

Meaning and Mystery

What It Means To Believe In God

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Introduction:

Does Anyone Actually Believe in God?

It can be frustrating to talk to an intelligent person whose thinking about important issues differs from your own. You feel as if there ought to be something you could say that would help that person to see the light. Or perhaps, if you are somewhat more humble, you may think that there is something the other person might say that could enlighten you. But when someone's beliefs are alien to your own, it can be difficult to develop an empathetic understanding of how anyone could find such beliefs convincing.

One recent author, reflecting on arguments for God's existence says, "I began to wonder whether the arguments were ever really seriously endorsed; and this led me to wonder whether anyone actually believed their conclusion. That is, I began to wonder whether anyone really did believe in God."¹ Judging that there is no reason at all to accept claims about God, he decides that people who say they believe in God are simply self-deceived. They don't really believe what they claim to believe.

Well, that's one way to respond to someone who says something that seems to you obviously wrong, but it's a pretty extreme way. An alternative would be to try to determine whether there are any assumptions implicit in your own perspective that lead you to view what you reject as not only false, but unbelievable. A key theme of this book is that ways of thinking about belief in God that seem natural in our culture distort the way we reason about it. Both believers and nonbelievers are tempted to think about the idea of God as if it were an empirical hypothesis, posited to explain general features of the world or particular experiences that defy natural explanation.² One result of this way of thinking is that when we try to talk about whether there is good reason to believe in God, we end up talking about things that bear little relation to the kind of belief intelligent religious people hold or to the considerations that actually convince them of the truth of their belief.

Asking for Reasons

The problem is not that we ask for reasons. Asking for reasons is part of what we do when we encounter beliefs that seem puzzling or doubtful. If your best friend has suddenly given up eating meat and become uncomfortable around others who still eat it, it seems appropriate to ask why she thinks she should not eat meat. Suppose that the answer turns out to be a personal experience with the operation of a factory farm that has produced a reaction of intense disgust. Even if you are not convinced to change your own habits, you might find the changed beliefs and practices of your friend to be understandable. You know something about how she changed her mind, and you can at least imagine thinking in the way she does. Sometimes what a reason does is to make a particular view understandable in the sense that we have some grasp on how someone might accept it.

Of course, we can describe beliefs that would not be so understandable. If your friend claims to believe that babies are delivered by storks, you would likely suspect that she is putting you on. If she proceeds to give you a reason, such as the experience of having seen a baby delivered by this method or having read about it in some source she takes as authoritative, you would be unlikely to regard these reasons as serious answers. If you were convinced that she was serious, you would likely wonder whether she has lost touch with reality. Or perhaps you would decide that she must be speaking metaphorically and did not mean what she said to be taken literally.

So what about the case of giving reasons for believing in God? If you don't believe yourself, but discover that someone you know well has this belief and ask for reasons, what kinds of reasons might you expect? If you have been indoctrinated into standard philosophical models, perhaps you would expect a rehearsal of some well-known arguments for the existence of God. But suppose someone actually appeals to such arguments as the basis of his belief. Would that render the belief intelligible to you? Perhaps you could understand how someone might acquire a theory about the cause of the universe through this kind of reasoning, but would such a theory amount to belief in God? What would be unintelligible is how someone might acquire the kind of belief that could have life-transforming significance or be held as a fundamental conviction. In other words such reasons would not account for the acquisition of a distinctively religious belief.

To think about the kinds of reasons that might make belief in God intelligible, we need to have some understanding of the context in which

this belief functions. In the first place, belief in God does not arise as acceptance of an isolated proposition. The idea of God is ordinarily understood in relation to a larger story in terms of which people form some understanding of what human life is about and how it should be lived. Accepting the larger story means acquiring a way to interpret the meaning of everyday experiences. A believer views her experiences in the light of the story and evaluates choices in terms that the story makes intelligible. In other words acquiring a belief in God is inseparable from acquiring a way of life.

So when someone asks a believer, “Why do you believe in God?” it may not be easy to know how to answer. The answer is unlikely to be a simple piece of evidence that convinces the believer that her experience should be interpreted in the way she does or that her way of life is fitting. Accepting the existence of God in a religiously significant way won’t be like adding a hypothesis that there is a hitherto undiscovered moon of some planet. In that case you might point with relative ease to the specific evidence you found convincing. But while there may be specific experiences that a believer takes as indicators of divine activity, the idea of God permeates the believer’s experience at a fundamental level. To point to the evidence, she would need to point to the kind of intelligible order that using a theistic story makes possible. Reasons for accepting the belief will be bound up with whatever considerations have made the story in which the idea of God functions compelling.

Narrative Framing

To understand the particular judgments that people make, we often need to know the patterns of thought that lie in the background of their assessments. The female CEO of a major corporation gives an apparently uncharitable assessment of a young female executive who is attempting to balance her duties to the company with the demands of family life. The judgment turns out to be related to the CEO’s personal story. Closely connected with her own sense of identity is a narrative of how she worked her way up the company ranks through single-minded dedication that surpassed that of her male counterparts. There were necessary sacrifices, including sacrifices to family life. She thinks of herself as a trailblazer for other women, and from this perspective she views the young executive who is apparently less

single-minded as someone who is squandering the opportunity that she and others like her have provided.

The background stories people have often furnish them with paradigms that lead them to weigh evidence in different ways. Political disputes about issues such as poverty or the use of military power often turn on the ways that people consider information from alternative narrative perspectives that frame its significance. One sees the situation of the poor in terms of a social oppression story, and another sees it in terms of a personal responsibility story. We tend to recognize as significant those things that fit into the frames we are using and marginalize things that don't seem to fit. Sometimes our failure to recognize the importance of something is irresponsible, but recognizing the irresponsibility typically involves enriching the narratives we are using, rather than approaching the facts without some narrative that enables us to sort out what is significant.

Our stories shape our perceptions at different levels. At the highest level of generality, we have stories about the nature of human life and the world in which we live that I call life-orienting stories (discussed in Chapter 1). They put our lives in a context that enables us to interpret the significance of our choices and develop a coherent mode of life. Religious stories of this sort tend to describe the significance of our lives in relation to dimensions of reality that transcend ordinary empirical observation and verification. They speak of such things as gods or God or karma or Nirvana, invoking these transcendent realities as keys to making sense of our lives.

It is tempting for someone who does not accept any religious account to view an appeal to transcendent realities as a kind of empirical hypothesis that is formed on the basis of flimsy evidence. But to do so is to miss the way that any talk about what is ultimately real makes claims that go beyond the empirically verifiable. One sociologist in a discussion of the centrality of narratives for understanding human behavior, points out that neither narratives that invoke transcendence nor those that deny transcendence limit their claims to what can be tested empirically. He notes, "... the belief that the only and total reality that actually exists is that which humans can empirically observe is itself a statement of faith, whether or not its adherents recognize and admit it as such."³ What makes such a claim about reality believable is not that it explains empirical evidence, but that it shapes a particular understanding of the world in which the categories and methods used in natural science are viewed as providing the tools for the most fundamental and complete explanation of everything. It is in using this vision

as a guide to thought and action that a person comes to believe what it presupposes about reality.

In a similar way people who believe in God are convinced, not by a process of reasoning from publicly available evidence to the conclusion that God exists, but by a narrative vision in which the idea of God plays a fundamental role. When they are able to use this narrative to orient themselves in life by discerning the kinds of significance it highlights, the conception of reality it presupposes becomes believable.

Alternative Narratives

It is possible to reflect on the life-orienting narratives that persuade us, but any such reflection should be governed by the realization that we need some story of this kind to order our lives. We can reject one story only if we can explicitly or implicitly substitute some alternative, and only a limited number of alternatives will seem like viable options to us. So our judgment about life-orienting narratives is fundamentally a comparative judgment. Is one of the viable alternatives superior to the others?

The superiority in question involves accounting for accepted facts, but such considerations are unlikely to narrow the options to a single one. There will be theistic stories and atheistic stories, developed in ways that can accommodate the facts that can be generally agreed upon. Matters on which we don't have general agreement are often more important in assessing these stories. How should religious experiences be weighed? Can we rule out claims to miraculous events? Do our emotional capacities and our discernment of value have a role to play in gaining insight into the nature of things? Because we fail to agree on these kinds of issues, we may also fail to agree about what the relevant facts are and how they should be weighed.

Even if we could agree about factual evidence, the superiority of one narrative over another is not just a matter of determining which one fits established facts better. Life-orienting narratives, whether theistic or atheistic, provide ways of ordering the value-laden world we experience as agents who must determine how to act. The accounts of reality they contain are woven into a vision of the human good and of a moral order that is authoritative for us. Their capacity to evoke our love for the good and motivate us to live in accordance with that moral order is crucial. We reflect on these

stories, not just as detached theorists, but as individuals with moral and aesthetic sensibilities that may or may not be engaged by a particular story.

The point here is not that one is attracted by a particular vision of human fulfillment and decides that it must, therefore, be true. It is rather that life-orienting stories have to make sense from a practical perspective, not just from a theoretical perspective. If we cannot be drawn into the vision of human good supported by a particular story, reasons for believing the account of reality it portrays are unlikely to be convincing. Conversely, when a story portrays a vision of human good that resonates with our moral impulses, we are likely to be receptive to potential confirmations of the truth of the story. The evidence for a godless reality seems more convincing when we find a moral vision of human life without God to satisfy our aspirations for independence and autonomy. Potential signs of divine benevolence seem more convincing when we approach them with an attraction for a kind of spiritual development that depends on the truth of a theistic narrative.

Revelation and Reason

The author quoted at the beginning of this introduction, who found no reason at all to believe in God, was very likely thinking that the idea of God is an empirical hypothesis that turns out not to be needed to explain anything. When we look at the relevant data, we discover that we can get along perfectly well without this idea. There is another way of thinking about the idea of God, however, that is prominent in theistic stories. People are said to learn about who God is and what God does through revelatory experiences. Consider, for example, how someone might come to believe that there is a loving God. Such a belief does not arise from reflecting on the good and bad of life and deciding that God is needed to explain an excess of good over bad. Rather the conviction that God cares about human life arises from becoming convinced that in particular events God's nature has been revealed.

The typical philosophical assumption is that there is a proper order to follow. You have to decide whether God exists before moving on to the question of whether there is a revelation of God's nature.⁴ But the convictions of religious people ordinarily proceed in the opposite direction. They are exposed to a story that includes accounts of what God has done or communicated and become convinced about God. This sort of response

may depend on predispositions that do not rule out the possibility of God as greatly implausible, but having such predispositions to entertain the idea of God is fairly common, and they need not depend on a process of reasoning that independently establishes the probability of God's existence.

Suppose you receive a letter from someone who calls himself or herself a "secret admirer." You might regard the letter as a hoax, dismissing the possibility. Perhaps you have independent reasons for thinking that no one could admire you in this way. But it is also possible that reading the letter convinces you that there really is a secret admirer who has chosen this way to communicate with you. Perhaps there are details in the letter that convince you the author is a genuine admirer. It is the contents of the letter, not some prior proof of a secret admirer, that functions to produce belief. Similarly, in theistic religious communities particular accounts of divine action and divine communication purport to tell people about God's nature and intentions. Coming to believe these accounts is not a matter of having a proof of God and then having a proof that this is a divine revelation. It is more a matter of finding the story convincing enough to "try it on" as a way of understanding your life.

Of course, an initial impulse to believe a revelatory story is not enough. When a story purports to make sense of your life, it needs to be usable as a guide to interpreting your experience and regulating your pattern of living. A story that seemed initially promising might later be recognized as defective. But finding a story usable is not a matter of finding the kind of reasons that could convince anyone. There is testing that can be done, but not the kind of testing that proves once and for all that a particular story is correct. Furthermore, the perspective from which we can test any life-orienting story is in relation to other possible stories that might seem viable. We are not in a position to abandon a story that might seem problematic unless we have on the horizon a way of interpreting the meaning of our experience and shaping our lives that seems more convincing.

Mystery

It can seem odd to someone who thinks that the meaning of human experience is to be understood in terms of what we can observe and verify that anyone would think that the key to making sense of things lies in a dimension of reality beyond ordinary empirical observation. Furthermore,

when sophisticated theists talk about God, it becomes clear that when they invoke various analogies and images, they are trying to speak about something that stretches the limits of human language. It seems strange to think that one explains something by positing something beyond understanding.

However, that way of putting it distorts what belief in God is about. Talk about God is not so much an explanation of what seems puzzling, but a way of expressing an apparent apprehension of a deeper meaning. All of us are familiar with the experience of going beyond a surface meaning to an awareness of significance it discloses. A certain look or gesture tells you that someone is flirting. An act of giving in to temptation reveals that you are not the person you imagined yourself to be. An awareness of suffering triggers the realization that you must respond. Our ability to read deeper meanings is surely fallible, but it is also part of what allows us to find our way around in the world.

People who believe in God think that experience discloses depths that are not immediately apparent when we look at surface meanings. But discerning the depths comes through awareness of a revelatory story that tells us of the purposes and plans of God. When we view our own lives in relation to this larger drama, everyday activities take on a different significance. The believer's experiential world includes things like awareness of divine guidance, divine judgment, and divine empowerment. The revelatory story becomes a kind of key that unlocks awareness of these deeper meanings.

The kind of understanding claimed is not what we might want as theorists concerned with making everything comprehensible. It is instead an understanding conducive to shaping a life that fulfills a particular vision of the human good. The believer who seeks to align herself with divine purposes needs some idea of what those purposes are and how to think about what God has done or is doing, but the kind of knowledge needed for practice might leave a great deal unexplained. A religious vision, properly understood, does not clear everything up, but allows one to articulate particular meanings and live in accordance with them, while recognizing that the articulation is from a very limited point of view.

Life-orienting stories that deny transcendence invite us to think about things we don't understand as puzzles that might be cleared up with more investigation. Life-orienting stories that invoke something transcendent invite us to attend to mysteries that defy human comprehension.⁵ The denial of mysteries is connected with a confidence in the powers of human reason that is useful in many contexts. But the danger of this approach is the temptation to ignore or minimize what does not fit into the available explanatory

patterns. If we think we know that there is nothing mysterious about the world we live in, nothing that might serve as a pointer to a deeper meaning, we are unlikely to be open to stories that attempt to convey such a meaning.

The idea that no reasonable person could really believe in God might seem plausible if we rule out the possibility of revelatory disclosures. What seems apparent, however, is that not everyone rules them out. For some people the possibility that particular events and particular experiences might function as signs of a deeper meaning than empirical testing could verify seems worthy of consideration. Some people find it natural to approach questions of who we are and what our lives are about as mysteries calling for an openness or receptiveness to the possibility of revelatory insights.

Does anyone actually believe in God? If we imagine that the only respectable kind of belief would be one that treats God as an empirical hypothesis and we think that this hypothesis fails to be supported by some minimal level of verifiable evidence, then it may seem charitable to say no. But if we recognize the role of life-orienting stories in our belief formation and acknowledge that a person might be convinced by some story of what God has done or communicated, we can easily imagine someone forming the kind of belief that shapes his or her experiential world.

Furthermore, thinking about the matter in this way helps us to see that disbelief in God is not just a rejection of an empirical hypothesis, but rejection of a certain kind of story as a guide to life. To make sense of rejecting god stories, we need to know what kind of story takes their place, for we can't get along without some story about what is ultimately real and how it connects with the human good. The question is not whether we can prove the assumptions about ultimate reality in our stories, but what kind of story we find adequate as a guide to how to live, for the closest we come to truth in these matters is in discovering an experiential reality we find compelling and a way of life that engages us.⁶

Notes

- 1 Georges Rey, "Does Anyone Really Believe in God?," in *The Experience of Philosophy*, 6th edn., eds. Daniel Kolak and Raymond Martin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 336.
- 2 Recent bestselling opponents of theistic religion explicitly say that they are arguing against the existence of God as a scientific hypothesis. For example, see Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2006),

50. See also Victor Stenger, *God, the Failed Hypothesis: How Science Shows That God Does Not Exist* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2007). In Chapter 2 I discuss the philosophical tendency to treat belief in God as a metaphysical hypothesis or as based on a metaphysical hypothesis.
- 3 Christian Smith, *Moral, Believing Animals: Human Personhood and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 100.
- 4 Sandra Menssen and Thomas D. Sullivan present evidence that this is a standard philosophical assumption and then argue against it in *The Agnostic Inquirer: Revelation from a Philosophical Standpoint* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007). I agree in rejecting this assumption, but offer different reasons for thinking it defective.
- 5 The distinction between “problem” and “mystery” is based on the discussion of Gabriel Marcel. He thinks of problems as potentially solvable, whereas mysteries escape objective understanding. See *Creative Fidelity*, trans. Robert Rosthal (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002).
- 6 Compare this to Kierkegaard’s claim that “*An objective uncertainty, held fast through appropriation with the most passionate inwardness, is the truth, the highest truth there is for an existing person.*” Johannes Climacus, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), vol. 1, 203.

God of the Philosophers

“To conclude to a transcendent ground, or to postulate such a ground in order to make the real intelligible, is not yet to attain the idea of God as religious faiths have traditionally conceived it.” (Louis Dupré¹)

“One will not long believe in a personal God with whom there is no personal communication, and the most compelling evidence of a personal God must itself be personal.” (Michael Buckley²)

In science fiction stories people sometimes ask questions of a computer that the computer declines to answer. Typically the reason for not getting the desired response is that the question has been badly formed. For instance, it may contain ambiguities or vague terms that make it unclear exactly what is being asked. Or the question might be asked in a way that leaves out crucial variables. For example, someone asks how long a given task will take, without mentioning the number of people or type of machinery available to work on it. Evidently computers of the future are smart enough to refrain from attempting an answer until they are given a good enough question.

Even when a question appears to be formulated in a clear and precise manner, deciding what kind of answer is called for may involve considerable contextual understanding. If someone asks you what you are doing for lunch, the question might be about your availability for a lunch meeting or an inquiry into whether you are still pursuing your odd diet or it might be about whether your social life is picking up. Giving an appropriate answer can require some discernment into what the point of the question is. If we misconstrue the purposes of the inquiry, we may offer the wrong kind of answer.

It might be thought that a question such as “Does God exist?” would be immune from this sort of misunderstanding. Surely there is a straightforward answer to this question, regardless of our purpose in asking it. Sometimes, however, apparently straightforward answers can be unresponsive to what we primarily want to know. Suppose, for example, that the question of God’s existence arises out of a concern to discover how to live my life. I want to know about God’s existence because I think it will make some difference for what I should be concerned about and what activities should engage me. I want to know whether it makes sense to join some community of believers and devote myself to practices, such as praying and studying sacred texts.

Imagine that someone responds to my question by offering convincing reasons for thinking that the universe had a First Cause or an Intelligent Designer. While I might recognize this response as relevant to my question, I might also be disappointed in it. Even if the answer I have been given is correct, it is not what I was trying to discover. The kind of god I was inquiring about is one who would make a difference in how I live, and yet I might very well accept the idea of a First Cause or an Intelligent Designer without thinking that such a fact had much to do with me at all. Even if I think that I have learned something important, I might judge myself to be not very close to answering the question that motivated my inquiry.

The question of whether God exists is often interpreted as an expression of a kind of theoretical concern, arising out of our desire to understand things. When viewed in this fashion, it is tempting to equate it with an inquiry into whether some being beyond the universe is needed to explain the existence of the universe. Once we frame the question in this way, we may find promising lines of inquiry. We might think, for instance, that the starting point should be some scientific account of the nature of the universe and focus on whether there is some kind of explanation that science cannot give. But even if we can get a satisfactory answer to this kind of question, it seems doubtful that this procedure would get to the heart of what people are looking for when they ask about God’s existence.

What most of us want to find out when we ask about God’s existence relates to the God we have heard about in religious traditions. We wonder whether the object of worship in religions such as Judaism or Christianity is a reality. Discovering that we needed an entity called God to serve as an explanation of the universe might be worthwhile information, but it does

not really answer the questions we are primarily concerned to answer. Can you pray to this theoretical entity? Is there some way to make contact with it? Does it care how you live? Issues that are of central importance in an inquiry about the object of worship in particular religions would be left untouched by an answer to the question of whether a being called God is needed as an explanation of the physical universe.

Perhaps someone might think that the answers to all these other questions are properly addressed only after we have resolved the explanation question. If it turns out that you do not need to posit such a being to explain the universe, we might imagine that this would somehow undermine a religious belief in God. But why should we think so? Did adherents of theistic religions decide that God exists because they thought that God was needed as an explanation of the universe, or is their confidence that God exists based on different considerations? If belief in God does not develop out of an attempt to form a theoretical understanding of the ultimate cause of things, we run the risk of distorting the belief when we construe it in these terms. If we are primarily concerned with God's existence as a religious question, we need to be careful not to confuse that inquiry with some other type of question.

Religious Questions and Metaphysical Questions

In describing how he came to develop his philosophical defense of Christian belief, Richard Swinburne writes,

[O]nce I had seen what makes scientific theories meaningful and justified, I saw that any metaphysical theory, such as the Christian theological system, is just a superscientific theory. ... A metaphysical theory is a highest-level-of-all theory. It seeks to explain why there is a universe at all, why it has the most general laws of nature that it does (especially such laws as lead to the evolution of animals and humans), as well as any particular phenomena that lower-level laws are unable to explain. Such a theory ... is justified if it is a simple theory and leads you to expect the observable phenomena when you would not otherwise expect them.³

What Swinburne proposes is not idiosyncratic. His assumption that the idea of God should be evaluated in the context of seeking a metaphysical

theory is the assumption that philosophers make when they attempt to discover whether general facts about the universe can justify an inference to the conclusion that God exists. Swinburne interprets standard arguments for God's existence as inductive arguments and uses the tools of confirmation theory to make a cumulative case argument. But he assumes that the way to justify belief that God exists is to show it as part of a general human concern to develop a theoretical explanation of things that starts with publicly available factual evidence.

In discussing cosmological arguments for God's existence, Swinburne says that while natural science cannot explain the existence of the universe, "God can provide an explanation. The hypothesis of theism is that the universe exists because there is a God who keeps it in being and that laws of nature operate because there is a God who brings it about that they do."⁴ Whatever might be said for or against this claim, it should not escape our notice that the idea of God is treated as a hypothesis that is justified by providing a certain kind of explanation. Once we accept that assumption, the rules and procedures for discussing whether God exists become in effect the rules and procedures of metaphysical argument.

But is there any alternative? Isn't the idea of God a metaphysical idea that ought to be evaluated on metaphysical grounds? To answer this question, we need to distinguish between two senses of "metaphysical." In one sense of the word any claim about reality is a metaphysical claim. So, for example, if I speak of my next door neighbor graciously agreeing to mow my lawn while I was away, I am making metaphysical claims about the entity I call my neighbor, my lawn, and implicitly myself. However, when I start taking claims about reality to call for the particular kinds of explication or justification that metaphysicians develop, I am doing more than saying they are claims about reality. I am treating them as part of a certain kind of theoretical enterprise that operates in accordance with recognized standards of evaluation.

When we ask metaphysical questions in this more specialized sense, we are trying to construct an account of reality that meets requirements of precision and argumentative rigor that are understood components of philosophic practice. We can treat the idea of God in this way. We can put on our objective evidence-evaluation hats and consider whether the idea provides a better explanation of commonly accepted data than alternative hypotheses. When we do so, it may be tempting to think that our metaphysical investigation is a way of trying to answer the question of whether the being religious traditions refer to as God actually exists. But there are some

significant reasons for being cautious about too close an identification between the metaphysical issue and the religious issue. Here are a few:

1. **Acceptance or rejection of God as a metaphysical hypothesis is primarily an intellectual matter.** The focus is on gaining some kind of conceptual understanding that can be rationally explicated and defended. Religious belief in God, however, is not a product of a detached examination of the world. It arises most fundamentally out of participating in the practices of a religious community. In such a community adopting a belief in God is wrapped up with accepting particular attitudes and values that are connected with a shared way of life. It is at least not obvious that the question of whether to adopt such a belief and the way of life that goes with it is to be answered by the kind of dispassionate reasoning we think appropriate for pursuing theoretical understanding.

2. **The kind of belief that could result from a metaphysical inquiry into God's existence does not give rise to the sort of commitment characteristic of religious belief.** When we treat the existence of God as a metaphysical question, it seems appropriate to imagine someone assenting to a hypothesis or a conclusion based on the evidence currently available, but holding the belief with a kind of tentativeness that is open to new evidence that might overturn it. However, anyone who accepted a belief in God in only a tentative manner would not be holding a religious belief. To be genuinely religious, belief in God must have the centrality characteristic of a fundamental conviction, making it inappropriate to think of the belief as a hypothesis in the ordinary sense of that term.

3. **Thinking of God as a metaphysical concept means treating the idea as an inference from known data to something unknown.** By contrast someone with a religious belief in God will think of God as an experiential reality. It seems odd to pray to or worship a being that you have posited to exist as a result of some chain of reasoning. But the kind of belief that could be called religious will be exhibited through activities that engage the believer in a way that produces some sense of contact with God.

4. **The content of a metaphysical belief that God exists is different from the content of a religious belief.** Anyone familiar with metaphysical thinking about God will recognize that the categories used are much more austere and abstract than the rich range of conceptual tools characteristic of religious traditions. A metaphysician might think about whether there is an uncaused cause or a necessary being, while a believer will think primarily in terms of images such as father or light or redeemer. Even terms that

might be given an abstract rendering, such as “creator,” have for the believer an evocative power connected with appropriate responses, such as gratitude and praise.

The point is not that metaphysical thinking about the existence of God is inappropriate. A religious believer, who is inclined to do such thinking, might hold that the idea of God can be defended as a promising metaphysical hypothesis. On the other hand, a religious believer might be indifferent to metaphysical speculation, thinking perhaps (as many nonbelievers do) that human ability to reach reliable conclusions about ultimate matters through such reasoning is very limited. The point is that the question of whether the idea of God is needed for metaphysical purposes is distinguishable from the question of whether to believe in God.

Unfortunately, both believers and nonbelievers have found it all too easy to conflate the two questions. Even when the issues are understood as separate, it is often assumed that belief in God needs to be based on some kind of metaphysical reasoning. But, as I will try to make clear, it is far from obvious that religious belief either needs or could have such a basis. I am not questioning the appropriateness of reflecting on religious belief, only the assumption that substituting the metaphysical question of God’s existence for the religious question is the best way to do that reflection. Throughout this book, I will suggest that closer attention to the features of religious belief in God will give us a better sense of what sort of reflection is most relevant to the issue of whether to have such a belief.

God of the Philosophers

The seventeenth-century mathematician Blaise Pascal had an overwhelming religious experience, which he memorialized in a note that he carried with him (sewed in the lining of his coat) until the end of his life. Through the note, he apparently attempted to remind himself of what he took to be a decisive, revelatory experience. In a now-famous phrase he claims that he had not encountered the god of the philosophers and scholars, but the “God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.”⁵ What did Pascal mean in contrasting the philosophers’ god with the biblical God? In part he may have been distinguishing the kind of reality that he believed he had contacted experientially with the kind of being who might emerge as a conclusion of a process of

reasoning. In one case there is an inferred deity that fits into some system of thought. In the other case something enters into a person's life with a compelling immediacy. In his attempt to remind himself of what he had encountered, Pascal repeatedly uses the word "fire," suggesting something wild and uncontrollable. From his perspective the god of the philosophers is a domesticated deity who occupies a determinate place as an object of thought, but the God Pascal speaks of is an awe-inspiring presence who cannot be locked in our conceptual cages.

The deity who appears in the writings of the seventeenth-century philosopher Descartes is a good candidate for the god of the philosophers. Descartes wanted to put human knowledge on a firm basis, and he set out to do so by using a process of systematic doubt. By setting aside beliefs he could not be absolutely sure of, Descartes hoped to arrive at the kind of truth that could not rationally be doubted and then build on this foundation a secure body of knowledge. When he subjected his beliefs to his method of doubt, Descartes put himself into a skeptical hole that he climbs out of only by invoking God as a guarantee of the reliability of his sense experience and his thought processes.⁶ Presumably Descartes, as a faithful Catholic, had a religious belief in God, but as a philosopher, he brings in God as a theoretical entity, performing a needed function in his philosophical system.

When the idea of God becomes a theoretical entity that can be useful to us, we have shifted the context from personal encounter to a context in which we can contemplate the idea with a degree of detachment. We are no longer dealing with the God who overwhelms and disturbs us, but a god who enters into our thinking on terms we set. Whatever does not contribute to our intellectual goals is likely to escape our attention.⁷

The kind of god needed for philosophical purposes will be one that contributes to the goal of intelligibility. Achieving this end is in some tension with the religious affirmation of an experiential reality that overwhelms our powers of comprehension. While a philosophical account of God may acknowledge that there is something beyond our understanding, the aim of making the whole intelligible makes it tempting to marginalize whatever our concepts cannot convey. Great theologians, such as Augustine or Aquinas, are able to use philosophic categories, while still affirming that they are dealing with a mystery they can barely hint at. But the philosophic urge exerts a pressure against genuine openness to a mystery that is beyond our grasp.

Another source of tension is between using metaphysical models of God and maintaining the interpersonal context in which theistic religions

place encounters with God. It is tempting for a philosopher to think that some abstract set of categories supersedes the personal language of theistic practice. Reflective theists recognize the need to qualify anthropomorphic understandings of the divine, but it can be a short step from eliminating objectionable analogies between the divine and the human to eliminating the model of personal agency altogether. When metaphysical thinking about God is placed in an interpersonal context, it can supplement the portrayals arising from theistic practice. But when the interpersonal context is removed, the idea of God retains only the remotest connection to religious conceptions.

When we contrast God as an object of theoretical understanding with God as an object of experiential encounter, one obvious difference is with regard to who is in control. Pascal describes the kind of encounter in which the object of experience is not merely a means to completing his agenda, but something that actively takes charge. By contrast someone who is theorizing about God may feel relatively secure about manipulating a set of philosophical concepts, in accordance with the rules of logic, like pieces of a puzzle that are being put together to form a satisfying intellectual product. There is little danger that the puzzle pieces will rise up to assert control.

When God is thought of as an agent, beyond our comprehension, who dwarfs us in knowledge, power, and goodness, our yearning for control suffers a blow. Contemplating such a God is not something we can do with an attitude of aloofness from a safe distance. The God of Abraham won't sit still while we figure out how to do things on our own terms, but enters with disturbing demands that challenge our agendas. To take seriously the idea of a Divine Other who judges and commands us is to enter a different realm from the abode of the god who passively fits into our projects.

The twentieth-century philosopher Martin Heidegger protests against the kind of god that emerges from philosophical thinking as an intellectual construct, noting that we can neither pray to nor sacrifice to such a deity. A god who is derived from classical metaphysical thought, he suggests, does not provoke a person to "fall to his knees in awe nor can he play music or dance before this god."⁸ But why speak, as he does and as Pascal does, of two different deities? Why not regard metaphysical inquiry as a different mode of access to the same deity? At least part of the answer might be that the categories of understanding that dominate metaphysical thinking represent an object that we can consider at arm's length. When we think about a prime mover or an intelligent designer, we imagine a being whose existence

can be considered with the kind of dispassionate objectivity we try to maintain in areas such as science. But there is reason to wonder whether God is the kind of entity who can be considered in this way. Perhaps we can understand Pascal to be suggesting that when we try to maintain the aloofness of an objective investigator, the object of thought is a truncated version of deity that is no longer recognizable as God. What we arrive at by means of such investigations is so remote from what religious people call God that it is misleading to claim that we are dealing with the same object.

Consider an analogy. Suppose someone does an analysis of the genetic code that makes up the body of a person you care about. You are given a description of the person by means of a computer printout, listing details of the code. Without denying the legitimacy of the account, you might claim that this sort of description misses what you regard as most important about the person. While there is a sense in which the analysis is just talking about the person in a different way, what is described is so different from what you know through encounter with this person that it seems like a stretch to say that the object of analysis is the same as what you call the person. Thinking about the person as an entity that can be objectively described, using categories other than those derived from personal encounter may tell you something, but knowing the person requires you to think in different ways.

Similarly, someone who believes in God might find the descriptions resulting from a metaphysical account of God to be so remote from the patterns of thought characteristic of communal religious practices that identifying the object of worship with the object of metaphysical thinking seems problematic. Just as the kind of knowledge needed for dealing with other people at a personal level differs from the kind of knowledge we seek in objective theorizing, the kind of knowledge claimed by the religious believer differs greatly from the kind sought in metaphysical analysis. One way to understand the difference is to recognize that in theoretical knowing we have artificially narrowed our purposes by conceiving ourselves as something like spectators on the object of knowledge. In most of life we are not spectators, but participants who are concerned to achieve various goals and respond appropriately to the kinds of reality we encounter. What we need to know is practical in the sense that the focus is on regulating our concerns and our actions. Religious belief can be treated as a theoretical matter, but it is more like the interpersonal understanding that we use to guide our practical living. As such, it calls for a participative frame of mind that contrasts with the approach of the spectator who is considering things from afar.

For purposes of some kinds of investigation, we follow a policy of putting our emotional reactions and values on hold. But there are some truths that we genuinely understand only when we have grasped their significance for our lives, and this kind of awareness arises out of something other than dispassionate detachment. Imagine someone who accepts the claim that an avalanche is imminent and will crush the house in which he and his family are living, yet makes no effort to evacuate the house. Or imagine a woman who hears that the spouse she adores has betrayed her, but has no emotional reaction. In such cases we might wonder whether the person has really understood. There are some kinds of understanding that occur only when we do our thinking as embodied agents who care about and respond to things, not as intellects, who can manipulate facts with sublime indifference.

The Kind of Belief that Matters

There are some beliefs that people can hold without much personal investment. I might believe that a particular celebrity will make an appearance in my city, but not care whether she does or not. I might believe that there is intelligent life in some other galaxy. But unless I feel the need to devote much time or effort to searching for signs of that life, the belief can sit comfortably on the edge of my belief system, along with other beliefs that have little impact on how I live. On the other hand, there are beliefs that matter to me a great deal. The question of whether my spouse really loves me is unlikely to be something toward which I can adopt a nonchalant attitude. The belief that I am competent in my profession might be vital to my sense of self-worth. I will have a major stake in the truth or falsity of such beliefs.

No sharp dividing line exists between beliefs on which a great deal is riding and beliefs that have minimal practical significance. Some obscure bit of knowledge about snake poison, which I have tucked away, might in some situation make the difference between life and death. Nevertheless, some beliefs are of more central relevance for the way we conduct our lives. Among these are beliefs that are closely connected with our core values or sense of identity.

One of the sources of confusion in trying to discuss belief in God is that it can be thought of in a way that puts it in the class of beliefs with little

practical importance. If we equate the question of whether God exists with the issue of what is needed for explaining the existence of the universe, such a belief seems a little like an individual's idle speculation about the existence of intelligent life in other galaxies. We can imagine someone who affirms a belief that there is some intelligence behind the universe and refers to her affirmation as belief in God, even though the belief makes little practical difference for her life. If she came to think that her belief was mistaken, giving it up need not be especially troubling. Contrast this sort of belief with a genuinely religious belief in God. To believe in a way that is recognizably religious is to stake your life on something that is closely connected with your sense of who you are and what it is important to care about.

One way to obscure the practical significance of the question of God's existence is to think about the idea of God in isolation from the range of ideas that are used in any religious tradition to connect it with the believer's life. Hence, for example, a Christian belief in God functions in relation to concepts such as sin, creation, redemption, commandment, and grace. Grasping what the belief means also calls for an awareness of connections between these concepts and activities such as prayer, praise, confession, seeking God's will, and repentance. We don't really comprehend what it means to believe unless we can imaginatively comprehend what it would mean to use a set of religious categories to structure our thoughts and attitudes and engage in the practices associated with internalizing this understanding.

If we look at religions in a very general way, we can see them as responses to central human concerns about ordering our lives. Major world religions typically present a comprehensive diagnosis of the human condition that locates a fundamental problem with our approach to life. Depending on the religion, the problem might be in some confusion about the human situation or some basic perversity that results in a distorted set of attachments and pursuits. Particular religions offer ways to overcome the problem and attain genuine fulfillment. However, achieving such fulfillment is not typically a matter of satisfying our present cravings. It is instead a matter of grasping the futility of our egocentric perspective and adopting a wider point of view that will open the door to liberation or salvation.

In theistic religions the idea of God is central both to understanding the human predicament and moving toward a superior mode of life. A vision of the goodness of divine purposes and activities functions to reveal to us our own deficiencies and our need for redirection. The means by which change can occur involves accepting these purposes as our own. As we adopt

the practices prescribed by the religious tradition, we begin a spiritual path that is supposed to reorient us and empower us toward a pattern of concerns and actions that will lead to a higher quality of life.

When we recognize that a religiously significant response to the idea of God occurs within the context of encountering a life-orienting story that offers a way of salvation, we should be able to understand why treating the idea primarily as a metaphysical hypothesis for explaining the universe distorts our thinking about whether to believe in God. We can consider whether the idea works as a metaphysical hypothesis by standing back and impartially examining evidence. But when the question of God's existence is bound up with the question of how we should live, considerations other than our need for theoretical understanding become relevant. For one thing it is relevant whether we can appreciate and be attracted by the way of life connected with acceptance of God. Indeed, finding a resonance between a theistic way of life and our deepest aspirations is a significant step toward belief in God.

Hence, paradigmatic religious experiences, such as conviction of sin or receiving grace can be vehicles to appreciating the package of beliefs in which belief in God is included. Being able to experience emotions like awe or reverence in the right situations or coming to think of life as a deep mystery can be ingredients in a religious response to life. Rather than being a matter for intellect alone, being drawn to a way of life in which belief in a divine source is a key component depends on whether the emotional and value reactions needed for responding to a being of supreme power and love can be evoked.

Knowing about the god of the philosophers is an intellectual task. It calls for assessing evidence and making inferences. To the extent that we have a personal stake in the outcome of such an inquiry, our interest needs to be put on hold so that the evidence can be considered from an unbiased point of view. The kind of evidence to be considered needs to be put in a form where we can assess it objectively. If there are essentially private religious experiences, they will enter the picture as claims to have had an experience that is described or interpreted in particular ways. If there are human inclinations that might pull us in a particular direction, we need to rein them in so that we won't jump to premature conclusions.

By contrast knowing about the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is a task calling for personal engagement, involving capacities other than our ability to draw logical conclusions. When we are presented with a life-orienting story that gives a particular diagnosis of human needs, our ability

for self-assessment and our openness to unpleasant self-knowledge are vital factors in responding positively or negatively. When the story portrays a normative order that is rooted in God, our capacity for being attracted by or repelled by the values embodied in that order is crucial for any assessment. When imaginatively entering a story evokes inclinations to believe, our willingness or unwillingness to trust these inclinations is pivotal.

Philosophical Foundations

There is a persistent idea that we ought to be able to decide about the existence of God apart from the wider context in which we might consider life-orienting stories. We can acknowledge that *if* God exists, it would make a radical difference, but consider *whether* God exists with a degree of objective detachment. By impartially examining the evidence, we can make a judgment about whether the available evidence supports the existence of a being with characteristics similar to those religious traditions ascribe to God.

However, it is unclear what this kind of investigation is supposed to tell us. If we decide that there is strong objective evidence for some kind of deity, perhaps we would think it worthwhile to investigate the claims of a particular religious tradition. But are we still to maintain the attitude of objective detachment? Would we approach these claims with a kind of academic suspicion? In that case it would not be surprising if the beliefs and practices of participants in the tradition seemed alien or even unintelligible. But what if we made an effort to understand the religious community at a deep level, participating in their practices and imaginatively entering into their life-orienting story? At this point whether we come to share their belief system or not, we are no longer playing the role of detached investigators. Instead we are opening ourselves to a way of life. Whether that way of life becomes our own is not just a question of evidence that could be objectively assessed. It is also a question of whether we find in ourselves something that responds powerfully to the religious life-orienting story, making it seem compelling.

On the other hand, what if we assess the evidence for some kind of deity from our position of objective detachment and find it inconclusive? Should we then conclude that investigating the claims of particular traditions is, therefore, unnecessary? It is conceivable that if we had done such an investigation

with a receptive attitude, we might have come to accept the life-orienting story of some tradition. Would we have been wrong to do so without prior confirmation independent of the tradition of the existence of a deity?

When people come to accept a religious account of the human situation, they might be mistaken. But it is confused to think that the kind of full-fledged belief in God that results from responding to the stories and practices of a religious community is defective without some independent validation from an objective assessment of evidence for a generic deity. Many of our most important beliefs are acquired not as individual propositions, but in contexts where we respond to an integrated complex of beliefs that come to make sense as a whole.⁹ Belief in God comes about as a response to a specific narrative about God, and it is only within such a context that the question of belief can be raised in a religiously significant way. Whatever doubts there may be about the whole complex of beliefs won't be resolved by breaking it into parts to decide about God in a context that insulates us from the possibility of religious engagement.

Michael Buckley has argued that the rise of Western atheism is paradoxically the result of attempts to provide philosophical defenses of belief in God that prescind from the specifically religious sources of that belief. Theologians and philosophers sought to found a generic belief in deity on simple observations and conclusions of reasoning that might be done without personal involvement and then treated actual religious belief as based on this philosophical foundation. As it came to be thought that religious belief needed this sort of philosophical construction, questions about the particular defenses resulted in a cloud of suspicion around the religious beliefs they were supposed to justify.

Buckley claims that the substitution of a god known through inference for the object of religious awareness is at the root of the problem. He writes,

While religion presupposes personal engagement as the permeating and fundamental relationship with god, philosophical inference introduces a third term or warrant other than this involvement, namely the evidence through which one is informed about god and from which god is deduced. In one way or another, religion involves god as a living presence; philosophic inference demonstrates that there is a god as "a friend behind the phenomena."¹⁰

The problem is not with metaphysical reasoning about God as such; it is with the tendency to think of this reasoning as necessary for validating the experiential involvement with a life-orienting story that furnishes the real basis for belief in God.

What Metaphysical Reasoning Can Do

Even though it is a mistake to think of religious belief as founded on philosophical arguments for God's existence, there is a role that philosophical reasoning can play in relation to belief in God. A positive response to a religious story will depend upon a prior disposition not to regard fundamental assumptions of the story as utterly implausible. So, for example, we do not accept stories that tell us about fairies or leprechauns as accounts of reality because we are confident that there are no such creatures. Similarly, someone presented with a story about God might think that no such stories should be taken seriously because thinking that God exists is on a level with thinking that fairies exist.

One role for metaphysical thought about God is to clarify the difference between belief in God and belief in the various agents that populate fairy tales. Philosophical reflection on the idea of a creator makes it apparent that an intelligence that could produce and sustain the universe would have to be a different and more fundamental kind of reality than the physical things and agents we perceive through our senses. While particular beliefs about God might be dismissed as superstitious, the idea of a creator can be connected with reflection on the nature and existence of the universe. The universe doesn't appear to explain its own existence, and the idea of a necessarily existing ultimate that explains why there is a universe seems at least worthy of consideration.

Furthermore, metaphysical arguments for a creator present the idea in ways that can display it as an option for belief. One way to view arguments for God's existence is to see them as identifying a possible option for understanding things and attempting to show its superiority to alternative possibilities. So, for example, one form of teleological argument appeals to the way fundamental features of the universe near the "Big Bang" give the appearance of being fine-tuned for the eventual production of living and intelligent beings. The apparent fine-tuning suggests that the basic laws and constants have a purposive explanation: Some agent transcending the universe arranged things so the universe could produce living and intelligent beings. Given the evidence, there are only a few viable alternatives. One is to posit what has been called the "many universe hypothesis," which purports to explain the appearance of purposiveness by some random process that produces a very large number of universes, some small percentage of which have life-producing potential. Someone advancing the fine-tuning

teleological argument will attempt to show that the purposive explanation is superior to alternative explanations, that the best understanding of things is to view our universe as produced by a creator who sought to produce living and intelligent beings.

Suppose that attempt is inconclusive. Suppose there is room for rational disagreement about what the best explanation is. The argument might still accomplish something significant. Even if this kind of teleological argument fails to establish that explanation in terms of a purposive agent is the only viable explanation or the best explanation, the identification of a few viable alternatives may be enough to establish that a purposive explanation of the universe is a possibility that needs to be taken seriously. Showing even this much removes at least some potential obstacles to taking seriously a story that purports to reveal something about the activities and nature of a creator. The possibility that there might be a creator could provide a reason to investigate accounts that purport to offer revelatory knowledge.¹¹

Of course, some people find metaphysical arguments for a creator to establish much more than a bare possibility. However, even if they are correct in their assessments, we should not confuse the very limited belief that might arise from a metaphysical argument for a creator with a belief produced by encounter with a life-orienting story. Someone who has responded to a theistic life-orienting story might be able to consider a philosophical argument for God's existence and say what Aquinas says at the end of each of his Five Ways: "... this everyone understands to be God."¹² If this identification means merely that the object of encounter in religious communal experience might be correlated with the ultimate arrived at in metaphysical discourse, it need not be problematic. But when it is concluded that, without such reasoning, claims about God would lack rational foundation or that religious discourse reduces to metaphysical discourse, a potentially helpful correlation has become a source of confusion.

Belief and Experience

It is easy for people in our culture to assume that the idea of God is primarily a type of explanation of what we might otherwise find puzzling, and for anyone who makes this assumption, it can seem as if the proper way to

consider whether God exists is to try to decide whether God is a good explanation or not. Do we need God to explain why the universe exists or why things in the universe are ordered as they are? Does God help to explain our sense of moral obligation or our experience of beauty? When we frame the issue in this way, the question to be resolved is whether there is enough evidence to convince us that we need to postulate God to account for facts that we all recognize.

For people who find this way to approach the issue natural and obvious, the suggestion that there is another way to proceed may seem puzzling. How else could one come to know whether God exists than by reasoning from well-established facts to a transcendent cause that explains them? A first step toward recognizing the possibility of an alternative is to notice that hardly anyone who actually believes in God bases the belief on this kind of reasoning. While most believers would affirm that God helps to explain some general facts about the world, more central to becoming convinced about God is learning to use the idea of God in their understanding of everyday life. People with a religiously significant belief are likely to engage in activities such as speaking to God in prayer or have experiences they describe as receiving God's forgiveness or God's guidance. It's not that God is an inference from these activities or experiences; rather the activities and the experiences are understood in such a way that belief in God is an implicit component.

Consider an analogous case. Imagine thinking about the philosophical question of whether to believe that other people have minds. It might seem as if the proper way to answer this question is to consider the idea of a mind as an explanation for something. So, for example, we might think that the hypothesis that other people have minds explains purposive behavior and speech originating from bodies that resemble our own. But thinking in this way requires us to imaginatively put ourselves into a world in which we don't assume the existence of minds other than our own until we have evaluated the evidence. Needless to say, none of us live in that kind of world. We can entertain the idea of what it would be like not to think there are other minds, but whatever argument we can make from that world to our own wouldn't be the basis for our belief in other minds. The real basis has to do with the way the idea of other minds is implicit in our thinking about our activities and our experience. We find this idea indispensable for describing the world we actually inhabit.

Similarly someone who genuinely believes in God will find the idea indispensable for describing the experiential world in which she lives. Thinking

of God as a hypothesis to be inferred from specifiable data means starting from an understanding of the world that does not presuppose God, but belief in God is not a matter of moving from such a world to a reality in which God is included. It is matter of finding yourself within the kind of world where God is implicit already. One who finds herself inhabiting such a world can still raise doubts about it. In that sense belief in God is different from the belief that other people have minds, which no one seriously doubts. However, doubts about the existence of God should not be construed as doubts about whether the idea works as an explanation for certain general facts that can be agreed to by people who believe as well as people who don't. They are better construed as doubts about the adequacy of a person's understanding of his or her experiential world. When belief in God is the matter to be decided, the central question is whether you can and should allow yourself to retain or be drawn into the patterns of thought that make the believer's world what it is.

The considerations that draw people into understanding their experiential world in terms of God do not arise primarily from the perspective we take as investigators, standing back from the world and constructing explanations. Rather it is as agents who need to make sense of and order our lives that we accept or reject the idea of God. The idea of God typically comes to people as part of a larger package that conveys some understanding of the place of human life in a wider frame of reference, the ways we can live lives of value in relation to that wider frame, and what fulfillment we can hope for. A response of belief or unbelief is to the total package. The persuasiveness of its diagnosis of the human condition and its portrayal of a superior mode of life plays a vital role in making the idea of God seem plausible or implausible.

When people encounter the idea of God in the accounts that come from theistic religions, they are offered an interpretive key, not only for understanding the events of their lives, but for ordering their concerns, their judgments of value, and their longings. For a believer the idea of God plays a significant role in answering questions such as, "What is worthy of my love and devotion?" "Do the things that capture my attention contribute to a worthwhile life?" "How can I deal with failure, suffering, and death?" The answers we give to such questions help to spell out the contours of a way of life. Finding the idea of God compelling is tied up with finding a particular way of life compelling.

The point here is not that we have certain problems and come to the conclusion that belief in God would help us to deal with them. It is rather

that we misconstrue the question of God's existence when we think of God as a possible answer to a theoretical question that arises from our concern to understand puzzling facts. We get closer to the heart of the matter when we understand belief in God as arising in a practical context where the central concern is to find guidance about how to live. When we view an account of the human condition in which the idea of God is an important component in the light of that concern, we are in a better position to notice the considerations that might lead to belief.

It is important to recognize that whether we believe in God or don't believe, we need some understanding of our situation that enables us to orient ourselves in life. People who are not persuaded by any religious narrative will explicitly or implicitly rely on a nonreligious story to structure their understanding of the events of life. It might, for example, be a story about how human life is an unintended byproduct of a vast physical system. It might suggest a path to liberation through ridding ourselves of any superstitious notion of something beyond the physical order or of any kind of causality other than physical causality. Accepting these truths might be thought to be a vital part of devoting ourselves to genuine values and developing real autonomy. Such an alternative to a theistic guide to life is built around the denial of a transcendent order beyond the physical, and the denial of such an order is usually believed in a way that parallels the way belief in God is acquired – as part of a narrative that provides a persuasive account of how to live.

Belief or disbelief in God is less like a hypothesis adopted to explain some observation or set of observations and more like an assumption that, as part of a larger narrative, gives guidance about interpreting and responding to the events of life. People accept a particular assumption because the interpretive account in which it is embedded provides a way of understanding their experiences and their choices that they find convincing. Of course, assumptions can be questioned. For someone whose daily life involves activities such as seeking God's help or looking for God's purposes, or enjoying God's blessings, it is certainly possible to reflectively consider whether this mode of life is guided by a faulty understanding of reality. But for a believer to give serious consideration to that question is to consider alternative ways to interpret the meaning of everyday experience and to explore the question of whether he or she could be drawn in to an alternative that leaves out God.

To seriously consider the idea of God means "trying on" an understanding of how to live that is permeated by the idea. To reject the idea of God is to

find some account of how to live that excludes God more compelling. While we can speculate about theism or atheism as theoretical constructs, these beliefs become important for us only when they are viewed as components of an understanding of the human condition that structures a way of life. The answers that we want are about the god of a possible life-orienting story, not the god of the philosophers.

Notes

- 1 Louis Dupré, *Religious Mystery and Rational Reflection* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1998), 26. The use of this quotation as an epigraph is by permission of Eerdmans Publishing Company.
- 2 Michael Buckley, *Denying and Disclosing God: The Ambiguous Progress of Modern Atheism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 138. The use of this quotation as an epigraph is by permission of Yale University Press.
- 3 Richard Swinburne, "The Vocation of a Natural Theologian," in *Philosophers Who Believe: The Spiritual Journeys of 11 Leading Thinkers*, ed. Kelly James Clark (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 186.
- 4 Swinburne, 191.
- 5 Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, ed. and trans. Roger Ariew (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2005), 266 (S742, L913).
- 6 Rene Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations*, trans. Laurence Lafleur (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1960), 61–143.
- 7 My discussion in this section is indebted to ideas from Merold Westphal, *Transcendence and Self-Transcendence* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2004).
- 8 Martin Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), 72.
- 9 Michael McGhee, "Seeker True Religion. Oh, Where?" in *The Meaning of Theism*, ed. John Cottingham (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 85.
- 10 Michael Buckley, *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 348.
- 11 See Sandra Menssen and Thomas D. Sullivan, *The Agnostic Inquirer: Revelation from a Philosophical Standpoint* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007). Menssen and Sullivan use philosophical arguments to establish the possibility of God as a prelude to considering the claims of a fuller revelatory account.
- 12 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* (London: Blackfriars, 1964), vol. 2, 13ff. (Ia, q. 2. a. 3).