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BELIEVING THAT GOD EXISTS BECAUSE THE BIBLE SAYS SO

John Lamont

The paper considers René Descartes' assertion that believing that God exists because the Bible says so, and believing that what the Bible says is true because God says it, involves circular reasoning. It argues that there is no circularity involved in holding these beliefs, and maintains that the appearance of circularity results from an equivocation. It considers a line of argument that would defend the rationality of holding these beliefs, but does not try to prove its soundness.

In the dedicatory letter to the dean and faculty of theology at Paris with which he prefaces his *Meditations*, René Descartes sarcastically remarks that it is inadvisable to tell unbelievers that God exists because the Bible says so, and that what the Bible says is true because God says so, because this presents the appearance of circular reasoning.¹ This has been thought of, by anyone who happened to think of it, as a telling remark. But in fact Descartes' sarcasm is misplaced. There is no circularity involved in holding that God exists because the Bible says so, and that what the Bible says is true because God says so.

This can be seen by considering a parallel case. Suppose I receive a letter from someone who identifies himself as Mr. Jones, the District Superintendent of the Water Conservation Board. He tells me that it has come to his attention that I have been watering my lawn for six hours every day of the week, and he wants me to know that if I do not reduce my water consumption I will be fined and my water will be cut off. I am a bit surprised at this message, since I have never heard of Mr. Jones or the Water Conservation Board before, but I accept that what the letter says is true.

In this case it is clear that I can believe what the letter says without being guilty of circular reasoning. But then I will be believing that Mr. Jones exists because the letter says it, and I will be believing what the letter says because Mr. Jones says it. Replace the letter by the Bible, and Mr. Jones by God, and I will believe that God exists because the Bible says so, and that what the Bible says is true because God says so.² Since there is no circularity in the former case, there is no circularity in the latter.

One might raise the following question: should we say that I believe the letter because Mr. Jones says it? Do I not simply believe the letter?



The answer to this question can be seen by considering what I would say if someone asked me why I believed that my water was going to be cut off, or why I thought there was such a person as Mr. Jones. I would answer, "Jones told me these things himself, in the letter he sent me". My believing the contents of the letter is my believing what Mr. Jones says, because he says it.

We commonly accept people's identities on the basis of what they tell us. This happens whenever someone introduces himself to us, and we believe their introduction ("Hello, I am Mr. X, etc"). Accepting that someone exists because he tells us so, although less usual, need not be less reasonable. There is no circularity in believing statements of the form "X exists because X says so". ("Believing that X exists because X says so" is of course understood to mean "believing that X exists on the grounds of X's saying so", not "believing that X's saying that he exists is the cause of his existence.") Consider this example; suppose there is a God, and one day an atheist loudly announces his disbelief in God. To teach the atheist a lesson, God causes the sun to be extinguished so that the stars appear, and causes all the stars in the sky to arrange themselves to read "I, God, exist"; at the same time he causes the same words to be announced in a loud and thunderous voice. Things return to normal after a few moments, but the atheist is persuaded by these happenings, and believes that God exists. In these circumstances, the atheist will be believing that God exists because God says so, and there will be no circularity involved in his belief.

It is helpful to consider how my beliefs would be connected in these cases, in order to see that they are not circular. In the case of the letter, I start off by reading the letter, and this leads me to form the following belief;

B1. The letter says that Mr. Jones exists, is its author, intends to cut off my water, etc. (let "etc." stand for all the rest of the content of the letter).

I trust the letter, and thus believe

B2. Mr. Jones exists, etc. and is the author of the letter.

When I reflect on my reason for believing that Jones exists, etc., I form the belief that

B3. Mr. Jones exists, etc., because the letter says so.

When I ask myself why I accept the contents of the letter, I conclude

B4. What the letter says is true because Mr. Jones says it.

The appearance of circularity in B3 and B4 arises from an equivocation on "says". In B3, "the letter says" refers to the act of assertion of the letter. B3 states that I accept the content of the letter ("Mr. Jones exists, etc.")

because the letter asserts it. In B4, "what the letter says" refers to the content of the letter's assertion. Let P represent the content of the letter. We can rewrite B3 and B4 as follows;

B3'. P is true because the letter asserts it.

B4'. P is true because Mr. Jones asserts it.

B3' and B4', it can be seen, are not circular, but equivalent, because the letter's asserting P is Mr. Jones's asserting P. P contains the statement that Mr. Jones exists, so my holding B4' will imply that I believe that (Mr. Jones exists because Mr. Jones says so), but, as we have seen, such a statement is not circular. Replace Mr. Jones by God, and the letter by the Bible, and the same considerations apply.

The absence of circularity lends support to a point recently made by professors Anscombe and Geach:

...Plantinga and Wolterstorff...are both explicitly opposed to foundationalism. Why, they would ask, should not beliefs in the existence of God and other articles of the Christian creed be treated as themselves "properly basic"? A good question. It is not on the face of it absurd to come to belief in God as part of a package deal, as part of a revelation.³

Plantinga's views can provide reasons why we *should* treat belief in God as properly basic, when it is accepted as part of a revelation. Belief in the Bible, belief in a purported revelation, is an instance of belief in testimony. Plantinga, following Thomas Reid, Geach and Richard Swinburne, asserts that "...the warrant furnished by testimony isn't and couldn't be furnished by induction, analogy, and abduction. Testimony is an independent source of warrant for me;" - and presumably for everyone else as well - "testimonial evidence is a basic sort of evidence for me."⁴ One could thus argue: testimony is a basic sort of evidence, that provides warrant on its own; believing in the Bible is believing in testimony; therefore believing that God exists because the Bible says so is warranted.

I do not mean to defend this argument here. Such a defence would require addressing the questions of proper basicity, of the nature of testimony, of credulity, of evidence against the existence of God. I merely seek to indicate lines of inquiry that can be pursued, when we realize that there is no circularity involved in believing that God exists because the Bible says so.

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NOTES

1. "Et quoi qu'il soit absolument vrai, qu'il faut croire qu'il y a un Dieu, parce qu'il est ainsi enseigné dans les Saintes Écritures, et d'autre part qu'il

faut croire les Saintes Écritures, parce qu'elles viennent de Dieu; et ceci parce que, la foi étant un don de Dieu, celui-là même qui donne la grâce pour faire croire les autres choses, la peut aussi donner pour nous faire croire qu'il existe: on ne saurait néanmoins proposer cela aux infidèles, qui pourraient s'imaginer que l'on commettrait en ceci la faute que les logiciens nomment un Cercle." René Descartes, *Oeuvres Philosophiques, Tome II (1638-1642)*, Ferdinand Alquie éd. (Paris: Editions Garnier Frères, 1967), p.364. This passage is taken from the translation of the *Meditations* by the duc de Luynes, that Descartes read and approved. Some might deny that Descartes is being sarcastic here, and assert that he is only trying to anticipate a possible objection to his procedure in proving the existence of God; he is not really insinuating that there is circularity in such reasoning. I doubt if this is true, but the question of circularity is worth investigating whether or not Descartes believed it to exist.

2. It is worth pointing out that Christians do not all mean the same thing when they talk about "the Bible". Fr. James Weisheipl, in his introduction to Aquinas's *Commentary on the Gospel of John* (Albany, N.Y.: Magi Books, 1980), remarks that "...Luther and Thomas (or any other medieval theologian) meant two different things by the word *Bible*, or *Sacred Scriptures*. For Luther and the Reformers the Bible was thought of as a finished, edited, and (by then) printed collection, while Thomas and the medieval theologians meant the Sacred Word *together with* the gloss of the Fathers, liturgy, and the living Church." The argument of this paper can be applied to either conception of the Bible.

3. Profs. P. Geach and E. Anscombe, review of *Philosophers Who Believe: The Spiritual Journeys of 11 Leading Thinkers*, in *Priests & People*, October 1994, p. 404.

4. Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 79-80.