

That Voice in Your Head

By Bradley Jarvis

Democratic presidential candidate John Edwards was recently asked how he knew that the voice in his head was God's and not his own. He claimed to understand why someone would have doubt. I understood too, from personal experience.

From the time I was in college, my "inner voice" would occasionally come up with things that I felt must have come from an external source because surely I wasn't smart enough, or self-assured enough, to do so. Well, it turns out that I was, at least the subconscious part of me. As always I did some research, and discovered that the self-aware part of people's minds is actually quite dumb; similar to the local memory that controls the display on a computer. It has some elementary computing power, but most of what it "sees" are the results of much more complex computations done by a microprocessor (or group of them). While consciously I have difficulty doing basic arithmetic, most of my brain is processing millions of points of data in complex calculations that our technology is still far from emulating.

I came to the inescapable conclusion that what I was attributing to "God" was really just a set of simple communications between the really smart part of my mind and the really dumb part of my mind. Quizzing other people, I concluded that they were probably the same. This conclusion is further supported by recent research identifying a physical part of the brain with people's experience of spirituality.

When someone claims that "God" talks to them, I assume that they are simply not self-aware. Such lack of awareness is not necessarily bad; I did reasonably well through my thirties. But I attribute much of the huge increase in productivity and creativity I experienced since then to my discovery and the effort afterwards to improve the communications between the two parts of my mind. I can't help but wonder if it might work as well for other people.

The Power of Prayer

Prayer is a powerful tool for improving the communication between the parts of your mind. It does not diminish its value just because the reassuring, super-intelligent voice in your head isn't coming from the omnipotent creator of the Universe.

I've had a few experiences with meditation, and prayer is much like that. The focus and the feeling of ultimate goodness and nurturing are the same. I suspect that the emotional state of surrender to a positive, caring influence, and loving acceptance of one's self as a valuable part of the Universe acts as a key to the improved integration of the mind. The result is a more full experience of the world and a deep respect for both who and what we don't know first-hand. The latter result benefits both the individual and society: We

individually experience less anxiety (fear), and society has fewer people trying to tear it apart for selfish gain based on a perception of other people as things to be manipulated.

I came to understand religion as the cultural manifestation of these realities, a way to explain them from an experiential (and not necessarily factual) point of view. It can teach practices that help people deal with their fears, increase their power, and strengthen their commitment to the welfare of their communities. Unfortunately, religion can also be (and has been) abused by those who perpetuate a simple lie: that the power of self-integration emanates from an external force that happens to be channeled through the manipulators. While the lie may be useful to initiate the process (like various myths aimed at children to keep them from hurting themselves until they become more aware), it must be shelved as soon as possible.

To argue against the lie in a public forum could threaten not only the power of the people who knowingly perpetuate it, but the success of the educational process it was designed to initiate. This is why, I believe, atheists like me are seen in a negative light by many people. While I have no problem with the former, the latter does bother me. We must find a better way to initiate people than to mislead them.

Perceived Arrogance

While reaching my current set of conclusions regarding spirituality and religion, I felt a certain self-loathing, and received very negative feedback from those closest to me. By questioning the basic tenets of Christianity I was demonstrating an unacceptable level of arrogance, elevating my views above those of countless thousands of believers in the existence and continued activity of a divine creator. I expect that readers of those views today may have a similar reaction; feel offended, and will be inclined as a result to avoid any further exposure to such heresy.

I'd like to make a plea for open-mindedness and acceptance of my explanation that the views expressed here simply represent the picture that my extensive reading and thinking about the subject have generated. I'm always open to learning new things, further questioning whether my perspective is right. But after about three years of intensive investigation and another ten of using "targets of opportunity" to further refine my understanding, there is enough convergence to feel fairly confident that I am on the right path, at least for me.

Using the approach to learning that has served me best in the past I have concluded that the concept of divinity is a human creation, which serves a variety of important functions in the survival and growth of our species. Because it is best perpetuated by stories about people (or human-like creatures), this creation has taken on the quality of an internalized myth that protects the young, and prepares us reasonably well for productive interaction with each other. As a recipient of its protection and social education, I have the utmost respect for it, and continue to apply many of its lessons to positive effect in my daily life. In many ways, I am still a very good Christian.

But I have learned enough to doubt the details of the myth and had the audacity to try to find my own way drawing from more than what I learned in Sunday school. What I represent here is the result of that probing, and I do so primarily to share something valuable with others in the hope that we may all benefit from continued exploration and debate.

God and Reality

If a divine creator of the Universe does exist and directly intercedes in people's lives, then there must be clear evidence that can be verified by anyone. Otherwise, we must simply take other people's word for it, meaning that we must have faith in their veracity.

The bulk of human experience strongly argues for a Universe that operates on a set of physical laws that can be mathematically described and applied predictably to a set of physical entities. We do not fully grasp these laws or have a complete picture of the entities they operate on, nor are we ever likely to. Like a computer attempting to do calculations to 10 digits of resolution and only having enough memory and processing power to handle four digits, we can only crudely approximate how the Universe operates (the results of the calculation). The approximate picture we have does not include a creator, nor is it required to explain what we see. If the presence of a divine creator is part of the Universe we can never comprehend, our innate limitations render this fact superfluous.

Personal experience is another way to test the existence of a creator, and even there the evidence is at best equivocal. Through biological or psychological (rather than supernatural) means, we can stimulate the same experiences of divine presence that the faithful report.

Reports of extraordinary events (what some have called miracles) are easily explainable by the laws of probability, if not outright exaggeration. Just because something is extremely improbable doesn't mean it won't happen; a classic example is physicist Richard Feynman's observation that we observe very improbable combinations of letters and numbers on license plates every day. There is an entire cottage industry devoted to showing how human intuition is very poor at dealing with probability.

Given all of these considerations, I (and others far more knowledgeable than me) have concluded that the concept of a divine creator is a human artifact. The part of reality it is useful in explaining does not have to do with the origins or properties of the Universe, but rather the psychology and biology of humans, as well as the history that derives from the related perceptions of people.

Standards of Evidence

We are often forced to depend on people's accounts of events we cannot have first-hand knowledge about. The profession of journalism exists to share information about what is happening in other parts of the world. Our legal system depends on eyewitness testimony

to determine facts in criminal proceedings. Religious texts relate the experiences of people in support of the existence of a deity.

I have personally attended events that were later reported in newspapers or on television and found significant errors or omissions. My own memory has been proven to be wrong, as I've learned when playing back recordings of meetings I've attended. Studies have shown that people witnessing the same events have different memories, and those memories were not just shaped by the events themselves but the witnesses' internal processing of those memories based on other experiences. These considerations make it clear that we should be very careful when using eyewitness testimony to determine the facts of events. And this all assumes that people WANT to report the events accurately (that is, they don't have an agenda that leads them to intentionally lie).

One way to determine the truth of an event is to find several people who recall the same details, have not collaborated to alter each other's perceptions, and have no reason to lie. External "physical" evidence should also be available, something which can be checked by anybody. As a general rule, don't take any one person's (or group's) word for something.

The standards should be even higher for events that either support or claim to disprove principles that many people are likely to use in their lives, because the consequences can be very great. Such events include those that prove the existence of a deity, the set of observations that support natural laws that predict how nature behaves and the actions of our leaders.

Standards of Explanation

While reporting of events identifies what happened where, to something or someone, explanations tackle why an event happened. Because of this, standards for explanations are different than for accurate reporting of events.

An explanation typically defines a set of things that have observable characteristics that everyone can agree to. The explanation also defines a set of interactions between the things based on their characteristics (usually as a group of rules) as functions of space and time, since "events" are defined in terms of these two variables. Having done all this, the explanation then shows how the set of things and interactions generate the observed event to a level of detail at least as great as the best available descriptions of the event.

Explanations are most useful if they can reliably be generalized to a large number of events, including events that have not been observed (but may be). To be generalized to ALL events, they must use the fundamental interactions and characteristics of the Universe (in addition to space and time).

Because human experience is always changing, with more events and more detail observed, explanations must change as well. The most successful explanations are those that require minimal change to deal with new information.

Faith

Matters of faith are matters of faith for a reason. They don't meet the standards of evidence and explanation.

In the case of Christianity, we are forced to take the word of a small number of people whose accounts of events are inconsistent (as in the various books of the New Testament, which were written long after the events), conditions of observation are questionable (extraordinary events witnessed after days of starving in the wilderness), and predictions vague enough to be useless. "God" as an explanation depends on people internalizing the questionable stories and because of its subjectivity cannot be applied consistently or broadly (consider the differences in interpretation between, say, Baptists and Catholics). Common replies to these issues are that the Bible is "the word of God" and that "God's ways are mysterious." How do we know that the authors of the Bible were controlled by God in their descriptions of events, except by taking someone's word for it? That there is mystery is obvious; a credible explanation would dispel these mysteries.

Another retort to the deficiencies of sacred texts is that every other alternative depends on faith. Because none of us can comprehend and use all of the observations, tools, and explanations of science, for example, we must accept what scientists say on faith. This is wrong: we don't HAVE to; it is simply convenient to do so in many situations. Any time we use a microprocessor, send a spacecraft to another planet, or fly an airplane, we are not only assuming that the theories and the observations that support them are correct, we are TESTING them. Testing of explanations (which is all that the theories of science are) is critical to their success or failure in favor of better ones. In matters of faith, people accept automatically that there can be no "better ones" and therefore are not inclined to perform rigorous tests of their beliefs.

Faith and Responsibility

What good is faith in a divine creator if good evidence doesn't exist that there even is one? I've already suggested a few: teaching people common, shared values that enable them to interact productively (or at least non-destructively) with each other; enabling better communication between the subconscious and conscious parts of the mind; fostering a deep respect for other people and other species, even without direct knowledge of them; and reducing stress caused by fear of the unknown.

But there are also some bad things associated with faith. Among these is the encouragement of incuriousness and mental laziness (when you believe you have access to the answers to the big questions, you tend not to test your assumptions by learning more). Another is the potential of abuse by people who claim to be a conduit for the power and wisdom of the deity, effectively enslaving the faithful to their leaders. And, of course, there is the holding on to bogus knowledge that can result in people taking inappropriate action to achieve their goals and hurt others in the process.

Judging from statistics about the prevalence of religion, it is clear that the majority of people consider faith to be more beneficial than detrimental. Having been one of them, I can still agree – to a point. When any of us acquire enough power to affect more than our local group of people, we have a responsibility to rely more on facts than opinion, and to constantly work to improve our understanding of the world while increasing and refining our respect for other people and species. Technology has bestowed this power on a substantial fraction of the human population, yet far too many of the powerful have been slow to rise to their responsibility. It is the immaturity of the powerful among us that makes faith a liability, keeping us from meeting the monumental challenges to global survival that we face today.

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