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Knowing and Believing: Science Religion and Magic

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Defense for Legitimacy of Religious Belief in the Case of Fearing Death

A few months ago, my grandfather died from his ten-year fight with cancer. He died the way he always wanted: in his home surrounded by family. We gathered to pray the rosary together on his last nights and every night for ten days after he passed. We all witnessed his last breaths and we grieved, still grieve, his passing. We cried the day he died, every night of the rosary, at his funeral, at his grave, and I still feel tears when given reminders of how he is no longer here. I have yet to remove his contact from my phone, even though his number has gone to someone new and has not been his since April. Is it wrong for us, as religious people, to grieve the loss of those we love? Surely, we should solely be joyful that they have gone to traverse the path to Heaven. Such is the argument Georges Rey, an American philosopher of the mind and cognitive science, makes with the “betrayal by reactions and behavior” (Rey 261) explanation of his argument claiming the “self-deceived” beliefs of religious people in modern Western society, termed “meta-atheism” (Rey 245). He criticizes religious beliefs outside of grief expression, but I will focus on this aspect. I contend that faith, as a single facet of humanity, is not meant to completely override all other human tendencies, such as fearing death. Rather, religiousness intends to ease the anxiety of dying with the comfort of explanations of the afterlife. This may shift the focus of death anxiety to other parts of death. That the religious man grieves or fears

death, I argue, is not a betrayal of his faith or sign of his “self-deception” but rather a rational reaction to the disruption of life (Rey 244).

Death has many definitions which contribute to the various attitudes it receives and its varying psychological effects. I would argue that harboring fear or anxiety towards death is rational. In contexts like the deprivation of life (Draper 2) and the “transition from a living state to a nonliving state” (Olson 1), the idea that all one knows may cease to be is indeed startling. Humans are creatures of habit; we like routine and regularity. For many of us, large life changes often bring trepidation and or denial. Following that logic, it is rational for people, regardless of their beliefs or lack thereof, to dread the tremendous change brought by death. Kai Draper, a Professor of Philosophy focused on morality and epistemology, speculates in his work “Death and Rational Emotion” whether “death can merit (self-interested) fear” (Draper 6). Behavioral, religion, and spirituality psychologist Aryeh Lazar also investigated the self-interested fears which contribute to death anxiety. His results show that fears of being forgotten after death, of losing what we know to be ourselves, and losing our ability to interact and benefit from worldly action correlate with motivations to act religiously.

We fear the loss of self-control and identity of self which takes the form of a body. In his essay “The Person and the Corpse,” Eric Olson, a University of Sheffield professor of philosophy who studies human nature and persistence, ruminates the relation between the self and the body’s becoming a corpse. His musings ponder how we speak of the dead and create a loose, undefined connection between a person and their corpse; “when we bury someone’s corpse, we bury them” (Olson 3). Our bodies are very important to our living self-image because we can see and perceive our physical selves much easier than our inner selves. Since our corpses “cannot then be psychologically contiguous with [ourselves]” (Olson 5), and at death we separate

“the immortal soul from the immortal body” (Peach 12), we are henceforth separated from our most predominant self-image. It is at this point the “loss of social identity” (Lazar 184) becomes more terrifying; the prospect that we will lose all connections to the only thing we have ever perceived daunts us. I put forth as well that we fear the pain of dying that precedes the state of death. Because we cannot live and experience death, we must rely on the “human experience of death” (Steffen 316) which we correlate with the pain of the dying, our own sadness, and its lingering disorienting effects. That is to say, what we conceive of death is limited to what we can observe as the living; what we witness and connect to death often suffers negative connotations. German philosopher Heidegger inputs that people “die alone; [death] is non-relational” (Peach 24). Because of this, the action of dying then rightfully scares us. Humans are tribal creatures. We live and thrive in groups and do not want to be separated from our group in Purgatory, Hell, or even in Heaven. We witness that desperation when we see people dying. Our personal experience in outliving those dear to us feeds death anxieties both within and beyond our self-interest.

I also assert that the grieving of an immediate death is natural and human but does not denounce religious beliefs. Rey compares “avowed believers” and “nonbelievers” in their amount of grief and observes that neither “seem seriously affected by the claimed prospects of a Hereafter” (Rey 261). In his argument, this finding should disprove the genuineness of a believer’s beliefs. Rey likens the state of afterlife to a luxury vacation – why should anyone be sad that a loved one has gone to “an infinitely better existence” (Peach 19)? I will grant to him that initial grief is not significantly different between theists and atheists (Feldman *et al.* 535) but I disagree with his interpretation of the observation. Humans are creatures – animals. Like other animals have been shown to do, we miss, grieve, and remember those who die. As social

creatures, humans care deeply for their close circles of relationships. In his analogies of opulent physical destinations, he fails to consider the disconnection between the living and deceased. We mourn the death of someone important to us not because we believe they ceased existing entirely, but rather because our social circles become completely disrupted once we can no longer interact and relate to them in the way we have always done. Our habitual nature causes further distress. We suffer “a loss attached to those things in life most important to us, those things we love” (Steffen 318), and grow saddened. When Jesus himself witnessed the sorrow and grieving of Lazarus’ sisters and community, he did not admonish them but rather “his heart was touched” (John 11:33). Jesus, a part of the God Rey claims our grieving forsakes, did not see the grieving human heart as a sin. He knew that the death of a loved one is still a departure from the living world to a place those left behind cannot reach.

According to developmental psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg, we first develop morality by fearing receiving punishment for our wrongdoings. This provides further explanation for why believers may have anxiety towards death that Rey overlooks. Feldman *et al.* and Lazar conducted research into the connections between fearing death and religiosity. Lazar’s included a model for fear of “punishment in the hereafter” (Lazar 185, 187) which predicted “belief in divine order,” (Lazar 185) a measure of religiousness. Feldman *et al.* included in their survey instead an attitude toward God with two negative choices being “avoidant (i.e., seeing God as inconsistent or fickle – sometimes warm, sometimes not)” and “anxious (i.e., seeing God as impersonal, distant, with little interest in one’s life)” (Feldman *et al.* 534). Since there are many different views of God and, in many beliefs, Heaven is not the sole afterlife destination, our fears of unknown resurface in the uncertainty of which temperament God will bear when delivering our judgments. By only referencing to positive associates of God’s being (Rey 249, 257), and

neglecting to analogize equivalents for Purgatory or Hell as he does a “luxurious resort” (Rey 261) to Heaven, Rey overlooks the possibility that anxiety of death may be caused by a fear of suffering the depths of Hell or trials of Purgatory, or of an all-powerful and all-knowing God who dispenses harsh punishment on Judgement Day; he omits the “fear of being punished after death in accordance with certain religious beliefs” (Peach 16).

I not only disagree with Rey’s claims that grief in the religious man is unfaithful but also attest the results of his overcoming grief and anxiety are actually expressions of our faith. John Calvin, the founder of Protestant Christian denomination Calvinism, also feared death as it “reflected God’s judgement on sin” (Bouwsma 253). His inclinations to the omnipotence of God and human “tendency to anarchy” (Bouwsma 254) made him so anxious that he formulated the proposal of predestination, in which an individual’s afterlife is destined from creation, “the boundaries dividing the reprobate from the elect, [...] can never be crossed” (Bouwsma 255). While this assuages some uncertainty of death, it introduces another anxiety and fear to be considered: have I been destined to Heaven or to Hell? I am amazed that Christians can face such a bleak possibility as infinite suffering and continue to believe and worship their God. Awesome, too, is Feldman *et al.*’s finding that Christians display a “greater positive acceptance of death” (Feldman *et al.* 536) and can overcome grief to improve themselves and their lives (Feldman *et al.* 534) at higher rates (Feldman *et al.* 536) and in less time (Feldman *et al.* 535) than those not religious with the knowledge that the dead loved one may receive Heaven’s blessing after his suffering. If this data is true, why is a difference between beliefs not seen in the original grief recordings? As much as we differentiate ourselves, humans, like other creatures, have irrational features. The disruption of our habits, social environments, and tribe connections puts us through immense stress. The impacts of this stress on mental and physical health hinders rationality. As

time moves on we adjust, however, and regain more of our precious rationality. Therefore, present grief is the same, but the consolation of our beliefs can help believers recover faster and grow from the experience. Thus, a belief in life after death is not so ineffectual as Rey claims it to be.

So, then, do theistic people who do not fear death betray their faith instead? It is true that not everyone fears death; there are several people who welcome death as an eternal peace that ends their suffering or an inevitability that is “neither good nor bad” (Feldman *et al.* 533). If I assert that anxieties of dying can be directly related to having faith, does that not conclude that lacking death anxiety indicates a lack in the corresponding faith? In the same way that both believers and atheists can be anxious about death, neither group is restricted from embracing it. The human experience is infinitely varied; for those who have suffered intensely, “then permanently escaping from that misery merits positive anticipation” (Draper 8). For example, those who fight long battles with illness, as with my grandfather or Rey’s theoretical “children slowly dying from a plague” (Rey 263), may welcome God soothing their pain in death as readily as they would fight to stay alive. Alternatively, a person of religion may have made peace with their mistakes and believe in the efficacy of their life choices; consequently, they are not wary of timely death.

I do not intend to suggest, either, that no one in the world claims more faith than they have; I only aim to dispel grief and unease towards death as indicators of the difference. Lazar’s and Feldman *et al.*’s research include a distinction between “intrinsic” and “extrinsic” faith. The terms describe the role religion plays in the participants’ lives: a central and deeply integrated part of life (intrinsic) or a means to achieve reward or advance ulterior motives (extrinsic) (Feldman *et al.* 535, Lazar 187). Its place in the research was verified by participants who

identified their motivations as either extrinsic or intrinsic. Lazar also includes specific environmental factors which may pressure an individual to claim greater belief such as family, culture, and upbringing (181, 184). These appeal to the human need for community and belonging and may incite a contrast between how someone presents themselves publicly and how they feel; this barrier serves to protect that sense of belonging. Someone's extrinsic or intrinsic perspectives on faith may then impact or show the difference between their true and proclaimed beliefs. Grief and a fear of death, as I have discussed throughout this essay, are neither limited to nor dependent on whether or what one believes, and therefore do not indicate empty beliefs.

Death is paradoxically mysterious and definite. We know what death is to the living and that it must happen for all. Religion assuages the fear of the unknown by giving us answers in which we put our faith. These explanations produce varying degrees of success and, in some cases, expand the number of factors on which we can ruminate. That we should grow uneasy over the various possibilities of destination and punishment is as normal as becoming comfortable with its inevitability. The grief of a devout believer is in no way impious but rather a natural and human response to the severed connection of close relationships. Rather, faith allows grief to be processed differently and provides the despairing with comfort and strength to look forward and renew themselves again.

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