

A recent survey suggests that one of five Americans believes in a God who is partial to the United States. No wonder U.S. presidents feel compelled to end every speech with the mindless "God bless America" in spite of the risibility and pettiness of this invocation, risibility because there is no evidence of a God who can bless America, and pettiness because if there were God, he should not limit his blessing to America. "God bless all nations" would be a more laudable sentiment, but less likely to win American votes. Given the astonishingly high level of religiosity of the American people, it would be next to impossible for an atheist to win the presidential election. I suspect that some of the U.S. presidents have been intelligent enough to be nonbelievers, but have paid lip service to God and gone to church in an ostentatious manner because they could not have won the presidency otherwise.

The U.S.A. is a secular nation with an avowed separation between church and state. But the Pledge of Alliance says, "One nation under God," and the currency proclaims, "In God we trust." (The inadvertent omission of "In God we trust" on some of the newly minted George Washington dollars makes one wonder about the hand of God, after all.) Such an intrusion of God into the workings of the state is pernicious in its official sanction for benightedness and detrimental to human progress. Religion should be entirely a private matter and should be kept out of the affairs of the state. Needless to say, intelligent design is a very unintelligent notion in light of all available evidence, and should have no place in the education of our children. The main argument against creationism is that it is based on falsehood, and ipso facto reprehensible.

There is probably some misunderstanding regarding the interplay between morality and religion. It is religion that appears to have derived from morality, to give the latter a semblance of incontrovertible authority, as in the case of the *Ten Commandments*. Adultery is not unpalatable to God, but it is potentially conducive to interpersonal conflict, and likewise with other prohibitions. We do need a moral code for the regulation of interpersonal relations, and evolutionists have considered the possibility of a belief in God having evolved through natural selection for the maintenance of interpersonal cooperation and

societal cohesion. But the bottom line is that we do not have to be religious in order to be moral. Morality can manage very well without religious sanction. Religion is at best redundant and at worst an affront to the human intellect.

There is no compatibility between science and religion for the simple reason that science aims at knowing, while religion thrives on faith fuelled by ignorance. It is in the interest of religion that ignorance should never be dispelled. Religion makes a virtue of ignorance, and thus is inherently inimical to science. It is the quest for truth, not faith in a nonexistent entity, that imparts dignity to human existence.

### **Conclusion**

The foundation of religion is deception, of selves and/or others, exemplified by the fabrication of miracles in the Catholic Church to justify canonization of favored people, sometimes with unseemly fast-tracking and exploitative haste, as in the case of the iconically celebrated Mother Theresa. Stories of miracles have to be taken *cum grano salis* to say the least, and most probably should be rejected out of hand without a second thought. The burning bush of Moses, Paul's epiphany on the road to Damascus, and Muhammad's encounters with Archangel Gabriel are more likely to be consequences of the protagonists' temporal lobe epilepsy than of God's manifestations.<sup>10</sup>

The Nobel-prize-winning work of Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman<sup>11</sup> makes the point that human beings are not as rational as they are seen to be by economists. We appear to be better at rationalizing our decisions than at making rational decisions. Emotional needs trump logical constraints. In a collision between emotion and logic, logic often goes overboard because of its tenuous hold on the human mind. Although we do have some excellent explanations of the pervasiveness of religion in human societies even as late as the turn of the second millennium (e.g., Boyer<sup>12</sup>; Dawkins<sup>13</sup>; Hinde<sup>14</sup>; Shermer<sup>15</sup>), psychologists need to get more involved in the task of examining in depth the cognitive and motivational processes underlying religious faith which stubbornly perseveres in the face of all the evidence contraindicating the existence of God.<sup>16</sup> Neuroscientific advances are likely to help tremendously in this regard as is suggested by the path-breaking work of Ramachandran and his colleagues<sup>17</sup> on the neural basis of religiosity, which has generated a lively controversy apart from opening up a very promising line of research toward the solution of the hoary puzzle as to why people believe

in God in the absence of any evidence for such an entity. □

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