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# DISENGAGED REASON AND BELIEF IN GOD

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It is sometimes assumed that the appropriate way to reflect on whether to believe in God is to consider philosophical arguments about whether God is needed as an explanation of the physical universe. I argue that treating this relatively disengaged form of reasoning as a primary way of deciding for or against religious belief confuses the issue by making belief in God into a kind of theoretical question. Rather than treating the idea of God as the answer to a question about how to explain the universe, I argue that we should treat it as an answer to the practical question of how to live. This question arises in the context of exercising agency within a value-laden world, and it is at this level that one can consider features of human experience that tend to drop out of our theoretical reflection, but are vital to acquiring or maintaining religious belief.

Recently I listened to a high-school senior describe his thinking about whether to believe in God. Jefferson had been brought up in the Christian tradition, but he had come to the age where he was trying to work out things for himself. He focused his attention on the nature of the physical universe and whether the existence of this kind of universe called for God as an explanation. He toyed with the idea that the order of our universe might be explained by chance, rather than being the product of some kind of purposeful activity. Reasoning from scientific data, he was pulled first in one direction, then in another. In the end he was unable to decide between the competing hypotheses.

As I listened to the thinking of this obviously intelligent young man, it seemed to me that the project he had set for himself was misdirected. He apparently thought that the kind of reflection he was doing would help him decide whether to continue to accept the religious beliefs he had been taught or to reject them, but his thinking about belief in God was divorced from any experiential confirmation he had found or failed to find as a participant in the practices of the tradition he sought to evaluate. It was also disconnected from the fuller set of theological concepts that were used within the tradition to connect the idea of God to the believer's life. Jefferson treated the question of God's existence as if it were fundamentally a theoretical issue, arising in the context of explaining the natural order, rather than an issue connected with very practical concerns about how to live. Reasoning from a perspective in which God might be needed as an explanation of the universe, but could not be considered as a potential object of religious engagement, he tried to settle the issue of whether to be a believer or not.

The kind of reflection that Jefferson attempted could be called disengaged in at least two senses. First, he was disengaged from his participation in the practices of his religious community, assuming an external standpoint, in order to reflect on a belief underlying those practices. This kind of disengagement is not in itself objectionable, though if it becomes too habitual, it might interfere with his ability to enter into and sustain the engaged mode. However, Jefferson's thinking was disengaged in a second way that may be more problematic. He pulled back, not just from the specifically religious attitudes and modes of thought needed for participation in his theistic community. He also disengaged himself from many of the characteristically human forms of involvement with the world that we set aside when we try to form objective pictures of reality. He did not approach his data in admiring wonder or awe or dread or a sense of mystery. He was not responding to the world as an agent who must find some way of molding an identity and orienting his life in relation to the real. Rather he approached his investigation as a disinterested observer who is critically examining evidence. In entering the observer mode, he set aside features of experience that are part of our ordinary human awareness, but distractions when we are constructing accounts of the universe as a physical system, and the features he set aside include aspects of experience that are vital to becoming engaged in a religious sense. Hence, when he thought about the possibility of belief in God, he excluded from view considerations that play a central role in acquiring or maintaining the kind of belief he was attempting to examine.[1]

Jefferson's assumption that he needed to think about belief in God from a perspective that excluded certain kinds of human awareness is not idiosyncratic. What he did in an exploratory way parallels what many philosophers who address the issue do with systematic precision. He put aside reactions that are central to ordinary living, such as moral and aesthetic sensibilities, in order to think about things more objectively. The kind of objectivity he sought is that which we idealize in scientific aspirations to describe the world in terms that are independent of contingent features of human perception and evaluation. Since the development of modern science, there has been a tendency to think that the highest level of human knowledge involves what Charles Taylor calls a disengaged self, "capable of objectifying not only the surrounding world but also emotions and inclinations, fears and compulsions ..."[2] Such a self attempts to understand reality in a way that transcends the perceptual and evaluative awareness that characterizes ordinary human experience.

Jefferson assumed that if he could think about his religious beliefs from an objective point of view, he would be in a superior epistemological position to determine the truth or falsity of those beliefs. It is this assumption I want to challenge. While I do not question the need to consider reflectively the truth of beliefs that are implicit in religious engagments, I question whether modes of reflection that distance a person from an awareness of what is important or admirable or morally worthy provide a point of view from which the relevant truth claims can be adequately assessed. Given the nature of belief in God, I will be arguing that the most relevant forms of reflection, especially for people like Jefferson, are those that consider the question from the perspective of the value-laden experience that we ordinarily live by.

In section one I call attention to a gap between what belief in God means in a religious context and the kind of belief that Jefferson's arguments might enable him to acquire. Given this gap, it is unclear how deciding whether a being called God is needed to explain the universe is supposed to help in deciding whether to believe in God in the religious sense. In section two I ask what kind of question the existence of God is and what modes of thought are relevant to answering this question. I claim that the issue should be construed fundamentally in practical rather than theoretical terms. That is, God is part of an answer to the question, "How shall I live?" rather than the answer to a puzzle about how to explain the world. Finally, in section three I apply my account to the issue of what sort of reflection Jefferson needs to undertake. Not surprisingly, I recommend a mode of thought that differs significantly from the disengaged form of reasoning he actually adopted.

## *I. Belief in God*

Imagine, contrary to fact, that Jefferson's attempt to decide whether to believe in God had resulted in a conclusion supporting belief. That is, imagine that his efforts to objectively consider the evidence had convinced him that God was the best explanation of some set of facts about the natural order, and hence that the existence of God was more probable than not, or even overwhelmingly probable. Even with this kind of "best case scenario" Jefferson would still be miles away from what his religious community means by belief in God.

One reason is that the "God" he would have arrived at differs significantly from the object of religious aspiration. Suppose that Jefferson had been able to rule out the chance hypothesis and attribute the existence of the universe to some kind of purposeful agency. Such a minimal characterization is a long way from the rich characterizations of deity in any theistic tradition. He can, of course, assume that the minimally described being (or beings) reached in his argument is to be identified with the object of devotion in his tradition, but why should he? If he is doubtful enough of the belief derived from the tradition to think that it needs to be justified on independent grounds, shouldn't he be skeptical about any attempts to move beyond the conclusions of those independent arguments?

Imagine that Jefferson's arguments convince him that the universe had an intelligent source. As Hume shows in a famous discussion, this conclusion says nothing about whether such a source should be characterized as good or benevolent or concerned with human beings.[3] Yet a deity who could not be described as good or who lacked interest in human life would hardly be adequate for the purposes of theistic religions. So if Jefferson discovers that our universe had an intelligent source, has he discovered that the God he was inquiring about exists? The conclusion he derives might be compatible with the existence of God. It might even be regarded as a kind of independent confirmation of something that was accepted on other grounds, but Jefferson's project arose out of the thought that he needed a means of deciding whether this religious belief is true, and even at best the kind of reasoning he is doing could not tell him that.

Furthermore, even if Jefferson could decide on the existence of a being with the right set of characteristics, there would still be a gap between the kind of belief he could attain through his dispassionate mode of argument and what belief in God means in a religious community. In Jefferson's project the goal is something like intellectual assent to a hypothesis that explains why we have the universe we do. But what a theistic community calls belief in God is inseparable from the attitudes needed to participate in practices such as worship, prayer, obedience, etc. Intellectual assent that did not include attitudes such as awe, reverence, gratitude, and the inclination to worship would not qualify as a genuinely religious belief. Furthermore, belief in God arises in a context where the believer's experience is structured by a set of paradigmatic images and stories that unite this belief to a way of life. When these connections are cut so that the belief is isolated from this larger complex, it loses its religious significance.

Perhaps someone will argue that assent to the propositional content of the belief is, even if not sufficient for belief in the full sense, something like an initial step.[4] But it is not as if there were a series of steps from intellectual assent to engagement in the full sense. In fact it looks as if the frame of mind that enables one to consider the question of intellectual assent in isolation from the full range of elements contributing to religious engagement is in tension with the frame of mind needed for maintaining belief in God.

Being an engaged participant in theistic religious practices involves some cognitive understanding, but if we try to isolate the purely factual components of that understanding and separate them from other features of the engagement, we lose the frame of mind in which the responses characteristic of belief in God were evoked. That frame of mind is a complex blend of beliefs, attitudes and acts of imagination that enable the believer to see the point of and become involved in the practices. One who lets go of that frame of mind in order to assume a more detached point of view is likely to find that gestalts, which depended on the more engaged stance, disintegrate.

Consider an analogous case. Suppose that you have come to love someone, but it occurs to you that perhaps you should examine your love to decide whether it is worthy. So you do an objective assessment of all kinds of facts about your loved one. The problem is not that the facts are irrelevant. But the frame of mind in which we assess facts about someone is in tension with giving a loving response to that person. Loving involves some construal of the facts, but thinking of it as a purely factual question turns love into something else. Furthermore, it is impossible to love while maintaining the kind of aloofness about the object of love that one seeks in objective appraisals.

The point is not that we cannot enter into objective modes of thought, even with regard to potential love objects. It is that the relation of love involves getting out of the objective mode of thought, and habitually pulling back to assess things objectively interferes with the kind of participatory awareness on which love depends. There may be reasonings that are conducive to attaining the kind of attitudes and valuations that are integrated in the awareness of the lover, but reasoning by itself does not produce love, and the detachment needed to consider some matters objectively is at odds with developing and nurturing the kinds of attachments that need to run deep in a committed love relationship.

Even if we imagine that Jefferson's inquiries had unambiguously supported the idea of God as an explanation of the universe, assent to such a being is a long way from religious belief. To be religiously significant, a belief about the source of the universe must be connected with the believer's central concerns and motivations. But the attitude and the point of view Jefferson had assumed, precluded him from making these kinds of connections. In his inquiry the question of God's existence becomes a matter that can be considered at arm's length and discussed with a kind of detached indifference. But by treating the issue as a theoretical problem that is removed from practical concerns, he has excluded from view the kind of divine object that might evoke a passionate existential response.

Nothing I have said is intended to suggest that Jefferson's mode of thought does not ask a legitimate question, only that the question he is asking is not the one he seems to think. Without realizing it he has changed the subject. Instead of talking about a reality that is of fundamental importance for who we are and how to live, the topic has been changed to discussion of a speculative idea that might be needed for theoretical completeness. It is not that the hypothetical deity of a successful cosmological or teleological argument would be completely irrelevant to belief in God. But this kind of discussion shifts our attention away from the existential context in which the existence of God is a pressing concern, to a theoretical context in which we are dealing with a different kind of issue.

But is there an alternative? Don't we have to investigate questions of fact with scientific objectivity? Aren't the kinds of attitudes and passions that make room for more engaged responses at odds with genuine inquiry? I suspect that a picture of inquiry that separates it so sharply from all our concerns other than a concern with disinterested assessment of facts is not even adequate as an account of knowing in the natural sciences, and when we move to areas of life that most concern us, the picture distorts in significant ways the nature of our knowledge. We can know what is to be caught up in the beauty of an aria or to feel an unconditional sense of obligation or to identify with the plight of a handicapped person. But if we try to put what we know in some form that makes sense from a disengaged perspective, our account is likely to lose something in the translation. Some types of knowledge depend on having the right kinds of interests, concerns, and commitments, and some failures of knowledge are failures to be engaged in the right way.

When Jefferson tries to decide whether God exists, he assumes that he must take the position of an impartial observer of factual evidence who puts his awareness of the human significance of things on hold. He must stick to the facts that can be acknowledged from the viewpoint of an observer whose fundamental concern is to get the facts right. But to think in this way, he has to frame the discussion in a manner that is suited for theoretical inquiry. So the question of God's existence comes to be thought of as a puzzle that arises in the context of trying to develop a coherent understanding of the natural order. The problem is that the kind of belief this type of thinking addresses is fairly remote from the modes of thought and the actual concerns displayed when people form and live by conceptions of the divine, and it is not clear how either success or failure in this project is thought to be important for a decision to acquire or maintain a recognizably religious belief.

## *II. What Kind of Issue is the Existence of God?*

I have suggested that there is something confused about the attempt to decide whether to believe in God from the kind of disengaged standpoint that Jefferson adopts. However, I do not mean to rule out the possibility of reflection on this belief, only the sort of reflection that excludes factors that are vital to becoming engaged religiously. Jefferson treats the existence of God as if it were a theoretical question about how to construct an adequate account of the natural world. I want to suggest that we get a better understanding of what it means to claim that God exists by viewing the claim as an answer to a fundamental practical question: "How shall I live?"

No amount of scientific understanding can tell us how to live, for this practical question only makes sense in a context where we attend to objects of human awareness that drop out in our scientific accounts. It is within the value-laden human world, where we find ourselves caring about certain things and judging what is worth caring about, that we determine by our conduct what concerns will be built into our identity. In that world the relevant data that enters into our thinking include experiences of loving someone or something, aspiring to certain ideals, failing to live up to our ideals, becoming satisfied or frustrated at our achievements, holding grudges, being forgiven, being betrayed, and so on. We strive for lives that are meaningful and satisfying, and religions are proposed to us as answers to some of our deepest struggles. But the answers typically require some redirection of our ends and re-formation of our identities, and in theistic religions the concept of God plays a fundamental role in revisioning and reorienting our lives in a direction that is offered as a path to genuine fulfillment. Believing in God is integrally related to living a particular mode of life, and without that connection it becomes something other than a religious belief.

However, when Jefferson set out to assess his belief in God, the mode of life connected with that belief drops out, as does the context in which belief in God is offered as an answer to fundamental practical questions. Instead Jefferson chose as his starting point the scientific account of reality. One of the features of this account is adherence to a method that filters out certain elements of experience. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries philosophers distinguished between primary qualities, which they understood as objective features of reality, and secondary qualities, which they dismissed from the realm of objective reality. Contemporary science has provided an altered version of the kind of reality that can be thought to exist independently of human experience, but in a scientific account it is fairly clear that the human experience of value needs to be filtered out. Values, like secondary qualities, can be explained as byproducts of the operation of physical systems, but they cannot be treated scientifically as a fundamental feature of the nature of things.

So when Jefferson sets out to discover what he needs to make sense of the world, it is noteworthy that the world he is trying to make sense of is not actually *his* world. He does not start from the value-laden reality that is the object of his own experience as a human being. Rather he starts with an abstract representation of that reality in which those features that seem most significant in the human world have been stripped away. Starting with such a world, he does not regard his own experience of mystery or wonder or attraction to an ideal as important evidential considerations. In a world of facts like the one he contemplates, the relevant question is whether there is some basic fact that is needed for explanatory completeness. Human orientations that do not reduce to factual assessment will be irrelevant to or distractions from the theoretical issue.

When we take the fundamental datum to be a set of objectively describable facts that we can put in terms that do not presuppose our awareness of the sort of significance we find in the interpersonal sphere, the only form for the idea of God to take is that of a speculative, quasi-scientific hypothesis. To consider God as a potential object of religious engagement, we have to bring in those features of the human world that we recognize as significant in our experience as agents who must relate to other people, for the context in which God can be a potential object of the kinds of responses characteristic of theistic belief is a relational context. If we exclude those elements that are vital to participation in the interpersonal world, we alter the meaning of the concept of God by removing the context in which that concept functions, transforming the question of God's existence into a theoretical issue.

Without endorsing Kant's derivation of God as a postulate of the practical reason, I want to agree with him that the question of God's existence is fundamentally connected to understanding the world we encounter as agents who must rely on features of experience that we set aside when we are doing scientific theorizing. To call God's existence a practical question is not to discount the fact that practical judgments have theoretical implications. Whatever ontology one uses to make sense of the practical world needs to be integrated with theoretical ideas. But Kant, I think, had it right when he affirmed the primacy of practical reason over the theoretical. The theoretical understandings we arrive at are subject to revision in order to accommodate the kinds of understandings we need for practical coherence.

It is in their capacity as agents who are trying to find their way around in a value-laden reality that people form various religious conceptions. It is as they encounter the mysterious, the terrifying, the awe-inspiring, and the transforming phenomena of life that they speak of the gods or the transcendent. Certain experiences are taken as paradigmatic and revelatory, and the ways of thought deriving from these experiences are generalized and made into interpretive tools. Critical reason goes to work on some of these ideas, examining them and modifying them, but the role these conceptions play in human life is fundamentally a practical one.

They guide people in making their way through a complicated and potentially confusing value-laden reality.

But how do they guide? Here I want to suggest as a hypothesis the account that Clifford Geertz gives of the function of religion. Religion, he thinks, allows adherents to establish significant connections between their picture of reality and what they hold dear. He writes, "Sacred symbols thus relate an ontology and a cosmology to an aesthetics and a morality: their peculiar power comes from their presumed ability to identify fact with value at the most fundamental level..."[5] Geertz also notes that this function is connected with what he calls "powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations."[6]

Geertz, of course, is trying to give an account which leaves questions of the truth of the religious adherents' ideas to the side. However, we can imagine someone who accepts the truth of some theistic religion agreeing that her religious conceptions allow her to achieve the function that Geertz describes. Concepts such as "God," "sin," "providence," etc. provide a framework in which a religious adherent integrates judgments of value used to orient actions and define individual identity with a view of what is ultimately real. Human values are seen as connected to a larger context in which they can be understood as deeply rooted in something beyond the human perspective, and in major religious traditions identification with that wider perspective is prescribed for achieving the highest human fulfillment.

But on what grounds can ideas that might be practically useful be regarded as relevant to judging what is real? One answer is suggested by a famous philosophical argument from William James in which he lays out conditions under which it is legitimate to allow practical considerations to affect our theoretical judgments. James was thinking generically about a kind of core religious claim in "The Will to Believe" when he defended the legitimacy of what he called "the religious hypothesis."[7] Although some philosophers have assumed that James was talking about belief in God, his account of the religious hypothesis is an attempt to characterize something much more general: something like a religious point of view that might or might not be developed in theistic directions. James describes this hypothesis in terms of two affirmations: first, "the best things are the more eternal things" and second, "we are better off even now if we believe the first affirmation to be true."[8] The first affirmation is a claim about value and its connection to what is real. It is obviously a vague claim, but I take it to mean that reality at the most fundamental level is somehow in tune with our deepest judgments about value. Or, to put the claim in a different way, the kinds of significance we find vital to understanding interpersonal reality are clues that give us some insight into the nature of things. When James characterizes faith in his later piece, "The Right to Believe," he calls faith "the greeting of our whole nature to a kind of world conceived as well adapted to that nature."[9]

James defends such faith on the grounds of practical necessity. There are some matters that cannot be decided on evidential grounds, yet because believing them or not believing them will make a major practical difference, we do not have the option of staying neutral. We will either live in accordance with some vision of life that affirms a fit between our awareness of value and the nature of things or we will live according to a view that does not affirm such a fit. In James' view, if we conceive of reality as exhibiting the sort of harmony with our deepest aspirations that we can call good, we open ourselves to possibilities of living that would otherwise be closed to us. Hence, he defends the right to adopt a religious stance toward reality, which might be correct, and which has the potential for improving our lives now.

Again, I want to emphasize that James is not defending acceptance of any particular religion or any particular set of religious categories. Rather he is defending the legitimacy of adopting some view of life that fulfills the function Geertz attributes to religion: uniting fact and value. The religious hypothesis is that somehow the two fit together into a harmonious whole that we can recognize as good. It is easy to see how one might suspect that accepting such a hypothesis is just wishful thinking. But James argues that since we have no way of deciding such an issue on the basis of objective evidence and we must live by some view that expresses the religious hypothesis or some view that does not, we will either be influenced by our hopes or influenced by some other passion such as fear of being wrong. His own preference is to believe in accordance with his hopes, taking a risk of being deluded to get a chance at accepting a truth that may allow him to achieve a deeply fulfilling mode of life.

Now how does all this apply to Jefferson? I would suggest that Jefferson is attempting to adopt a reflective stance that does not make any assumptions about whether there are connections between fact and value of the sort affirmed by James' religious hypothesis. But in practice, this results in leaving the awareness of values that guides his orientation in the practical world out of his thinking about God's existence and sticking to the facts. However, when he tries to do so, theism turns into a quasi-scientific explanation of puzzling facts. To avoid distorting belief in God, he needs to consider this belief from a point of view that allows him to bring in the products of his own engagement with the value-laden world of everyday life. Given such a starting point, he can ask questions such as, "How can the kind of awareness that enables me to recognize what is valuable and worth doing be integrated with an understanding of the nature of things that is conducive to living in accordance with the values I recognize?" Theistic views are not the only answers to this kind of question, but one who approaches the issue from the perspective James endorses might find some theistic religion worthy of consideration as a possible answer.

## *III. What Form Should Jefferson's Reflection Take?*

Part of the reason why Jefferson felt the need to examine the question of God's existence was his awareness that there are pictures of reality that do not include God. Consider, for example, Bertrand Russell's account of his atheism in "A Free Man's Worship." In this famous essay Russell describes a universe in which human ideals and aspirations are accidental byproducts of a scientifically describable reality that is devoid of any awareness of the values we affirm. In a memorable passage he writes,

> That Man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving; that his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms; that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling can preserve an individual life beyond the grave; that all the labours of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and that the whole temple of Man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins—all these things, if not quite beyond dispute, are yet so nearly certain, that no philosophy which rejects them can hope to stand.[10]

What Russell presents, with his own unique flare for the dramatic, is a vision of reality in which scientific categories represent the way things ultimately are. In this picture there is no fundamental place for human values. At times Russell anthropomorphically portrays the scientific universe as hostile to human concerns, and he characterizes the appropriate attitude to take as one of "unyielding despair" in which we valiantly hold onto our deepest values in an environment where they are an alien intrusion, subject to being overwhelmed by the vast physical system of the universe.

Russell's response to what James calls the religious hypothesis is clear. He affirms a reality that has no fundamental place for the considerations we find most significant in deciding how to live and, hence, no place for any religiously significant concept of God. If Jefferson is as captivated as Russell by this sort of naturalistic vision, no form of James' religious hypothesis is likely to be a live option. To consider belief in God and the mode of life that goes with it as genuine possibilities for him, he will need to explore those possibilities from a perspective that does not rule out a religious understanding of the universe. That is, to fairly evaluate a theistic vision of reality, he needs to take seriously the possibility that his awareness of value is not, as Russell suggests, a kind of alien intrusion, but instead a clue that offers some insight, even if obscure, into the nature of things.

What form might such an investigation take? I want to describe generally two levels of reflection that Jefferson might attempt. The first is a reflection on his own practical world and the kind of reality in which his value commitments make sense. The second is a reflection on whether the religious categories he has been taught are adequate to or can be adjusted to deal with his experience. A model of the first sort of reflection is suggested in Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self*.[11]

Taylor argues that we cannot understand our human world if we limit ourselves to the kind of terminology that is appropriate for physics. In living our lives we will find ourselves making certain "strong evaluations" that are not reducible to our desires or aversions, but function as standards in relation to which these desires and aversions can be judged. When we form notions that a certain mode of life is higher or worthier or more admirable, or when we take some goods, such as respect for life or equality, to be of incomparable importance, we are adopting an understanding of the good that helps us find our way around the human world. As reflective beings, we need to try to make sense of the strong evaluations we rely on, but attempts to explain the basis for our judgments inevitably push us, argues Taylor, toward ontological frameworks. He initially describes these frameworks as background assumptions and later as contexts in which the perspective on the good we have adopted becomes intelligible. But to emphasize how inescapable frameworks are, Taylor also identifies them with the kind of orientation to the good that is needed to have an identity at all. Frameworks enable us to stake out our place in the practical world by providing something analogous to a space in which we can define what we take to be fundamentally important.

So Taylor's approach suggests a process of reflection on the fundamental orientation that one assumes in having a particular identity. In trying to articulate the basis for the strong evaluations on which we rely to define who we are, we must talk about those evaluations in relation to frameworks in which they can be made intelligible. Taylor holds that an individual can judge one framework superior to another when it makes better sense of her practical world. In the case of someone who finds that a theistic framework helps to make intelligible the basic reactions that define her identity, the articulation of the connection between the framework and the reactions is a reason for believing in God, though it is obviously not a reason for someone who is unmoved by the vision of the good that it articulates. Being moved by that vision is implicitly to recognize a certain kind of intelligible order in which caring deeply about the values expressed in one's strong evaluations can be viewed as a compelling mode of life.

Taylor emphasizes the connection between accepting a framework and being motivated to live a certain mode of life. Within an adequate framework there will be objects that function as what Taylor calls moral sources. That is, they will be objects of love and admiration that empower us to live in accordance with our vision of the good. Plato's concept of the Good is a central example of a moral source, and in classical Jewish and Christian thought God is a moral source. Taylor argues that even in systems that repudiate such classical forms of metaphysics there will be elements that play the role of moral sources, though they may be hidden, and some moral sources may turn out to be deficient at a motivational level.

So suppose Jefferson were to reflect on his most basic value reactions, those that define who he conceives himself to be. Perhaps they include such things as a passion for justice or a concern for individual dignity. Perhaps he has images or ideals that represent the kind of person he aspires to be or a manner of life he thinks of as worthy. Using Taylor's approach, Jefferson would ask himself why the values he takes to be fundamentally important are so important. What is his vision of the good, and in what kind of picture of reality does having such a vision and forming an identity based on it make sense? Realistically, he cannot hope to examine all possible pictures, but he could certainly consider whether any assumptions needed to take his fundamental values seriously fit better in a theistic worldview or in a naturalistic one.

Now the assumption that appears to underlie this procedure is that a framework that gives an account that is more conducive to living in accordance with the strong evaluations operative in one's practical world is more likely to approach the truth, or in epistemological terms that when a metaphysical view renders the practical world more intelligible, that is a *prima facie* reason for preferring it. Such an assumption has affinities with what Kant calls the primacy of the practical reason. It is also related to James' religious hypothesis in that the hypothesis says that there is a fundamental fit between human aspirations and the nature of reality. All these claims are open to dispute, but if Jefferson is to consider the kind of evidence that is most closely connected with religious belief, he needs to conduct his inquiry using some such assumption as at least a working hypothesis.

Taylor's approach offers a way to reflect on the existence of God that is engaged in a way that Jefferson's actual form of reflection was not. In Taylor's approach thinking about whether you can believe in God is not like considering a hypothesis from which you can remain aloof. Reflecting on the question is inseparable from thinking about who you are and what values move you. The kind of God who could provide intelligibility to practical concerns you find compelling is a God whose recognition is conducive to engagement in the way of life those practical concerns define. Approached in this way, reflection on God's existence becomes reflection on whether there is a Supreme Good that could unify various intimations of value and energize your aspirations through responses of love and admiration.

Nevertheless, Jefferson's thinking on the subject is going to be deficient unless he also reflects at a different level. Does he find experiential confirmation for whatever framework helps to articulate the values that define his practical world? His religious tradition has offered him a whole range of concepts, including the concept of God, that are supposed to help him make sense of his world. These concepts function as interpretive categories that give a certain kind of order and structure to his experience. It is possible that the set of concepts he has inherited, including such ideas as providential care, sin, redemption, etc. are a kind of empty shell that have little relation to the way he actually understands his experiences and makes his decisions. It is also possible that the paradigmatic experiences that the interpretive scheme highlights, such as awareness of the holy or experiences of grace, have eluded him or that attempts to squeeze troubling and puzzling events into the religious framework have become strained. On the other hand, it may be that the theistic picture of reality has penetrated so deeply into his psyche that he cannot seriously entertain the idea of a godless world. To try to strip the religious framework away might be something he could imagine, but find uncompelling, as he tries to make sense of experiences he takes as paradigmatic for understanding his life.[12]

Christian theism, the view that Jefferson set out to evaluate, offers an interpretive scheme in which the physical order is an expression of redemptive love. Some events are regarded as signs of the presence and activity of this deep reality, and a normative set of images and stories guides one's thinking about what it means to make contact with this redemptive love. But the appeal of this kind of framework depends on whether the patterns it points to seem compelling experientially. To take the idea of God seriously, Jefferson needs to have experiences that are illuminated for him when he thinks in terms of the theological categories and images that the tradition provides. The question of whether he believes in

God is a question of how dispensable or indispensable the interpretive scheme involving this concept is for him. That is clearly not a question he can ask from the point of view of a disinterested observer, and more relevant than his consideration of theistic arguments that remove him from the realm of concrete experience will be his experiments in "trying on" the framework and using it to structure his world.

Jefferson is unlikely to maintain a religiously significant belief in God unless he finds significant those experiences that believers have taken as disclosures of the ultimate. Does he have intimations of what Rudolph Otto calls the holy? Does he contemplate the physical universe with a sense of wonder and awe? Does he find in his awareness of himself or other people something mysterious to which he responds with attitudes akin to reverence? Does his awareness of certain ideals or values evoke a kind of absolute devotion? Has he experienced events that produce interpersonal reactions, such as gratitude or love or guilt, that would only make sense in relation to a personal reality beyond the human? None of these questions are intended as arguments for God's existence. Rather they raise the issue of whether Jefferson can find the experiential threads that can be woven into some kind of religious engagement. The frame of mind that allows a person to be drawn to such an engagement is not a dispassionate weighing of facts, but an imaginative attentiveness to patterns of meaning that can evoke passionate responses.[13]

If Jefferson were to discover that concepts like "God" have become indispensable features of his most secure grasp of the meanings of his experience, he might be able to look at a teleological or cosmological argument and say of the theoretical entity posited what Aquinas said: "And this is what everyone understands to be God." But in such a case it would not be because his theoretical speculations had grounded his religious assumptions. It would rather be a matter of connecting the concepts that made sense of his lived reality with observations about contingency and apparent purposiveness that seem significant when viewed through a theistic lens.[14]

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**NOTES**

1. One of Kierkegaard's objections to demonstrating the existence of God is that doing so requires one to ignore God's presence. Perhaps this could be interpreted as meaning that the religiously engaged mode of thought that can produce an awareness of a divine presence could not be rendered more certain by assuming a religiously disengaged mode in which there is no awareness of God. See Soren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Fragments*, Vol. I, Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, eds. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 545-546 where Climacus rejects philosophical attempts to demonstrate the existence of God as ludicrous and says that the way to demonstrate God's existence is by worship. My own argument stresses the need for engagement of a more general sort, not a specifically religious engagment. That is, I am concerned about the kind of engagement

that might be needed to adequately evaluate a religious engagement.

2. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 1989, 21.

3. David Hume, Norman Kemp Smith, ed. *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Educational Publishing, 1947), X-XI, 193-213.

4. For an interesting consideration of a number of issues related to this claim, see the well known discussion by H. H. Price of the distinction between belief in and belief that. H. H. Price, *Belief* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1969), 426-454.

5. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 127.

6. *Ibid.*, 94.

7. Ludwig F. Schlecht, "Re-reading 'The Will To Believe'," *Religious Studies* 33 (1997), 217-225.

8. William James, "The Will to Believe," in *The Writings of William James: A Comprehensive Edition*. John McDermott, ed. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1961), 732.

9. William James, "Faith and the Right to Believe," McDermott, 735.

10. Bertrand Russell, "A Free Man's Worship," in *The Basic Writings of Bertrand Russell: 1903-1959*. Robert Egner and Lester Denonn, eds. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1961), 67.

11. Taylor, 3-107.

12. In Nicholas Wolterstorff's reflections on the tragic death of his son, his answer to the question of why he does not just scrap the idea of God is that he cannot help believing. The conviction springs up irresistibly. See Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Lament For A Son*. (Grand Rapids Michigan: Eerdman's Publishing Company, 1987), 76-77.

13. M. Jamie Ferreira, *Transforming Vision: Imagination and Will in Kierkegaardian Faith*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 114-144.

14. An earlier version of this paper was read at the meeting of the Society for Philosophy of Relgion in February of 2001 at Hilton Head, South Carolina.