

# The Dialectics of Faith and Reason

PHAVISMINDA Journal  
Volume 8 (May 2009): 105-114.

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## 1. Introduction

Sam Harris, in *End of Faith*, challenges our belief in God. He charges faith as the cause of many miseries in the world, including religious wars, terrorism, persecutions and intolerance. He is not alone in this cause. In his league are two other best selling authors, Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens.

Given the advance in science and the development of society, faith in God has become less and less necessary for the understanding of the world and the organization of society. Harris in fact blames faith as the hindrance to a scientific understanding of the world and the emergence of a totally free, tolerant and progressive society.

Coming from a society that is steeped in faith and rich in religious tradition, I find the position of Harris a disturbing phenomenon. These thinkers, after all, are not alone in their disdain for faith. Just recently, a group of atheists mounted a campaign in London to advertise on the double-decker buses that "there is probably no God, so enjoy your life."

This presentation will not attempt to prove the existence of God. Philosophers and scientists during the age of Enlightenment have attempted to do so, only to end up doing the opposite. William James has already seen the sterility of rational proofs of God's existence. He writes in *the Varieties of Religious Experience*: "(The) inferiority of the rationalistic level in founding belief is just as manifest when rationalism argues for religion as when it argues against it." (James, pp. 84-85) Saint Thomas, in proposing the Five Ways, did not aim to prove the existence of God. Rather, he merely articulated the five possible ways through which reason may be able to access God's existence. Put in another way, the Five Ways of Saint Thomas aims to show that one can attain knowledge of God through reason alone, even without the aid of faith.

The aim of this presentation is to reflect on the value of faith and its relationship with reason. It will argue that faith is in fact a part of our experience as human beings, and that to expunge it from our experience is to

do violence to our nature. Yet, faith cannot be the absolute determinant of our behavior. Any absolute claim on human destiny can lead to distortions in human relations, thus, there is a need for faith to be purified by reason, just as reason is always in need of the enlightenment of faith.

## 2. Sam Harris' Concept of Faith

Harris does not make a clear distinction between belief and faith. He lumps belief together with faith. Between faith and belief, the latter is more common to human experience. Belief, for Harris, is adherence to a particular truth-claim without the backing of evidence (cf. Harris 2004, 65). Thus, to accept the news on CNN as true is belief. While such form of belief may be verified by common sense and the presentation of a TV footage, belief in God does not have the same verifiability. For Harris, faith is a form of belief whose specific object is the existence of God. Since the claim that God exists is ultimately unverifiable, he considers such belief as unjustified. Faith is a willingness to wait for the evidence, to believe now and to discover the evidence later (Ibid., 66). For him, this is untenable.

Because Harris bases his arguments against faith on the necessity of evidence, he is by logic a realist, that is, he believes in objective reality (Ibid., 182). He does not fully subscribe to the tenets of relativism and pragmatism, two ways of thinking that deny objective reality (Ibid., 179). Instead, he asserts that one can know the truth, and this truth is made available through careful observation and experimentation, in a word, through science.

As a believer in science (he is a student of neurology), Harris posits that science relies on intuition, saying that there are some things that science presupposes because the mind bridges the gaps in our knowledge through intuition (Ibid., 183). Harris admits the use of intuition in science, yet he does not apply the same to metaphysics. Metaphysics, in fact, claims this intuition to be its true domain, but a scientist like Harris does not want to accept such claims because when intuition is admitted to be a metaphysical principle, it is only a short hop from there to faith in God.

One of the most basic intuitions of science is the order and consistency of nature. To be sure this is not a product of science itself, but a principle formulated long before the empirical sciences came to be. We can go all the way to the Miletians, Pythagoreans and Heracliteans for this intuition. It is this same order and consistency that later philosophers used as basis for their argument of God's existence, an argument which believers in evolution have rejected and replaced with pure chance and randomness. Yet, the same chance and randomness cannot be a basis for science, for no science is intelligible without positing a nature stable enough to be studied and dissected.



Bertrand Russell argues that science builds on statistical patterns (Russell 1957, 8), that is, one can predict the occurrence of a certain event based on its statistical probability, but then again, one has to make a clear distinction between predicting when an earthquake will occur and why they do occur. "When" relies on statistics, whereas "why" relies on real science. However, when we understand earthquakes fully, then seismologists will no longer rely on statistics. They will base their predictions on hard data.

Evolutionists argue that what we see now as the current state of affairs is a product of billions of years of chance and random events. What we see now as organized and stable is only a product of time, not the artifice of an intelligent designer. Yet, the event of the Big Bang itself is determined by a specific set of numerical relations, which, on further analysis, already pre-"wired" our universe to become what it is today (Cf. Rees, 2-3).

All these do not constitute a rational proof of God's existence. Yet, they open up for us an intuition of something more than what can be seen by the naked eye. Intuition, like belief, can be applied to different levels of reality. Harris mentions that watching the evening news involves a form of belief, and so is faith in God. The difference between believing the newscaster and putting faith in what the Bible says is that while one can verify the news report, one cannot say the same of the Bible. Intuition too functions in the same way. When Galileo noticed anomalies in the motion of the heavenly bodies, he intuited a reality far different from what had been commonly held during his time. When St. Thomas, following Aristotle, posits God as the ultimate cause of things, he intuited the principle of causality. Between Galileo and Saint Thomas, the difference is verifiability. Modern astronomy has proven Galileo to be correct, but no science has so far presented incontrovertible proof that God exists.

While science and faith may be said to originate from the same intuition, they break away in the standard of verifiability. While the claims of science can be verified by its own methods, the claims of faith cannot be verified by the methods of science. Yet, there is incongruence in this logic. For why would science be verified by its own method, and faith be verified by science? Why would a radically different way of knowing be subjected to the method of another? The God of faith cannot be an object of scientific inquiry. The sighting of his appearance through a telescope or the discovery of his abode through radar will immediately invalidate his divinity.

In truth, faith can be verified by its own method. It is possible to verify the words of the Bible through hermeneutics. The evidence that science makes is in the "truth of things," but the evidence that faith relies on is the "truthfulness of persons."

To be sure, intuition is not faith. Intuition is a part of reason, the part of reason that opens it to faith. Faith, on the other hand, is credulity based on trust. We believe a person because we trust that what he says is true. Thus, the basic criterion of faith is trust in the truthfulness of a person. Reason intuits the first cause, and faith confirms this first cause to be a God who is a compassionate and loving Father, who governs the universe with justice and mercy, who sent His only begotten Son to redeem the world. As you can see, science and faith speak two different languages, though they are rooted in the same intuition. Science speaks a technical vocabulary, hence most of its words are invented or conventional; whereas, faith speaks the language of relations, hence, most of its basic words originate from human experience.

Harris invalidates faith merely on the basis of the absence of scientific evidence. Yet, he posits the possibility of aliens and other worlds yet undiscovered. If one can admit of the possibility of the existence of extraterrestrials even if there is no evidence as yet, why can one not admit of the possibility of God's existence even though the evidence of His existence is still not available to science? Harris might reply that while those who admit of the possibility of extraterrestrials do not act like they are so certain that extraterrestrials exist, those who believe in God actually act like they are so certain that God exists. To this we might retort, if those who believe in the possibility of extraterrestrials do not act so certain that extraterrestrials exist, why does Harris act like he is so certain that God does not exist? For this is the crux of the matter: while believers can doubt whether God exists or not, atheists cannot doubt that he exists at all. For while believers can still remain as believers even if they open themselves to the possibility that God may not exist, atheists cannot remain so when they open themselves to the possibility that he may actually exist. Atheism is strictly a position of negation.

The atheists might counter by saying that when a believer admits of the possibility that God does not exist, he is actually losing his faith, for faith is "assurance of things not seen," as the Letter to the Hebrews says (Heb. 11:1). In truth, there is no such thing as perfect faith. Assurance, after all, is not certitude. One is assured precisely because one is not always sure. Faith is an act of the will transcending reason.

### 3. Faith is Integral to the Human Experience

Harris' conception of faith coincides with Pope John Paul II's phenomenological description of it in the encyclical *Fides et Ratio*. The Pope writes:

There are in the life of a human being many more truths which are simply believed than truths which are acquired by way of personal verification. Who for instance could assess



critically the countless scientific findings upon which modern life is based? Who could personally examine the flow of information which comes day after day from all parts of the world and which is generally accepted as true? Who in the end could forge anew the paths of experience and thought which yielded the treasures of human wisdom and religion? This means that the human being—the one who seeks the truth—is also the *one who lives by faith* (*Fides et ratio*, no. 31).

John Paul II does not reject the objectivity of science, but he takes exception to the claim that only the method of science can be the source of truth. While belief in what another person said can be perfected through the “personal accumulation of evidence”, belief, says the Pope, “is often humanly richer than mere evidence, because it involves an interpersonal relationship and brings into play not only a person’s capacity to know but also the deeper capacity to entrust oneself to others, to enter into a relationship with them which is intimate and enduring” (*Fides et ratio*, no. 32).

Jacques Derrida, the proponent of Deconstruction, seems to agree on this point, for he writes:

The ‘lights’ and Enlightenment of the teletechnoscientific critique and reason can only suppose trustworthiness. They are obliged to put into play an irreducible ‘faith’, that of a ‘social bond’ or of a ‘sworn faith’, of a testimony (...), that is of a performative of promising at work even in lying or perjury and without which no address to the other would be possible. Without performative experience of this elementary act of faith, there would be neither ‘social bond’ nor address of the other, nor any performativity in general: neither convention, nor institution, nor constitution, nor sovereign state, nor law, nor above all, here, that structural performativity of the productive performance that binds from its very inception the scientific community to doing and science to technics” (Derrida 1996, 44).

Human institutions, in fact, are founded on the fiduciary dimension of faith. In Derrida’s words, without faith, neither “social bond” nor “address to the other” is possible. While Harris can say that the content of ordinary human conversation can be verified, unlike that of the claims of religion which cannot, the fiduciary dimension of human relations sometimes cannot be verified until the end of a lifetime, which means that putting faith in a person is also something like faith in God: you postpone evidence until much later, for to seek evidence always for whatever promise made is ultimately disruptive of

human relationships. Beyond the absence of any act of infidelity, one cannot really prove the love of a husband or wife. One has to simply trust in his or her word to move on with one's married life. To insist that every promise be verifiable is to reduce the human person to an object of experiment, one that puts no value in human words but only in the accuracy of a lie-detector machine.

For Harris, all mental states can be verified by studying the operations of the brain. William James calls this theory "medical materialism". He writes:

Medical materialism finishes up Saint Paul by calling his vision on the road to Damascus a discharging lesion of the occipital cortex, he being an epileptic. It snuffs out St. Teresa as an hysteric, St. Francis of Assisi as an hereditary degenerate.... All such mental over-tensions, it says, are, when you come to the bottom of the matter... due to the perverted action of various glands which physiology will yet discover (James 2002, 16).

To such a dim view of spiritual experience, James counters:

To plead the organic causation of a religious state of mind, then, in refutation of its claim to possess spiritual value, is quite illogical and arbitrary, unless one has already worked out in advance some psycho-physical theory connecting spiritual values in general with determinate sorts of physiological change (James 2002, 17).

For James, the way we decide certain states of mind as superior to others is not by determining its biological origin, but by the immediate delight we take in them, and the good consequential fruits they bring us for life (Ibid., 18).

In dogmatically ascribing mental states to purely biological origins, medical materialists, are "only so many belated dogmatists, neatly turning the tables on their predecessors by using the criterion of origin by a destructive instead of an accreditive way" (Ibid., 20).

On the attempt of the rationalist mind-set to co-opt the whole of human experience, James has this to say: "If we look on man's whole mental life as it exists, on the life of men that lies in them apart from learning and science, and that they inwardly and privately follow, we have to confess that the part of it which rationalism can give an account is relatively superficial" (Ibid., 84).

Yet, in acknowledging the superiority of the religious sense in the pursuit of goodness and happiness, we do not reject reason, for faith, too, can become dogmatic and dangerous if it is not checked by the data of reason.



#### 4. The Reciprocal Relationship Between Faith and Reason

It is when faith transcends reason that Harris considers it to be most dangerous. When faith overturns reason, it becomes capable of all kinds of evil which we are presently experiencing: religious wars, genocide, persecutions, Inquisitions. All religions have been guilty, one way or another, of fomenting violence against others because, in Harris's estimation, religion does not admit of tolerance.

Harris does not think Hitler, Stalin, Mao Zedong and Pol Pot were atheists. He thinks they are ideologues bent on establishing their own brand of religion. If this is so, then Harris simply equates religion with dogmatism, which is not the case. The problem with Harris is that he raises his banner against religion and faith, when all he probably wants was to shake his fist against dogmatism.

In his dialogue with Jürgen Habermas under the auspices of the Catholic Academy of Bavaria in January 19, 2004, the future Benedict XVI, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, admits that one of the sources of terrorism is religious fanaticism. He then asked the question whether "religion is a healing and a saving force, or an archaic and dangerous force that builds up false universalisms, thereby leading to intolerance and acts of terrorism" (Ratzinger, p. 64). "Must not religion, therefore be placed under the guardianship of reason, and its boundaries carefully marked off?" Ratzinger muses. Yet, this question does not imply a totally optimistic view of reason, for he also points out a corresponding danger from the side of reason. He clarifies:

At first glance, it appears to be wholly beneficial and entirely praiseworthy. In reality, however, it can become a new kind of threat to man. Man is now capable of making human beings, of producing them in test tubes (...) Man becomes a product, and this entails a total alteration of man's relationship to his own self (Ratzinger, 65).

Ratzinger then advocates a reciprocal relationship of purification between faith and reason. Admitting that there are pathologies of faith and reason, he claims that "religion must continually allow itself to be purified and structured by reason (...)" just as "reason too must be warned to keep within its proper limits, and it must learn a willingness to listen to the great religious traditions of mankind. If it cuts itself completely adrift and rejects this willingness to learn this relatedness, reason becomes destructive" (Ratzinger, 77-78).

On this latter point, he finds common base with his dialogue partner, Jürgen Habermas, who concedes that "religious convictions have an epistemological status that is not purely and simply irrational." He calls on secularized citizens of the state "not to deny in principle that religious images of the world have a potential to express truth" (Habermas, 51).

In his controversial Regensburg Address, Pope Benedict XVI gave substance to his theory of reason purifying faith when he distilled from the words of the Emperor Manuel II Paleologus the principle "Not to act in accordance with reason is contrary to God's nature." In this address, made controversial by the Islamic world's reaction to his use of a quote from the same emperor critical of Islam, the Pope was actually making an appeal for religions to consider the nature of God as *logos*, thus reason itself must govern our actions and guide our decisions. Faith in God is not an excuse to act capriciously. The God who is the object of faith is also the God who gave us the faculty of reason. Reason itself is a gift from God, a participation of His own Divine Mind.

Thus, when we say that faith transcends reason, we do not necessarily mean that it suppresses reason. When faith transcends reason, reason is merely opening itself to the movement of intuition, which seeks to fly unfettered into the realm of human trust. Trust does not mean submission. It means giving oneself over to another because one believes the other is trustworthy.

It is possible though that in the process of self-giving, one can be exploited and manipulated. The demand for trust can be a ploy to dominate. But this is not trust. It is only a distortion of it. As such, it needs to be purified. This is where reason can once again regain its part, for when one believes, one does not leave his reason behind; one only elevates it to a higher form of understanding. We do not always take literally everything that the Bible says, for reason recognizes some things to be hyperbolic in their formulation, while others are clearly figurative, and will have to be taken so. It is only the atheist, who in looking for loopholes in the teachings of the Bible, will understand everything in their literal sense.

## 5. Faith and Ethics

The dialogue between Jürgen Habermas and Cardinal Ratzinger mentioned earlier was originally a search for the foundations of a stable democratic society. Habermas locates this foundation on the solidarity of its citizens (Habermas, 22). Yet, he leaves open the question "whether an ambivalent modern age will stabilize itself exclusively on the basis of the secular forces of a communicative reason" (Habermas, 38). Ratzinger, for his part, identifies "essential values and norms that are in some way known or sensed by all men" as that "which holds the world together", but hedges on calling them by their collective name of "natural law", because of the challenges evolutionism poses to it. He settles instead on the interplay between faith and reason, reason being shared by all, but still in need of enlightenment by faith, and vice versa.





Harris, however, is not so nuanced in his position. He identifies faith as the distorting factor of civilization and proposes to build a civilization devoid of faith. He asserts that one can be an atheist and still live an ethical life. Ethics for him is based primarily on empathy (cf. Harris, 185). Empathy, however, applies primarily to those closest to us. It does not apply to our enemies or those distant from our circle of significant others.

One may cite the order and discipline of many secular societies, compared to the chaos and mayhem in religious societies as proof of this contention. Yet, the most orderly secular societies are not entirely atheistic, but have sprung from deep Christian roots. It might be argued that the most civilizing values in these societies were not Christian in origin, but secular, but in the process of social evolution, it would be difficult to distinguish between what is originally Christian and what is not. Harris would either have to construct historical fiction, or project an idealized state that has perfected its civic values by rejecting religion.

Michael Novak, in *No one sees God*, contends that a society with deep Christian roots would be able to sustain itself for some time without the normative force of religion, but doubts whether it can remain civilized after a while. Harris would like us to believe that such a condition is, in fact, possible. By inviting us to believe in a utopia the evidence of which comes only much later when its proponents would be long gone, Harris ultimately contradicts his own thesis. When he invites us to abandon our faith in order to build a new civilization of tolerance and civility, he wants us to “live an untestable hypothesis until our dying days, (so) we will discover that (he) is right” (Harris, 66).

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