DOUBT

a history

The Great Doubters and
Their Legacy of Innovation
from Socrates and Jesus to
Thomas Jefferson and Emily Dickinson

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INTRODUCTION

Doubt Is No Shadow
A Quiz and a Guide to the Question

Like belief, doubt takes a lot of different forms, from ancient Skepticism to modern scientific empiricism, from doubt in many gods to doubt in one God, to doubt that recreates and enlivens faith and doubt that is really disbelief. There are also celebrations of the state of doubt itself, from Socratic questioning to Zen koans; there is the sigh of the world-weary, the distracted hum of the scientist, and the rant of the victimized. Yet with all this conceptual difference there is a narrative to tell here: doubters in every century have made use of that which came before. At other times, great notions of doubt have been reinvented in relative isolation from the original and in fascinating new forms. This is a study of religious doubt, all over the world, from the beginning of recorded history to the present day. The story builds and does so in the same erratic, wildly creative way that the history of belief does. Once we see it as its own story, rather than as a mere collection of shadows on the history of belief, a whole new drama appears and new archetypes begin to come into focus. Without having the doubt story sketched out as such, it's hard to see how patterns of questioning have mirrored certain types of social change, for instance, and hard to identify doubt's most enduring themes. There are saints of doubt, martyrs of atheism, and sages of happy disbelief who have not been lined up as such, made visible by their relationships across time, and given the context of their story.

Issues of belief and doubt tend to get into some very partisan ruts. Atheists tend to see believers as naïve and dependent. Believers tend to see atheists as having abandoned themselves to meaninglessness, amorality and pain. To shake off these and other modern habits will take exercise. It may be useful to begin by taking one's own pulse on a handful of questions—a quiz—intended both to vitalize the issues by pulling them apart a bit and to help situate some readers among their peers. Answer Yes, No, or Not Sure.

The Scale of Doubt Quiz

1. Do you believe that a particular religious tradition holds accurate knowledge of the ultimate nature of reality and the purpose of human life?
2. Do you believe that some thinking being consciously made the universe?
3. Is there an identifiable force coursing through the universe, holding it together, or uniting all life-forms?
4. Could prayer be in any way effective, that is, do you believe that such a being or force (as posited above) could ever be responsive to your thoughts or words?
5. Do you believe this being or force can think or speak?
6. Do you believe this being has a memory or can make plans?
7. Does this force sometimes take a human form?
8. Do you believe that the thinking part or animating force of a human being continues to exist after the body has died?
9. Do you believe that any part of a human being survives death, elsewhere or here on earth?
10. Do you believe that feelings about things should be admitted as evidence in establishing reality?
11. Do you believe that love and inner feelings of morality suggest that there is a world beyond that of biology, social patterns, and accident—i.e., a realm of higher meaning?
12. Do you believe that the world is not completely knowable by science?
13. If someone were to say, "The universe is nothing but an accidental pile of stuff, jostling around with no rhyme nor reason, and all life on earth is but a tiny, utterly inconsequential speck of nothing, in a corner of space, existing in the blink of an eye never to be judged, noticed, or remembered," would you say, "Now that's going a bit far, that's a bit wrongheaded"?

If you answered No to all these questions, you're a hard-core atheist and of a certain variety: a rationalist materialist. If you said No to the first seven, but

then had a few Yes answers, you're still an atheist, but you may have what I will call a pious relationship to the universe. If your answers to the first seven questions contained at least two Not Sure answers, you're an agnostic. If you answered Yes to some of the questions, you still might be an atheist or an agnostic, though not of the materialist variety. If you answered Yes to nine or more, you are a believer. But more than providing titles for various states of mind, the questions above may serve to demonstrate common clusters of opinion.

In the Eastern hemisphere of the planet, we find powerful and extraordinarily popular religions that did not posit a God or gods. In the West most religious doubt must be categorized as oppositional: in recorded history, belief in God or gods has been the norm and those who questioned or rejected the idea generally did so under at least some constraint. Of course, in every tradition of theistic belief there are records of questioning, doubt, and disbelief. In fact, the great religious texts are all a terrific jumble of affirmation and denial, and the greatest of them record valiant efforts to reconcile these impulses: in the Hebrew Bible, Job rants at God, and Augustine, the early Church Father, tears at his hair in his Confessions, beset by doubts. Whether you are a non-believer, or you belong to a religion without God, or you are a believer troubled by dark nights of the soul, we are all part of the same discussion. This is because, whatever our position may be, we all have the same contradictory information to work with. Sometimes it feels like there is a God or ultimate certainty, and it would be a great comfort if such a thing existed and we knew the answers to life's ultimate mysteries: who or what created the universe and why; what is human life for; what happens when I die? But there is no universally compelling, empirical, or philosophical evidence for the existence of God, a purposeful universe, or life after death.

Some people may be tone-deaf to the idea of evidence, some may be tone-deaf to the feeling that there is a higher power—we must forgive them each their failing. But there is also a tradition by which both sides refuse to engage the interesting questions: believers refuse to consider the reasonableness of doubt, and nonbelievers refuse to consider the feeling of faith. Believers value the sense of mystery human beings can feel when they look inward or beyond; nonbelievers value the ability to map out the world by rational proofs. Yet there is a kind of mutual blindness, as if personal affiliation with one camp or another means more than does interest in the truth. These refusals to consider

the opposing viewpoint are in some ways the result of recent history, a still-warm turf war between science and religion that got out of hand. A little historical context does the most to counteract this, but before launching into the narrative, I offer two interpretive ideas: "A Great Schism" and "Patterns of Doubt." These discussions are distinctly open to the doubting interpretation. This is, after all, doubt's story.

A GREAT SCHISM

Great believers and great doubters seem like opposites, but they are more similar to each other than to the mass of relatively disinterested or acquiescent men and women. This is because they are both awake to the fact that we live between two divergent realities: On one side, there is a world in our heads—and in our lives, so long as we are not contradicted by death and disaster—and that is a world of reason and plans, love, and purpose. On the other side, there is the world beyond our human life—an equally real world in which there is no sign of caring or value, planning or judgment, love, or joy. We live in a meaning-rupture because we are human and the universe is not.

Great doubters, like great believers, have been people occupied with this problem, trying to figure out whether the universe actually has a hidden version of humanness, or whether humanness is the error and people would be better off weaning themselves from their sense of narrative, justice, and love, thereby solving the schism by becoming more like the universe in which they are stuck. Cosmology can be stunning in this context. It is meaningful to get to your wedding on time, to do well in the marathon for which you have been training, to not spill coffee on your favorite shirt. But if we take a few steps back from the planet Earth and from our tiny moment in history, we see a very different picture: the Earth is a ball of water and dirt swarming with creatures, living and dying, passing in and out of existence, shifting around the continents. A few steps further back and we see planets coming into being, stars being born and dying, galaxies swarming in clusters across billions of years. The Earth blips into existence, life appears and swarms, and the Earth blips out of existence. From this perspective, the importance of a favorite shirt, a finish in the next marathon, and even whether you show up at your wedding—all of this begins to seem inconsequential. Concentrating on the macro-

picture of reality is enough to make you sit down on a park bench and never get up again. When you face this schism in meaning, the idea that the universe has an agenda can get you off the park bench and back to your life.

Also in terrific contrast to the universe, human beings have a seemingly innate notion of what is fair. Yet as John F. Kennedy famously put it, "Life is unfair." We are indignant when things are not fair and yet there is little evidence of fairness in the world outside our heads. Unbelievably painful things happen, sometimes for no apparent reason and with no justification. The question of value is part of this. We make sense of things in life, all day every day, by sorting the important from the unimportant (the phone is ringing, the desk is dusty, the baby is falling), but the larger universe seems devoid of these calculations: a stray bullet strikes the generous and beloved mathematician and spares his gnarly little dog. Unstick yourself from our local human time and place, and it is hard to imagine that human values have any real meaning. Poets have often described the oddness of considering a dead emperor, or the skull of a genius: human power in life has no translation in death, or in the greater universe.

A related but not identical rupture has to do with the fact of answers in general. We have an almost violent desire to understand things, and our brains seem to take the whole of life as a great puzzle. Puzzles in the human world usually have solutions. We spend our entire lives working on an intriguing mystery, and we do not have any reason to expect ever to be presented with a solution, or even that there is one. The French philosopher Gabriel Marcel wrote about the difference between problems and mysteries, as did the great, offbeat student of Buddhism, Alan Watts. Both pointed out that problems must be solved but mysteries are to be enjoyed unsolved—and that we will be happier if we regard the universe and existence itself as mysteries. More commonly, the world strikes human beings as something to be figured out, and comes with no solution. Consciousness itself seems missing in the wider universe, and the human heart seems quite out of place. There is a serious weirdness to the mind, thinking amid the vast unthinking world.

Another huge difference between our human world and the universe as we know it is that, within the human world, as Bob Dylan sings, "Everybody's got to serve somebody." We are all inferior to someone in some areas. In the universe, we human beings are the only ones talking and the only ones

articulating any answers. The universe is more powerful than we, but when it comes to demonstration of sentience and will, we find ourselves in the uncomfortable position of being the smartest, most powerful creatures around. There is no one to help us. Thus there is a rupture between daily life, in which individuals are rarely the highest authority, and the larger picture, the macro-reality of humankind, in which we as a group are the authority on everything.

Again, faced with two contradictory truths—that of the human world and that of the universe—religious virtuosos have all suggested some kind of reconciliation. They all say the schism is illusory, either because the universe is really possessed of human attributes and only looks chaotic, uncaring, and without direction, or because our sense of meaning is ridiculous, and we ought to train ourselves away from our willfulness and our struggle to invent, succeed, and sustain. Most prophets, preachers, and seers have made use of both these ideas. On the one hand, when the religious virtuoso tells us to focus our attention on infinity and eternity, and tells us that the importance of our concerns is illusory, he or she seeks to rouse us from our waking dream; to teach us to concentrate on the incomprehensible mysteries of our situation. Along these same lines, people who are driven to speak to such issues often insist that dedicated truth seekers must physically absent themselves from the human contest, living instead in seclusion, doing meditative exercises to strip away belief in human purpose, plans, and meaning. On the other hand, when the religious virtuoso tells us that God has meanings and purposes that we merely do not understand, he or she suggests that we trust the sense of justice and narrative that we have in our heads, and that we claim the meaninglessness of the universe to be the illusion. It is a comfort; it sends us back into our lives of meaning and purpose with the sense that meaning and purpose reign throughout the human experience and the universe at large. Again, most of us walk the line.

The sage tries to help contemplative people hold both of these thoughts in their minds. Jesus supported the idea that God created the world with purpose and care—an example of a preacher reading human-type meaning into the universe. But he also said to give up daily-life contests, habits, and even family bonds, to learn to see them as meaningless—an example of a preacher imposing the nonhumanness of the universe onto daily life. The Hebrew Bible says that vengeance is the Lord's, meaning the fairness that human beings crave really does exist in the world outside our heads. But the Hebrew Bible also

says that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, that time and chance happen to them all. Almost all important religious figures and texts make both of these impositions (meaninglessness on the human world, meaning on the world beyond human control), because the chief issue of religion is the breach between these two worlds.

Religion is not the only discipline to address these concerns, but it is the one by which human beings have attempted to integrate these two realities through practices and emotions as well as ideas. Writing philosophy and reading philosophy are practices, but the text of philosophy is primarily concerned with ideas that can be articulated, not instructions on how to arrive personally at an awareness of what cannot be articulated. Also, a lot of philosophy is concerned with other things. This is especially true today as linguistic analysis and symbolic logic dominate the field. Moreover, much philosophy is inaccessible to many people. The arts are also concerned with the ruptures of human existence, they are full of ideas, and they are practices; indeed, when one performs them or attends great performances, these arts are very close to religious experience in their effect. Still, there is something about religion that is more completely centered on contemplating the rupture—perhaps it is because no end product (canvas, performance, or text) is expected or construed as the central point of the adventure. With religion, the point of the exercise is enlightenment; it is to teach us to live, well and wide awake, in our strange place between meaning and meaninglessness. Great doubters are concerned with this same area: they seek to understand the schism between humanness and the universe, and they very frequently do it through acts—rituals, meditations, life choices—as well as ideas.

The great doubters and believers have been preoccupied with another great schism: the one between what human beings are and what we wish we were, what we do and what we understand. That we love, and that love, among other possibilities, brings forth life, is very strange. We cannot say it is inexplicable, and yet, when it happens (either true love, or conception, or both) we stand amazed. Love can drastically alter a rational person's worldview. The birth of a child can bring extraordinarily religious feelings— because it is such a good thing, but also because it makes no real sense. Where did this miniature human being come from? Technically, we made it out of nine months' worth of French toast, salad, and lamb chops. Technically, our bodies hold tiny little instructions for how to build human eyes, a language center in a human brain,

and a human spirit—fussy, joyful, or otherwise. But how strange that such a thing as fussy exists and is created thusly.

The fact that the human heart so often disagrees with and disobeys the human brain also seems to demand explanation. We feel "possessed" when we love someone we did not intend to, and when we are in great heights of artistic creation, and when we are acting with unusual honor or surprising deceit. In a similar way, human beings find it difficult to credit themselves with owning the virtues, since we lose touch with them so often. It would seem rational that any creature capable of feeling, contemplating, and praising kindness would in fact be extraordinarily kind, but we are not. We may strive for true altruism, pure love, and total clarity, yet we cannot possess these ultimate virtues; for some, this suggests that the ultimate virtues exist elsewhere.

The terms that we use to define God tend to be descriptions of the ruptures between human beings and the universe: meaning, purpose, infinity, and eternity. The terms that we use to describe the personality of God tend to be descriptions of the ruptures between our real selves and our potential selves: honesty, kindness, love, and compassion. Great doubters have been as profoundly invested in these questions as have great believers, and they have offered a bounty of answers, addressing not only what we might believe, but also how we might achieve this belief through study and practice, and how we ought to live. Without God to answer the question of virtue, some have taken on extraordinary codes of morality themselves, as the only way left to solve the breach between what we are and what we wish to be. The history of doubt is not only a history of the denial of God; it is also a history of those who have grappled with the religious questions and found the possibility of other answers.

PATTERNS OF DOUBT

Doubting the existence of God or some ultimate power or divinely mandated code is a very private experience, but it has everything to do with the larger community, and we can describe some loose relationships between certain types of communities and certain kinds of religious doubt. We start where belief starts: in a relatively isolated group of people, concerned with a very

local religious world. In this locally oriented and homogeneous culture, religion and science are essentially the same thing, or are at least fully compatible—early on in ancient Greece, for example. Where everyone seems to believe the same thing, doubt is calm: when scientists or philosophers begin to question religious lore, they do so from within the religion, merely trying to get it all correct. The best religious minds help to question the specifics without hostility to the old version of things. Over time, vibrant details of the cult may fade from attention without much breach or upheaval. What was understood as history and science is increasingly seen as allegory.

Even when the walls of this bedrock-belief culture are worn down to the point of being out of sight, they still effortlessly hold the place together. For a while, the citizens' very personalities are held together by the massively stable and integrated culture, such that they do not fracture and become self-reflexive to the point of distress. Doubters who develop here tend to be more interested in what they have found than what they have lost. These figures are not howling in the abyss of the night; they're out there measuring the stars. They love thinking about the logic of the machine of the world: they're impressed with it and impressed with themselves for figuring it out. Generally speaking, marveling at the mechanism is regarded as a sufficient replacement for faith.

The second model is a heterogeneous or cosmopolitan culture—now, our average citizen belongs to a particular group within the community or is even from some other place. By peaceful trade or hostile clash or general upheaval, interaction between small groups has led to one big group. Alexander the Great mixed the Greeks and the Persians, but this is also a shift one person can make alone: from a village in the old country to the streets of New York City. The Hellenistic Age that Alexander started was one of the great cosmopolitan worlds, as was the Roman Peace, the golden age of Baghdad in the Middle Ages, the Tang dynasty in China, Europe during the Renaissance, and our own whirling modernism. They all experienced a massive mixing of peoples and cultures, and they all produced terrific cosmopolitan doubt. If my ostensibly universal God demands rest on a different day than your ostensibly universal God, we are both going to notice the glitch and wonder who's got it right, if anyone. So difference alone leads to a more questioning, critical attitude toward received truths, i.e., truths that have tradition as their primary proof or source of authority. But it is more than that: the heterogeneous society results from, and leads to, a shakeup of cultural constraints, so that eventually nothing

feels unified and integrated. You speak a different language at home; or you have moved several times; they teach relativism in school; technology has proceeded beyond your skills; you raise your children differently than your parents did. You seek counsel from competing experts.

Yes, you are more likely to lose your faith here, but even more important, when you lose your faith here you are much more alienated, because you were already a little adrift before you lost your God. The effect is that religion here tends to reflect that homelessness and doubt. Also, religious doubt becomes so widespread that worldly contests seem like the only reasonable pursuits, and people lose themselves in materialism and competition, entertainment, politics, and the marketplace. On their own these are never fully satisfying, so alternatives, what I will call graceful-life philosophies, are devised, promulgated, and followed in large numbers. The message of such graceful-life philosophies tends to be: we don't need answers and we don't need much stuff, we just need to figure out the best way to live. Cosmopolitan doubt is often harrowing, but it is also experienced as amusing and empowering—these people feel savvy and free in comparison to their forerunners. They go to the theater.

Finally, within the mixed, increasingly skeptical community, something new arises: a committed, ardent belief, where the idea of doubt is written into the idea of the religion. Here expressions of doubt can feel threatening very quickly, because the feeling of lost certainty and the pain that accompanies it are now very well known. The moral abyss, the friendless world, seems to be the common state of those outside the community, and they express this in florid detail: outside the community, people swagger with the pride of the independent but also bemoan their fate, compete like animals, abuse drugs, commit violence, and generally invite upheaval into their lives. Those who make a belief commitment reject this and call back to a period of unquestioned belief—but belief has grown much more self-conscious and the group often now feels it must consciously police its membership against doubt. There are communities who simply believe in something, and communities who believe in "not just plain believing," and communities who believe in "just plain believing." Doubt is experienced very differently in these three settings, as we will begin to see in chapter 1.

The basic structure of this book is chronological, but there has been some

thematic bundling. The first four chapters follow the four heroic traditions of doubt of the ancient world: the Greeks, the Hebrews, the East, and Rome. These amazing foundational bursts of doubt all fall into the period between 600 BCE and 200 CE. Chapter 5 looks at Jesus and the howl of Christian doubt: after Jesus at Gethsemane and Augustine in his garden, doubt was never the same. This period also witnessed the first intermingling of the four heroic doubting traditions. Chapter 6 watches doubt make a loop around the Mediterranean in the high Middle Ages, blazing through medieval Islam, Judaism, and Christianity—right through the period commonly thought of as the age of belief. Chapter 7 covers the period that spans the European Renaissance, Reformation, and Inquisition, and we will follow a trail of doubters' trials, many of which end at the stake. Chapter 7 also includes the rise of Zen in Japan, and the meeting, in China, of two great forces of doubt: European science and Asian nontheistic religion. Doubt was becoming an international tradition, aware of its global variety, history, and heroes.

Chapter 8, about the period from 1600 to 1800, includes the scientific revolution with its huge cosmological shift, the scandalous Libertines, the Enlightenment deists and materialists, and some wild doubters of the democratic revolutions. From Newton, Galileo, and Spinoza to Robespierre, Thomas Paine, and Thomas Jefferson is a particularly fascinating journey in the history of doubt—and that's only what went on in the foreground. Untold women and men left a variety of plucky, tortured, pleased, contemplative, or angry records of their doubt in religion, in the afterlife, and in God. Chapter 9 covers the nineteenth century, a period hugely vocal about its doubt; indeed, in this period many people came to believe that atheism was inherently better than religion and that the movement of humanity should be in this direction. The sentiment was a new one and it was widely welcomed: Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, and Friedrich Nietzsche are only the best known of that opinion. It is worth noting at the outset that the claim that atheism should someday take over the world was born in the nineteenth century because of a specific set of historical circumstances. In all other periods, doubters tended to treat the community of doubt as city-dwellers treat the city: they live there, for better or worse, and they know a lot of country people hate it, but for themselves, they are either stuck there or they love it, but in any case, they do not expect everyone to move there—though it sometimes seems like everybody wants to. I will explain where the idea of an evangelical atheism came from, why it made

sense at the time, and how much of the history of doubt it obscures. Finally, chapter 10 will assess the twentieth century and our present times, charting doubt's recent heroes—the doubting poet Georgia Douglas Johnson in the Harlem Renaissance, for instance, and Thomas Edison sounding off against the afterlife to the New York Times—and following its silent masses. Doubt twists into new shapes in the horror of the Holocaust. Also, in the twentieth century, Eastern atheism expands remarkably in the West while Western atheism spreads in a great red wave over areas of the East.

From its beginnings to the present, doubt can be identified in seven categories. Two of the earliest were science (materialism and rationalism) and nontheistic transcendence programs (often religions without gods). The next three showed up early as well. There was cosmopolitan relativism as soon as people mixed and as a result began taking their own traditions with a grain of salt and, also, a political need arose for public secularism and tolerance. The moral rejection of injustice, like the doubt of Job and other survivors, appears at the same time, and so do the first graceful-life philosophies, which present themselves as guides for life without belief. Philosophical skepticism, which questions our ability to know the world at all, including our ability to claim God's existence, starts with Socratic questioning but really gets going after the ancient Greeks acquire a multitude of philosophies and that great variety makes some people reject them all. Finally, there is the doubt of the ardent believer. All of these histories are remarkably intertwined.

I wrote this book because as I have studied history I have always noticed doubt, out of the corner of my eye. I came to believe I knew a story that most people did not know. Most scholars, I thought, did know all the elements of the story but did not think of it as a distinct history. Through researching and writing the book, though, I've been surprised to discover that scholars of every period have found doubters and that when these are looked at head on, a strong, cohesive history appears. The names and movements that appear in the first chapters of this book—Socrates, Epicurus, Skepticism, Stoicism, and Diogenes the Cynic; Job and Ecclesiastes, the Jews who fought against the Maccabees; the Buddha, the Carvaka, and Zen; Cicero, Lucretius, and Sextus Empiricus—would be on the lips of doubters ever after. Later, medieval doubters of the Islamic, Jewish, and Christian traditions will be added to these names in various writings about the world's doubters. In fact, throughout the centuries many people have written histories of doubt. Some of doubt's

schools of thought, heroes of resistance, and witty anecdotes were remembered, forgotten, and remembered again, across centuries. The great traditions of global doubt cited the existence of one another long before they knew much detail: in their argument against universal belief in God, doubting Christians noted rumors that Confucianism was an atheist religion; doubting Jews cited Aristotle's idea that the world was eternal and thus not created by a Creator; doubters in China embraced the scientific rationalism of the West as soon as they got wind of it—from the Jesuits. The explicit idea that there is a history of doubt, one of great antiquity and global expanse, bloomed in and out of common knowledge.

A few things about religion become visible from the history of doubt. One is that there was belief before there was doubt, but only after there was a culture of doubt could there be the kind of active believing that is at the center of modern faiths. Until the Greeks filled libraries with skepticism and secularism, no one ever thought of having a religion where the central active gesture was to believe. Another is that doubt has inspired religion in every age: from Plato, to Augustine, to Descartes, to Pascal, religion has defined itself through doubt's questions. Of course, this extends up to today.

Doubters have been remarkably productive, for the obvious reason that they have a tendency toward investigation and, also, are often drawn to invest their own days with meaning. Many scientists and doctors have been doubters of religious dogma, including the physicist Galileo Galilee, the Jewish theorist and doctor Maimonides, the Muslim philosopher and doctor Abu Bakr al-Razi, and the physicist Marie Curie. Sometimes scientific methodology causes doubt by its example of questions and proof, sometimes doubters are drawn to the sciences, sometimes both. Many ethicists and theorists of democracy, freedom of speech, and equality have also been doubters; in the modern period alone, these include Thomas Jefferson, John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor, Frederick Douglass and Susan B. Anthony. Great poets, too, from Lucretius and Ovid to John Keats and Emily Dickinson, have often written because they doubted God and an afterlife and had to work out the question with diligence.

The earliest doubt on historical record was twenty-six hundred years ago, which makes doubt older than most faiths. Faith can be a wonderful thing, but it is not the only wonderful thing. Doubt has been just as vibrant in its prescriptions for a good life, and just as passionate for the truth. By many

standards, it has had tremendous success. This is its story.