

Reflections on Faith, Doubt, and Eternal Consequences

by [Samuel Hux](#) (April 2022)



Sacred Lake, Mikhail Nesterov

How long has the human race, or a significant portion of it, believed in an afterlife? It does not strike me as just a natural thing to believe in: the observation that things end is too compelling. No longer a practicing Episcopalian—it's been years—any certain comfort from that Christian certainty or hope deserted me a sufficient time ago. I have often wondered if Christianity's greatest appeal is not love of a

transcendentally just Being but the assurance of immortality. Not a very original thought of mine!

I would be pleased to know—just curious—how many (not an exact number) philosophers, separate from those who are also theologians like Augustine, Aquinas and such, actually believe in the soul's afterlife. A quick survey of my memory does not reveal, beyond Plato's *Phaedo* (which I could never take seriously), a sustained argument that there must be an afterlife, the way that some philosophers, not just theologians, have argued that there must be a god, or The God. Nothing so extensive and deep as, for instance, Thomas Aquinas's Five Fold Argument for the Existence of the Divine. More likely one finds arguments for the *Possibility* of God's Existence: Kant's Moral Argument and others'. I would note in passing that the classical Moral, Cosmological, and Design arguments may be convincing in their own rights, but do not necessarily "prove" the existence of the Judaeo-Christian God they are aimed at. When the general argument is complete, to get to that specific God a leap of faith is required. But back to the afterlife:

In spite of his deep concern for religion, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, and *The Will to Believe*, my hero William James was not a conventionally religious person, if really religious at all. Yet attached to the end of one edition of the latter book is a brief essay setting forth the possibility, but not the probability, of an afterlife. That's as far as he will go ... and that's how far I would go along with him.

René Descartes does not have an argument *per se* on the afterlife. But in his *Meditations on First Philosophy* he has an argument, or makes assumptions, that relate to the question. I mean his fundamental distinction between two kinds of being, kinds of "thing." *Res Extensa*: physical or extended thing, *extension* meaning weighable and measurable and occupying space. *Res Cogitans*: thinking or thought thing, non-

physical and non-weighable and non-measurable and occupying no space. Your body of course is *res extensa*. I am exactly 6 feet tall, approximately 200 pounds, and I occupy this chair. Your mind—not your brain, which is part of your body—your soul, as far as Descartes is concerned, is *res cogitans*. I have no idea of the size of my mind-soul, my psyche, which cannot exist in any space. When my body ceases to function I will die because Death is a physical event. But my soul, not being physical, may survive physical death, even if its mental “part” is without its tool the brain. Hence the Cartesian possibility of a non-physical afterlife. So, well and good, but ...

The Cartesian possibility will work with the receptive. But for most people the problem is the difficulty, amounting almost to the impossibility, of imagining what a bodiless afterlife could be. If we spent any time when young and impressionable in church or synagogue we heard about the soul at least on every Sabbath, but we have no real idea what it is. This becomes more complicated if we know the Greek word for soul, *psyche*, for we think immediately of Psychology, the study of a congeries of mental stuff from intellect to personality and god knows what else. What exactly do we mean when we say of someone really objectionable that he or she is “soul-less”?

A corollary problem is that unless one is an Islamic fool (excuse the redundancy) who thinks 70-odd virgins await him in heaven after killing heathens, we can no longer believe in a heaven for mobile and breathing human bodies, as we did for centuries. Yet we can't get rid entirely of that notion, whether we've read Dante's *Divine Comedy* or not, where the souls retain their bodies, especially important in the *Inferno*, so that their “reward” is physical pain as well as mental despair. One reason Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* works so well is that we suspend disbelief as Faust physically descends into Hell. He's gonna suffer as a man, not just a soul, poor miserable son-of-a-bitch. You really must

see Richard Burton's film: the agonized poetry before Faust descends is some of the greatest in English. And if you're going to go in the other direction, remember your poetic-childish fantasy of sitting at the right hand of God: your soul floating—so to mis-speak—in the ambiance of the Divine does not seem to work.

The point is that the physical Heaven or Hell, which most can't accept any longer, remains so compelling that by comparison or contrast the Cartesian Possibility—how to say it?—seems not only so hard to imagine but also so much less compelling in part because so much less dramatic. . . even if drama is not the most important consideration when one is reflecting on human fate.

In any case, there is another consideration or question, which goes far beyond philosophy and theology and maybe even common sense. Whether one believes in an afterlife or not, does one believe the afterlife in reality or fiction is for the purpose of rewarding or punishing as in the conventional Christian conception, the Dantean understanding in short hand? So that the afterlife is for everyone, that is, no one excluded: post-life Democracy. I like, theoretically, the idea of Hell. There are people whose eternal agonies I would like to contemplate, the big and little Hitlers (and hitlers) of history. But I am not sure the Elysian Fields are for everyone else. Entry only for some souls? Although not qualified to be Saint Peteresque judge I'll pretend I'm given a tryout. I can think of some politicians, for instance, not hitlers but not worthy of preservation either, like some colleagues who seem soul-less. Shall they keep company in Elysium with—for prominent example—my Beloved? I judge not. They do not deserve remembrance in even *this* lifetime.

Are these idle speculations more serious than the tone in which they are offered indicates? That is, do I after all believe there is an afterlife? I think I should put it this way. I so profoundly cannot bear the thought that my Beloved

could vanish into nothingness that my longing and prayers that she not might as well be called an affirmation of life everlasting: no other conclusion is large enough. And maybe that is what love is.

Belief in an afterlife and belief in the existence of God are obviously related, even if not absolutely necessarily so. That is, the former does not automatically follow from the latter. I should say right off that the God I'm supposing is He worshipped by Christians and Jews, not the Deity of various Asian religions I know little of, nor Allah of Islam, because I think Islam not so much a religion as it is a politics. I follow Rebecca Bynum's *Allah Is Dead: Why Islam Is Not a Religion*. Whether one believes in an afterlife or not, I know what *Belief* means: at least *ascent*. But in relation to God's existence I am not sure what *Belief*—or *Faith*—means precisely. It seems to me to mean not exactly ascent. I suppose, or rather I know, that I am here writing to a degree autobiographically.

As for many (most?) American gentile kids, Church and Sunday school were automatic for me, although my family was not very religious, not that I noticed. I never saw my father in church, while he did not object to my mother's wish that I attend, mostly, I judge, that she simply thought it was the right thing to do. So I was a lukewarm attendant at the local Southern Baptist Church. (It was years before I experimented with Catholicism in the army and then settled on the Episcopal denomination in college.) It did not occur to me that atheism or agnosticism were options. I believed because that was what you did. But what did such "belief" mean? I did not know, because that was all that was culturally available to me. You might as well have asked me why I breathed. You want me to hold my breath, I might have answered, I'm not swimming.

This means my faith was not a very serious possession. It got a bit more sophisticated when I tried on Catholicism and settled on Episcopalianism; but this was merely an intellectual

game. T.S. Eliot, W.H. Auden, C.S. Lewis were all Anglicans, as Cardinal Newman had been before turning Rome-wards. The Episcopal Church just off the campus of The University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill housed sermons which were alternate Sunday debates between Reverend Harvey, Broad Churchman, and Father Insko, Anglo-Catholic, the "audience" full of PhDs. When I took instruction for membership my American History Professor sat next to me. An intellectual game, as I've said, not a commitment of the soul. The entire affair was, for me, essentially an escape from the Southern Baptist Church. Allow me an offensive joke or two. What's a Methodist? A Baptist who can read. Why do Baptists never make love standing up? They're afraid they'll be thought to be dancing. My conversion to Anglicanism, in other words, was in part snobbism.

But set aside the game and the snobbery, and just focus on the quality of my "faith." My major point is not to remember days of yore. Rather it is to suggest that I was typical of the vast majority of Christians, whose faith I can't take very seriously. The most egregious of them are those supposedly most serious: Fundamentalists, with whom I have practically nothing in common, being solidly middle class and highly educated. (There may be sophisticated "fundamentalists," so my use of the word may be inexact, but I am more or less stuck with what it meant when-where I grew up: believers who had no truck with metaphor in the Bible, for whom all was literal, Jesus actually walking on water and such-y' know what I men?) Ironically, most fundamentalists I have met have been in the "halls of intellect," in Philosophy courses where theological issues were touched upon and in Intellectual History courses which included religious classics, selected Biblical books among them. My fundamentalists were never the majority but always a significant minority, and practically un-educable: not because unintelligent but because confident they already had all the answers. Their faith in God had nothing to do with metaphysical issues, but was strictly with the physical. Their

eyes would glaze over with incomprehension and boredom when their ears heard any metaphysical proposition or explanation, although they did not know the propositions and explanations were metaphysical (what is *that*?) since they were clearly to them just blasphemous. To put it as directly as possible: their faith was in their *physical* God, the imposing giant of a *man* clothed in white robe, with grey beard and flowing hair, seated on a throne. This was not a metaphor for them. They knew enough to know that Heaven was not on some astronomical map, but it was a *where*, somehow somewhere, where He was. Their faith was a certainty of a divine physical certainty. And my diction and rhetoric here is as repetitious as it is in order to characterize (or caricature?) the repetitiveness of their "faith."

They would not have known what to make of Paul Tillich's *Dynamics of Faith*. I should alter that sentence. A few of them did not know what to make of Tillich in a course I taught on "Twentieth Century Christian Thought" 30 years ago. For Tillich, Faith was not simply Belief. . . but "Ultimate Concern." Which is an *ultimate*—that is to say—fully committed and uncompromised *concern* for *The Ultimate*. The Ultimate being The God behind the mere word *God*. How more metaphysical can one get?

Nor would they know what to make of Pope Benedict XVI, who as Father Joseph Ratzinger wrote in *Introduction to Christianity* (1968) of a necessary dialectic of Faith and Doubt. They would think him—if they read him—a rank blasphemer. Although he was making perfectly good sense. Rather than quote him, I will in my own way understand him:

There can be no Up without a Down, no In without an Out, etc. If everything is Up then *Up* is meaningless, a no-place. One might be inclined, working analogies, to add "just as there can be no Faith without Doubt," but this is a forced analogy, since Faith versus Doubt is not an opposition lying in nature as Up-Down and In-Out are. The opposition lies in the human

mind, not out there in space. So while it is true to say that if everything is Up, *Up* is a no-place meaninglessness, it is not true however to say that if everyone has Faith, *Faith* is a no-thought meaninglessness. But it is an empty and banal possession of the mind, which is what my Fundamentalist's Faith is. A Faith not "earned" because merely "given" in the nature of Fundamentalism. In other words, not tested by the possibility of Doubt, so it is something to be pleased with the way one might congratulate oneself on breathing. That is, my Fundamentalist's Faith is not challenged by Doubt, does not have to overcome it. He or she is the opposite of Benedict.

It is evidently—given the history of serious and casual thought down the centuries—not so difficult to believe in some sort of Divinity, some creative and controlling force beyond Nature, some Being responsible for the Design of the universe, in other words some God. But the demands of Christianity are a more complex matter: a God who is Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, the Son sacrificed for the sake of unworthy humankind which is yet paradoxically worthy enough to be offered the chance of the soul's salvation, the Son then resurrected from the dead. That's a hell of a lot to swallow. The ancient theologian Tertulian wrote some form of "I believe because it is absurd," although the word *although* is perhaps better than *because*.

Nothing is absurd to *my* Fundamentalist because he or she *just knows*. With no problem. Pope Benedict argued that Faith challenged by Doubt, and overcoming Doubt, is the only Faith worthy of holding dear, so Doubt is a necessary one half of a dialectic which is the majesty of Christianity. And although it was not Benedict's job or priority, the same might be said of Judaism. In any case, Doubt is not a disrespectful or vicious condition: it is a respectable honesty yielding—in the Faithful—to a higher necessity. In the Pope's understanding, God is not a Dictator badgering the believer with threats, "Believe in me, goddamn you, with no reservation or hesitation, or I'll make sure your soul will whistle on a

burning brick in hell for eternity" (an image I steal from a Robert Lowell poem).

And speaking of hell, it's a hell of an irony that my Fundamentalist and the famous New Atheists like Sam Harris are twins but not identical twins, The former's Faith is unchallenged by any thought which makes Doubt a possibility. The latter's Atheism is equally unchallenged by any thought which makes Theism a possibility. The former has no reputation as a thinker, nor should have. The latter does have a reputation as a thinker, but should not have. His Atheism is not based on detailed refutation of the classical theistic arguments of Aquinas, Descartes, Kant, or you-name-it, is simply assertion dressed up in pseudo-scientific language. They are not philosophical arguments, just juvenile. I cannot count the number of times I have said or written that the Atheist's "argument" amounts to what should be a mere confession: "I don't believe in God; therefore he cannot possibly exist." I can hardly think of a confession more arrogant.

I should not imply that Faith overcoming the challenge of Doubt is an easy victory, although I have to admit it is hard for me to imagine Benedict (The Pope, for goodness' sake!) as a field of continuous battle between Faith and Doubt; easier for me to imagine Father Joseph Ratzinger suffering the dynamic before the conclusive ascendancy of Faith. You simply cannot find the tension in Benedict that you find in the autobiographical sketches of Jonathan Edwards for instance. Or in the letters of Herman Melville. Or in the fiction of Miguel de Unamuno. Or in the characters of Graham Greene, Or ... While Benedict's argument is unassailable I think, one suspects it is more a philosophical doctrine than a personal confession, Still, nonetheless, it bespeaks one of the great—and dramatic—themes of the Christian narrative beyond the scriptures. The man or woman caught time and time again between the agonies of Doubt and the elevation of Faith, the

heroism of that man or that woman not graspable by either twin, my Fundamentalist or the New Atheist.

Do I consider myself one of those caught between Doubt and Faith? Yes, but not “heroically” so. When I doubt I feel no agony; when I believe I feel no elevation. My condition is simply a matter of a mostly painless confusion, modified by an intellectual interest in the question (or I would not be writing this essay). Let’s hope that God understands. If I were as stupid as the New Atheist I might assume that God’s existence depends upon my hope.

I make a distinction between the traditional atheists and the “New Atheists” like Sam Harris and his ilk. Because the “Old Atheists”—let me call them—showed some respect for the theistic position they denied. Take for instance David Hume, who would be no help to Sam Harris Incorporated—if they read him. In fact, in spite of his reputation, it is not really clear that Hume *was* an atheist, although he was indeed a skeptic. I will try to make this clear with an analogy. Event or thing *A* apparently causes event or thing *B*. But, says Hume, all we can know is that *B* followed *A*. We cannot know that *A* caused *B*—although we may casually assume it, that’s all. Why? Because we cannot see or experience through the senses any direct *cause* as such. This, however, does not mean that *cause does not exist*: it only means we cannot prove the causal connection occurs. End of analogy. Hume the skeptic does not dismiss the possibility of the existence of God. Rather, such *existence* can no more be proven than *cause* can.

Hume does not hector believers. He does not stand on rooftops shouting. Even if he does not believe in a deity—and that is not certain!—he does not bet the life of his philosophical reputation on it. But the New Atheist does indeed exercise his loud mouth on rooftops. What drives him so?

The question of divine existence is no small matter to be dismissed with contempt. It is never a small matter to dismiss

anything that has survived in the human mind for such an extraordinarily long time that custom begins to look like nature. Any such dismissal had damned well better be worth the price. Sam Harris Inc. is/are too confident and not half as smart as Huckleberry Finn and Slave Jim on their raft on the Mississippi debating whether the stars were made or just happened, Huck proposing that so many must have just happened, with the instinctive theist Jim proposing that "someone" must have made them. And when we, lesser beings than Mark Twain's creatures, consider the unimaginably vast vastness of the universe (or the universes?) resulting from the Big Bang questions both hopeless and necessary arise in our minds, including the impossible "What happened before time began?" and "What could have been there before there was space to be in?" and Huck's "How could such a vastness beyond comprehension have been anything but an unpredictable and ungraspable astronomical accident?" and Jim's "How could it have been anything but the opposite of accident?"

Here's another question: Is it a bland inquiry to consider the possibility—or is it probability?—that such a vastness was the conception brought to reality of a vast "intelligence" beyond our capacity to perceive? Here's another: If there is or may be such a vast "creative" intelligence did it then *become* the "governing" intelligence of the universe or *be replaced* by such? Here's another: Even if the universe is the result of an astronomical "accident," could not a vast governing intelligence take it over? Here's another: Is it conceivable that the divine intelligence, under no obligation, so to speak, to conform to our rules of logic, paradoxically works by what strikes us as accident? Here's another: When we speak of God—whether as theist or atheist—are we thinking of a universal deity or a deity "belonging" to this planet alone? If one is or was a Christian I suspect it is the latter, the planet which we are or were taught the Son of God visited. And that raises a question no Christian wants to hear: Is God, then, and not merely the concept of "God," an evolutionary

consequence?

There is another question yet to be asked. I know why the Christian preaches to the world. He or she feels compelled to spread "the word of God," not only to celebrate God but to compel others to seek salvation. But why do the New Atheists need to advertise their cause from the rooftops? Why not just enjoy their certainty in privacy? What do they gain from efforts to destroy others' faith in the existence of God? Do they think a world of atheists would be a better world to live in? Or *what* for Christ's sake?— if I may put it that way! I strongly suspect the motivation is akin to the old game of shocking the bourgeoisie by showing how advanced and brave and different you are; although in this case "*épater les chrétiens.*" Well ... let me shock the shockers.

For half a century I taught fulltime at two different colleges and was visiting lecturer at two others. That means I knew hundreds of faculty, not all well, but well enough to be not ignorant of roughly who and what they were. In all that time I can count *five*—5—who were definitely not atheists or agnostics, three Roman Catholics and two Jews. That, amazingly, is all! In so far as Sam Harris Inc. are lecturing fellow intellectual types, they are preaching to the choir, if I may use that metaphor. But I will go further than that ...

It is only faculty pride that convinces the professorial population that it is different from the middle class in general, the bourgeoisie that some like to shock. Yes, I taught in college for most of my adult life, but my social life was not confined within the campus gates. I have been closer to more JDs and MDs and MBAs and grad-school dropouts than PhDs and MAs—all a part of the "audience" the New Atheists aim at. Their worldviews and religious and anti-religious views are in no essential ways different from faculty views. The point to grasp is that the Sam Harris types are not writing and lecturing for Uncle Edgar and Aunt Matilda down on the farm or for Diego, Sabina, Luigi, Gina, Clarence

and Clara-Mae in the projects. Faith may still have a strong grasp in those inclines. But an alternative phrase for *Professional Bourgeoisie* could be the rather clumsy *Loosely Irreligious Class*.

The New Atheists may think of themselves as shocking and brave radicals. They are, rather, merely loudmouth conformist bores.

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