A Phenomenology of Belief in God and Morality

Süleyman Aydın

Abstract—Beliefs have consequences with respect to acts, and acts are proper objects of morality. Morality is not directly associated with beliefs unless they are put into practice. We are not responsible for how we come to believe in something, or whether we come to believe in it or not, but we are responsible for acts we display on the basis of our beliefs. This paper argues that the way we come to believe in God, or the position we take against belief in God is crucially important in shaping our acts and our understanding of morality.

Keywords: beliefs, morality, belief in God, practice.

Belief in God: Philosophical vs. Theistic

When we think upon morality, we soon find ourselves thinking about God. In religious traditions, God is conceived of as a purely spiritual being, a supremely good, all-powerful, all-knowing, eternal, self-existent personal being who has created the world, but is not part of it (Rowe, 2007, p.6). Believing that God really exists has several consequences with respect to our acts,

* Yrd. Doç. Dr., İnönü Üniversitesi Fen-Edebiyat Fakültesi, Felsefe Bölümü, E-mail: yaysuleyman@yahoo.com
and therefore our understanding of morality. However, the ways we come to believe in God are not quite the same.

Theistic belief in God, i.e. to believe in God in a religious context, requires not only that we believe in God, but it also requires that we accept that God sent humankind some prophets, messengers and heavenly books in certain periods of history. For those who believe in God in this sense “ethics is not only tied up with religion, but is completely settled by it… It is the word of Heaven, or the will of a Being greater than ourselves. The standards of living become known to us by revelation of this Being (Blackburn, 2003, p.9).

However, not all theologians and philosophers who believed in God in the past were believers in God in this theistic sense. There have always been thinkers who believe in God in a philosophical sense, independent of any religion-based truths. However, God is conceived of, both by theistic believers in God and by philosophical believers in God, as a supremely good being who approve only of moral acts on the part of believers. Therefore, not only theistic believers in God, but also philosophical believers in God are sensitive to moral implications of human acts.

All religions support morality one way or the other. To believe in God in a religious sense requires not only that one believe in God, but it also requires that one believe in some revealed truths concerning God’s actions. Therefore, a mere philosophical belief in the existence of God is not sufficient in providing believers with moral acts in a religious context. In other words, a philosophical belief in God is not sufficient in leading one to a moral life. This consideration seems to assume that how we come to believe in God, i.e. whether we believe in God in a theistic way or not, is determinant of morality. However, there seems to be no logical necessity between how one comes to believe in God and how moral a life one leads. If there were a logical necessity between theistic belief in God and leading a moral life, every theistic believer in God would have a moral life. This is not the case in reality. Therefore, a phenomenological look at the issue is required. We know that the religion commands helping the needy, having warm-hearted relationships with others, respecting the parents and the elders, protecting children and the handicapped. However, we frequently encounter with some theistic believers in God who go the opposite direction. This demonstrates that theistic belief in God does not warrant moral acts on the part of religious believers in God.

Theistic believers in God think that moral acts of those who believe in God independently of any religion are meaningless because their conception of God is crooked, i.e. not theistic, or not the same as described in revealed re-
ligion. In this perspective, a virtuous act is meaningless unless one does it for the sake of theistic God, with the intention of realizing God’s command, no matter how worthy that act might turn out to be in some humanistic perspectives.

Actions and Responsibility

As it seems obvious, the way one comes to believe in God leads to different readings of acts, and therefore of morality. "We have all learned to become sensitive to the physical environment… [However], fewer of us are sensitive to what we might call the moral or ethical environment…." (Blackburn, 2031, p.1)

We know that one is not free in cutting down forests, killing animals or abusing children irresponsibly. However, the perpetrators of these bad actions can defend themselves on the basis of some religious beliefs. If we just look at the origin of their beliefs, we might judge that they are guiltless, because their acts are based upon some religious beliefs. In cases like these, however, we need to look at their acts, not at what those acts depend on. This is because they might present their worldly ambitions as the corollary of their religious beliefs.

Truth of beliefs is quite different from the evidential consequences of beliefs in human acts. Human acts, at least sometimes, might be motivated by material desires and worldly passions in the garment of religious beliefs. In the context of morality, the important thing is whether one displays moral acts, not whether he displays them on the basis of his religious beliefs. Therefore, when a theistic believer in God, for instance, expresses his belief in justice on the basis of his religious beliefs, we cannot say that his belief in justice is faulty because of its religious origin. Belief in justice has a value independent of its source as far as it causes moral acts. Similarly, we cannot say that one’s belief in justice is meaningless, even though it causes one to display moral acts, since it is based on some philosophical considerations, instead of religious truths.

In ordinary life, one is not responsible for the personal way of coming to believe in God as far as one’s acts are not harmful to others. This is because morality is not associated with theoretical content of one’s personal belief in God. On the other hand, when one’s acts are harmful to others, theoretical origin of one’s belief in God would not be a mitigating reason for his sinful acts.

Demonstrating God’s Existence in Reason
Since ancient times, theologians and philosophers have sought to show that knowledge of God’s existence is possible, or that belief in God is rational. We commonsensically know that we know pretty much those things we ordinarily think we know. We know that there are other people, that we were alive yesterday, that there are trees and mountains. But do we also know various ethical and moral truths and truths about God and God’s attitude toward mankind. Some philosophers, influenced by various forms of skepticism would say that we know much less than we think we know, and the most extreme skeptics would say that we really know nothing at all about them (Lemos, 2007, s.1).

The attempt of knowing God’s existence is not merely an attempt of satisfying our intellectual curiosity. Rather, belief in God is a genuine option, while the wrong choice could lead to considerable personal loss (James, 1897). In other words, it has to do with our expectations in the hereafter. This is why philosophers have sometimes given pragmatic reasons for belief in God, when truth-conducive reasons for belief in God do not seem compelling. Truth-conducive reasons for belief in God provide us with an intellectual or cognitive satisfaction; whereas, pragmatic reasons for belief in God give us satisfaction with regard to meaning of life, death, and the other world.

When philosophers and theologians attempted to show that belief in God was rational, they were not only committed to providing justifying grounds for belief in God, but they were also committed to repelling the charge of irrationality directed to them by nonbelievers. Therefore, the justifying grounds, i.e. rational arguments for belief in God have a moral tone. The arguments for the existence of God serve to be the standard of weighing opponent views about God. In order to be cogent, they appeal either to some facts in phenomenal world, or to principles of reason (Findlay, 1948).\(^1\)

The attempt of proving God’s existence by arguments presupposes that it is possible to demonstrate God’s existence by the power of human reason. This endeavor, which is sometimes called natural theology, “relies on standard techniques of reasoning and facts or truths in principle available to all human beings just in virtue of their possessing reason and sense perception” (Scott, 1998). This signifies that it is possible to demonstrate God’s existence by reason in the same way as we demonstrate a scientific belief by reason and

---

\(^1\) For a Turkish translation of J.N. Findlay’s “Can God’s Existence Be Disproved?” See “Tanrı’nın Varlığı Çürütülebilir Mi?” (Trans: Süleyman Aydın), Felsefe Tartışmaları 44, Boğaziçi Üniversitesi Yayınevi, 2010.
sense perception. In this tradition, beliefs are separated into two categories:
- **basic beliefs**
- **inferential beliefs**

Basic beliefs are those that are either self-evident, evident to senses, or incorrigible. As such, they do not require any evidence for considering them true; they are starting points or premises of deductive arguments due to the fact that they are rational in and of themselves. As for inferential beliefs, they get their rationality on the basis of an inferential reasoning at the bottom of which there are basic beliefs. Since theologians and philosophers have not considered belief in God a basic belief in general, they have regarded it as an inferential belief, and provided some deductive arguments as evidence for the belief that "there is a God".

The project of demonstrating God's existence by means of human reason seems to have come to a dead end in philosophy. Contemporary philosophers in general are inclined to think that God is behind the limits of human knowledge, and that belief in God need be explained in terms of pragmatic reasons in terms of human happiness, morality, a meaningful life, self-realization, and soul-developing. In short, natural theology seems to be exhausted in the goal of making us adjudicate between opponent positions with regard to the existence of God. Therefore, theoretical content of belief in God, i.e. the way one comes to believe in God, cannot be an object of morality in and of itself, independent of its consequences in human acts.

**Faith and Morality**

The alternative way of thinking about the existence of God is the tradition of revelation-based theology. Theologians in this tradition think that belief in God is to be accepted on the basis of faith, not on the basis of reason, because at least some truths about God rely, at least in part, on revelation. All theistic believers fall into this category. For them, human reason without assistance of faith is incapable of coming to believe in God in the adequate sense. Although reason might come to confirm that there is a God, belief in God in the adequate sense requires more than this. For instance, belief in God in the adequate sense requires also faith in revelation-based truths.

For them, a philosophical belief in God, which does not necessarily include believing in some truths associated with a revealed religion, is a crooked conception of God. They assume that human reason is dysfunctional in truths related to revelation and therefore the role of reason is to admit and

---

2 That God's knowledge is beyond the limits of human knowledge is defended by an appeal to Kant's conviction that God lies in the realm of 'noumena', not in the realm of 'phenomena'.
try to understand the details of what was revealed by God. As it seems obvious, the role given to human reason in revelation-based theology is quite restricted.

To believe on the basis of reason signifies two things. The first is that one comes to accept the belief immediately after hearing it, since it is a basic belief, i.e. self-evident, evident to senses, or incorrigible. The second is that one accepts the belief by means of an inferential reasoning, e.g. appeals to some other beliefs as evidence in support of the belief in question. The other beliefs to which one appeals in support of the belief in question are rational either because they are basic beliefs; or because they depend on some other basic beliefs (Apczynski, 1992).

On the other hand, to believe on the basis of faith signifies just one thing. One accepts the belief when one has trust in some religious and historical authorities who report that God transmitted some divine commands to mankind by the agency of some messengers, or prophets whom He himself selected.

Theistic believers in general seem to assume that philosophical believers in God are more prone to an immoral life due to their faulty conception of God. In this regard, they require that philosophical believers in God come also to believe in revelation-based truths in order to be believers in God in the adequate sense. However, the adequateness of belief in God cannot be assessed in the court of reason. In other words, the question whether a theistic belief in God or a philosophical belief in God is more rational cannot be evaluated by an appeal to the principles of reason alone. The adequateness of belief in God on the part of theistic believers is warranted by faith in the revelation. Otherwise, theistic believers in God and philosophical believers in God are in the same boat with respect to having faith in a Supreme Being. The dividing line is that philosophical believers in God find it impossible to investigate and understand the real nature of the past events, and therefore they see religion-based truths not as objects of knowledge; instead, they see them as objects of morality.

Plantinga (2000) argues that some people cannot come to believe in God because of their sinful acts, or the sense of guilt, or some implausible urges and passions regarding worldly life. Therefore, they knowingly avoid having faith in revelation-based truths, since they are evildoers, or they have some satanic intentions towards others, and the nature.
To understand the implications of this argument we can consider three cases. First, there are a number of acts which are moral on the basis of reason while they are taken to be immoral in some religions. For instance, slaughtering cattle is moral on the basis of reason; however, it is a big trespass in Hindu religion. Second, there are a number of acts which are immoral on the basis of reason while they are taken to be moral in some religions. For instance, beating or thrashing goodwives, or children, and lying are plainly immoral acts on the basis of reason; however, they are allowed, at least in a certain extent, in some religions. Third, there are a number of acts, such as killing or abusing innocent children, which are both immoral on the basis of reason and on the basis of a religion.

Now, in what sense sinful acts might prevent one from coming to believe in the revealed truths? It is true that some philosophical believers in God, in fact, transgress various religion-based values, and therefore become guilty, impious, or immoral in a religious sense, in cases like the first and the second cases. However, it would be nonsense to think that they are incapable of having faith in revelation because of their religiously immoral actions. This would be begging the question. They take as immoral only the acts that are unethical on the basis of reason. Therefore, they would not admit that they really become immoral in those actions, and they would reject the claim that they knowingly avoid of having faith in revelation because of their sinful acts.

As for the third case, it might be true that some philosophical believers in God do not have faith in the revelation due to their sinful acts on the basis of reason. Perhaps, they think that they cannot explain their sinful acts to a theistic God in a reasonable way in the hereafter. However, one might argue, in a similar vein, that some theistic believers in God have faith in revelation due to their sinful acts on the basis of reason. Perhaps some theistic believers in God think that if they do not believe in God as described in the religion they will be condemned to hell forever by God. Therefore, in order to secure the possibility that God forgives them for their immoral acts in the hereafter, they prudentially opt for being theistic believers in God.

As it seems clear from what we have said, theoretical content of how one comes to believe in God is not an object of responsibility. For this reason, the way one comes to believe in God, whether in a theistic or in a philosophical way, is not a serious problem as far as morality is concerned. We evidentially know that the perfect theoretical knowledge of a surgeon does not necessarily cause him to do a perfect operation, and therefore, we do not much
question the origin of his theoretical knowledge as far as his operations are successful.

On the other hand, just as a surgeon not successful in his operation tries to evade responsibility for his operations by pointing to his past theoretical accomplishments at the university, a theistic believer in God might seek to evade responsibility for his sinful acts by pointing to the fact that his belief in God is based on the revelation. Perhaps he believes that God will forgive him for his immoral acts, while He will never forgive him when his belief in Him turns out to be faulty. However, this does not make him exempt from responsibility and does not give him the right to think that one’s philosophical belief in God is insufficient in causing one to lead a moral life. No one can reasonably show that one’s philosophical belief in God cannot be operational in making one lead a moral life.

REFERENCES


