

Does Rational Scrutiny Cause Violent Harm to Religious Belief?

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Abstract:

We raise the general question: Does rational scrutiny of religious beliefs harm religious believers? We concede that harm does indeed result, but then identify two embedded questions that must be also answered. First, What is the nature and extent of this harm? Second, Are such harms justified? With respect to the first question, we acknowledge that non-trivial harms that might be caused by rational evaluation, the most significant of which are “existential harms.” With respect to the second question, however, we argue that such harms should be considered morally permissible within a democratic society.

Does Rational Scrutiny Cause Violent Harm to Religious Belief?

Introduction

In this paper, we address the question: *Does rational, philosophical examination of religious beliefs cause harm to religious believers?* We identify the contemporary context in which such a topic typically arises, which can be seen most readily in response to recent publications by Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens (among many others). Ordinarily, this question embodies both an accusation (that harm is indeed occurring) as well as a prescription for behavior (that those who are scrutinizing religious beliefs should stop).

We identify two embedded questions within this main question: (i) What is the exact nature and extent of this harm? (ii) Are such harms justified? With respect to the first question, we identify non-trivial harms that might be caused by rational evaluation. The most significant of these harms we call “existential harms.” With respect to the second question, however, we argue that such harms are tolerable and should be considered morally permissible.

We conclude the paper with some general remarks regarding the contemporary debate between religious believers and those who challenge the overall rationality of religious beliefs. Again, we reiterate the conclusion that the conflict that arises between rational critics and religious believers is permissible, a conclusion that is especially true within the context of a public exchange of ideas within contemporary democratic society.

The New Atheists

In recent years, a number of scholars have advanced a direct challenge to the rational basis of religious beliefs, including Richard Dawkins (2006), Daniel Dennett (2006), Sam Harris (2005, 2006), and Christopher Hitchens (2007). Many of these scholars take their challenge directly to the public, not to the specialized journals of religious studies or philosophy of religion. Collectively, these public intellectuals have been called “the new atheists” (Hooper, 2006; Wolf 2006) and have become more vocal and more direct in expressing their challenge to religious belief and religious believers. While this is not a new conflict within Western civilization (it is reminiscent of many of the “science vs. religion” or “reason vs. faith” episodes throughout history), the public style and philosophical force with which these scholars argue is a new feature of modern public life.

For the purposes of this paper, the term “new atheist” will refer to public intellectuals who challenge religious beliefs. While their particular criticisms of religion and religious believers vary, their challenge to religious belief is, very roughly, that religious belief fails to satisfy basic standards of rational evaluation. This rational failure, they argue, also contributes to an overall threat to the stability of civilized society.

At the most basic level, to be rational is to give reasons for one’s beliefs and to avoid overt logical contradictions. A person who believes without reasons (or without sufficient reasons) violates this basic rational principle. Likewise, a person who maintains logically incompatible beliefs also violates this rational principle. According to the new atheists, religious believers violate both sorts of rational principles: to the extent that religious believers hold

beliefs without reason and to the extent that religious believers hold beliefs that are logically incompatible, the new atheists conclude that religious beliefs do not stand up to rational scrutiny.

The new atheists continue their argument by pointing out that beliefs held in violation of rational assessment have the potential to cause serious harm to society. By failing to follow rational epistemic guidelines, religious believers are unable (or unwilling) to update, revise, and/or discard their beliefs (even in the face of contrary evidence). However, such beliefs inevitably influence the course of public life (through voting, through child-raising, through overt public action, etc.). So, the result is that people in society maintain beliefs that are unresponsive to the available evidence. This, the new atheists assert, is the recipe for considerable social harm.

The success and sustainability of communal living depends on our society's ability to operate under a comprehensive and integrated understanding of the human condition (broadly construed). Understanding that humanity will always be constrained by the limits of our collective knowledge, it is extremely important that we work continually to refine our social understanding. In this way the free investigation of ideas and the pursuit of knowledge based on the best evidence is an essential part of our communal responsibility. The open exchange of ideas allows us to seek evidence, revise our beliefs, and update social policies on the basis of such rational examination of the evidence. The new atheists are forceful in pointing out that, despite the public impact of their beliefs, religious believers are reluctant to participate in public assessment of beliefs. This reluctance is especially disconcerting considering the tendency of fundamental religious beliefs to be actively maintained independently of evidence, and in some cases, in the face of considerable counter-evidence.

From all of this, the new atheists conclude that religious believers should not be given a “free pass.” That is, religious believers should not be exempt from the challenge of rational, public scrutiny. The new atheists assert that religious believers are a threat to the well being of society. They are a threat because (a) they hold beliefs without consulting evidence (or that are contrary to the available evidence), (b) they promote faith-based beliefs that violate evidential epistemic standards (intellectual habits that could spill over into other areas of public life), and (c) they are willing to act publicly on their privately-held beliefs for which they lack sufficient evidence. For these reasons, the new atheists have taken their rational challenge directly to religious believers – a direct frontal assault on religious belief in modern society.

Does Rational Assessment Cause Harm?

The question that we are interested in exploring is not whether the new atheists are correct (i.e., whether religious beliefs are false, whether religious beliefs are ever justified, or whether religious believers are a threat to modern society). Rather we are interested in the defensive reply to the new atheist’s challenge. The defensive reply asserts that rational scrutiny commits a kind of violent harm to those who hold religious beliefs (or to the religious tradition itself). This issue of “causing violent harm” is usually simply asserted as a plain fact by those who oppose the new atheists, and it is merely one of many responses deployed. Ordinarily, this response embodies both an *accusation* (that harm is indeed occurring) as well as a *prescription for behavior* (that those who are scrutinizing religious beliefs should cease what they are doing). Yet, this challenge, when taken seriously, leads us to our first key question: *Does rational assessment of religious beliefs cause harm to religious believers?*

In this case, the specific charge is that the new atheists have committed some sort of harm to religion (in general) and to religious believers (in particular) by subjecting religious beliefs (and religious belief-forming practices) to rational scrutiny. The accusation, in other words, is that when the new atheists speak out generally against the rational basis of religious beliefs they cause harm to religious believers themselves. Is this accurate?

In order to assess this questions, we must first articulate what, exactly, the nature of the violence (or harm) is. Then, assuming that harm *is* caused by rational assessment of religious belief, we need to ask whether such harms are insufferable, or whether they are permissible.

What is the Nature of this Harm?

We believe that a religious believer who is confronted with rational evaluation does indeed experience harm. It is not a direct physical harm, nor is it a direct political harm (such as a restriction of free speech or freedom of assembly). It is not an economic harm, either. Rather, the first sort of harm that is most likely to occur is the “agitation of doubt” that is caused by exposing the non-evidential status of religious belief. This agitation has cognitive, psychological, and emotional consequences: a person may be faced with a difficult intellectual choice to make, or must endure the uncertainty caused by rational scrutiny, or suffer the emotional side-effects of worry. All of these are real consequences associated with rational evaluation.

However, this is not the most significant type of harm that is caused. We are concerned with a more profound kind of harm that is tied to the relationship of an individual with his or her religious community. If we take a religious community, roughly speaking, as composed of members who identify with a particular set of beliefs, symbols, rituals, accepted scripture, and

cherished values, then we can imagine that rational scrutiny might disrupt one or more of these components, particularly if it undermines the validity of a foundational doctrine or canon. If the foundational belief buckles under the weight of the rational assessment the consequences to the individual can be severe. The direct risk lies in the individual's inability to identify with his or her community and its values. This lack of identification can cause a cascade effect on the person's emotional integrity, sense of self worth, and overall psychological cohesion. In essence, rational assessment runs the risk of significantly altering one's personal worldview (which serves as the basis of normal functioning as a person and as a member of society). The term we use for this combined self-worth and psychological cohesion is *existential worth*. Disruption or damage to this existential worth is an *existential harm*.

Assessing Existential Harms

As we move forward, we also need to ask whether these existential harms are uniquely caused by rational evaluation. We suspect that they are not. Whenever a religious believer is confronted with another religious believer (say, from a different religious tradition), there is serious potential for existential harm. In effect, the religious believer is confronted with another person, who may be equally sincere and equally decent, but who holds different religious beliefs (say, one believer maintains the divinity of Christ, while the other denies the divinity of Christ).

This sort of encounter is commonplace, resulting from religious diversity within a community. And yet, this kind of encounter represents a serious potential harm to individuals, as both religious believers recognize that many of their beliefs are the result of historical contingencies (had they been born in a different community or different continent, their religious

beliefs would have been significantly different). So, there is potential for the same serious existential harm whenever a religious believer has contact with a person from another religious tradition. Presumably, however, few people suggest that religious believers should remain isolated from each other and should refrain from interacting with one another. And if this sort of social interaction is permissible, then encountering the rational challenge presented by the new atheists should be considered permissible too. Both kinds of “encounters” possess the potential for deep, existential harm, yet it is unreasonable to suggest that religious diversity should be minimized.

Another context in which existential harm may be present is in higher education. Consider examples in which students learn about the history of American politics (including failed foreign policies and embarrassing domestic policies regarding slavery, welfare, corporate subsidies, and other disappointing aspects of American history). In such cases, students are faced with considerable challenge to their existentially-comforting belief that, for example, “America is the greatest country on Earth.” While not of a religious nature, this sort of agitation certainly parallels the existential harm discussed above: students are challenged to examine their existing beliefs, to recognize the lack of positive evidence for their comforting beliefs, and to confront the uncomfortable fact that there is ample evidence that contradicts their original belief.

Recognition of such things, however, allows for future improvements: it is not until students question their “America is the greatest country on Earth” belief that they can begin to envision improvements to social policy (healthcare, welfare, social security, education, etc.). These are not the sorts of challenges one would expect from the greatest country on Earth. But until students confront the reality that there is still much that needs to be improved, students will be unable to make positive contributions to improving America. If we allow students to maintain

their comfortable beliefs in order to avoid the agitation of doubt, they will be unprepared to develop creative solutions that contribute to a more just society. Thus, the agitation caused by recognition of a belief that is inaccurate or that is held without evidence allows for an overall greater good as a result. Honest (but agitating) realizations are the source of growth and improvement. In fact, much of higher education, when done properly, leads to disruptions of this sort. Education should not be easy and comforting; rather, it should be honest, direct, and prepare students for a life of civic responsibility. And sometimes, a greater good results from exposure to doubt and questioning of one's own cherished beliefs.

In this context, however, the existential harm associated with higher education is considered permissible (the overall good consequences outweigh the potential harms experienced by the students). As we noted with the previous example, few people reject the value of higher education merely on the basis of the existential harms caused by exposure to new ideas. And if this sort of existential harm is tolerated in the context of higher education, then it should also be tolerated within the context of the rational challenge to religion. Within a democracy, the free expression and examination of ideas is crucial for growth and adaptation. We believe that the benefits of this growth outweigh the agitation caused by rational scrutiny.

Now, with respect to the specific challenge issued by the new atheists, it is worth noting that when a person's religious beliefs are subjected to rational scrutiny, response to the scrutiny is still the responsibility of the religious believer. For example, if a logical contradiction is pointed out, the religious believer has a number of options: she could give up one belief, she could give up the other belief, or she could decide that the contradictory beliefs are perfectly fine to keep around (i.e., she might not subscribe to the law of non-contradiction, or suspend its application to this case). So, from the mere fact that rational scrutiny reveals contradictory

beliefs, the resulting response is guided by the religious believer's free choice. The new atheists are not so logically powerful to force a religious believer into unwanted existential crisis.

But what if the religious believer maintains beliefs that violate the epistemological prescription suggested by evidentialism? Evidentialism, roughly, prescribes the following: believe only what you have sufficient evidence for believing; when no sufficient evidence is available, then suspend belief. When it is pointed out to a religious believer that she has violated this prescription, it is unclear that she will experience severe existential harms. One response might be to insist that her religious beliefs *are* based on good reasons and sufficient evidence (citing Biblical texts, religious experiences, archaeological evidence, etc.). Another response takes the shape of embracing faith, of believing in the absence of reason. This "fideist" response embraces the irrationality of religious belief, honoring faith as a kind of achievement. The whole point of faith is that one's religious beliefs do not live up to rational standards. So, it is unlikely that such the faithful would find rational failure to be agitating.

Thus, violations of evidentialism do not immediately result in existential harm. Religious believers have several (rather effective) strategies to protect themselves from experiencing such significant harms. So, even when confronted with the new atheist's challenge, religious believers are not forced to respond in ways that are deeply harmful. Instead, religious believers will probably be rather unchanged (much to the chagrin of the new atheists). To assume that religious believers and their existential well-being hangs on every word uttered by Richard Dawkins or Sam Harris is to overestimate the actual influence of their rational challenge.

In summary, whether the new atheist's challenge exposes logical contradictions or violations of evidentialism, the religious believer is still in control of their own personal response. They can choose to violate the law of non-contradiction, they can ignore evidentialism, or they

can revise or reject some of their beliefs (and which beliefs they revise or reject is also up to them). Thus, religious believers can escape the thrust of the challenge. Likewise, in other cases (situations involving religious diversity, or in the context of higher education), the potential for existential harm is tolerated (just as it is also tolerated in cases of actual harm). The same is true for the challenge presented by the new atheists: whatever potential or actual harms may be associated with rational scrutiny, it appears that such harms are permissible, and should therefore be tolerated within the context of a secular democracy.

Conclusion

In this paper, we addressed the rational challenge offered by the new atheists, and the nature of the potential harms that such a challenge might cause. While rational assessment of religious beliefs does indeed have the potential to cause non-trivial harm, we argued that whatever harm that is caused by the new atheists is permissible.

This does not mean, however, that it is justified to aggressively confront individual religious believers regarding their non-evidential beliefs. Rather, we believe that the challenge of religious beliefs should take place at the level of religious traditions, operating through the avenues of scholarship, theology, and other large-scale social mechanisms of change (including public consciousness-raising groups, local re-interpretation of doctrine, lay ministries, etc.). This affords religious traditions (and by extension religious believers) an opportunity to address new issues without direct, personal confrontation. But even if individual religious believers are caused to experience existential harms, we should tolerate such harms, just as we do in other contexts that promise to lead to a greater social good.

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