

Dealing with Appeals to Personal Experience

Note: this is part of a series of short and informal essays I'm writing for my own clarity, and which may be of use to other atheists. They express my reactions to some things I repeatedly hear my fellow atheists say that I simply don't agree with. I hope this kind of diversity might not be a bad thing. Your comments are welcome at alex_colias@hotmail.com

So it was during a Q&A session, after Dr. Richard Dawkins, a prominent atheist, just finished lecturing. An old gentleman came up to the microphone to ask a question. Here's the link to check it out:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JKGtcVoBhBQ>

The exchange went something like this:

Questioner: "I would like to ask you, professor, what do you have to say to someone who has met the living and risen Lord Jesus Christ, who has walked with God for over 50 years, who received the anointing of the Holy Spirit with the same consequences as the early apostles in the book of Acts? Sir, what do you have to say? Because I assure you for my life it has been no delusion."

Dr. Dawkins: "If you had been born in India, I daresay you'd be saying the same thing about Lord Krishna and Lord Shiva. If you had been born in Afghanistan I daresay you'd be saying the same thing about Allah. If you'd been born in Viking Norway you'd be saying the same thing about Wotan. If you'd been born in Olympian Greece you'd be saying the same thing about Zeus and Apollo. The human mind is extremely susceptible to hallucination."

Questioner: "Sir, I'm being allowed by the friend I used to work with to come back. I cannot afford to build my life on hallucination, but on Jesus Christ, who is the rock, and it is that I have asked you to address, please."

Dr. Dawkins: *"You are obviously sincere, but obviously I do not share your beliefs, and I think you are hallucinating. That's all I can say. I don't doubt your sincerity."*

And that was that. Just watching the video of it gave me a really funny feeling in the pit of my stomach. I felt it was wrong somehow, not in the logical sense, but in some ethical sense. It's a bit hard to pin down, really. Dr. Dawkins paused, and apologetically and politely told the old gentleman that he was hallucinating, that his experience was false, that it was all in his own head. I really don't know if anyone else got the feeling I did.

It wasn't just that the old gentleman was being told he's loony, and had wasted his whole life acting like his imaginary god was real. It wasn't just that he was being treated like Jimmy Stewart talking about his giant rabbit friend Harvey. For me it goes deeper than that.

I gather that Dr. Dawkins says the belief in any god is a delusion, but what's so delusional? Am I really supposed to believe that the vast majority of my species suffer from the same type of delusion or something? And that somehow or other I'm one of the few immune? Am I supposed to believe that everyone else is kind of, well, kooky, about something really big and important, except us atheists? That strikes me as being just as weird as it sounds. I mean, I'm not particularly clever. I know because I've known some folks who are, and I'm nothing like them – not even in the same league. And I'm not very educated, either. So I'm not sure what I've done to gain this elite status of seeing through this grand illusion that all these other people swallow. Figures vary, especially based on the exact phrasing, but when stated specifically "I don't think there is any spirit, God, or life force", less than 10% world-wide agree (according to the Gallup Poll "Religion in the World at the End of the Millennium"). I also happen to be blood type O negative, which is again less than 10% of the population. Strange! Is there a connection?

OK – just kidding. But the point is that I wouldn't tend to call whatever the god thing may be simply a delusion, that's all. I mean, majority opinion may have been wrong in the past about some beliefs, such as the source of disease, how all this variety of living things got here, how much of a solid object is really solid, and other fancy stuff. But that wouldn't make them all delusional. In a nutshell, I'm thinking it's really a faith issue: faith in creation implying a creator, faith in a design implying a designer, faith that the things around us and even life itself must have a purpose, faith in what others such as our parents and cultures say is true, and most importantly, faith in what place faith should have in our lives. But I wouldn't declare the vast majority of people in the world delusional or deluded because they have faith in a god or gods. Even when we look at sub-groups based upon education, I have no reason to believe that faith itself is so cut and dry. It doesn't make sense given the numbers. And how we respond to believers really matters, not so much to convince them, because we aren't under any edict to convert anyone, but rather to be clear about what the issues are, and let them decide what to do with it from there. That's why I have a problem with the response to the old gentleman. At best, it didn't really seem very helpful.

Simply negating the validity of someone else's experience isn't conducive to establishing dialog, and doesn't make anyone rethink anything. It's a conversation-stopper. It doesn't clearly explain what the problem is with trusting the old gentleman's personal experience, other than to say "you're hallucinating and your particular religion is arbitrary" or something like that. This flat-out negation may even sound a bit like personal opinion, and for me it's not a matter of personal opinion at all. I would suggest approaching the old gentleman a bit differently, to clearly identify the real problem if we try to accept his personal experience, while hopefully making him see the problem, too.

I'm pretty much accustomed to the idea that most people aren't all that interested in what someone else wants to say. I try to assume that as the default case, and if anything, tend to just ask a few questions instead. The goal is to get the story straight, right from the horse's mouth, and encourage them to be thinking along with me. In this particular case, the real point is the subjectivity of personal experience. It is not a question of the validity of the old gentleman's

Christianity in particular, but the lack of uniqueness of his personal experience. So instead of simply saying “You’ve been fooling yourself for fifty years” and such, some questions we could ask the old gentleman might define the problem more clearly:

Do you believe your god to be the one true god?

Do you believe all other gods to be false?

Do you agree there are other religious people in the world who do not believe in your god?

Do you believe some of these people have also walked with their god or gods for many years?

Do you believe some of these people are just as sincere in their faith as you are in your faith?

Do you expect me to trust your personal experience any more than theirs?

Do you see how if I say your particular religion is true based on your testimony, then I would also have to say the same thing about some other religions?

Do you agree with me that all these religions can’t be true at the same time?

The basic idea is that since I’m not the one asserting anything, I don’t have to prove anything. I don’t have to assert or prove the likely (and it’s only likely) correlation between birthplace and religion, for example. I don’t even have to assert that external evidence may be a good idea or anything like that. I can simply ask some questions to be sure I understand, and clearly show the problem with accepting the assertion. I don’t need to cast judgment or say something that can be misconstrued as mere personal opinion. When it comes to appeals to personal experience, some questions may suffice to show what’s going on.