

It's All in Your Mind

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Some years ago, while I was working as an engineer, I remember waiting to board a flight from Los Angeles to New York with two of my colleagues. One of them, John, suddenly realized that the plane we were about to board was a DC-10. The DC-10 models had some problems, but that forced airlines to do more rigorous safety checks of their engines. John already had a fear of flying, but when he found out we were about to board this particular model he decided to wait six hours in order to take a different flight. He warned us of how unsafe it was to get on that flight. Of course my other colleague and I ignored John and boarded without him. I still recall how critical we were of John for being so childish about his fear of flying. We soon dropped the topic altogether until we were somewhere over Illinois. It was at that point that the plane lost altitude rather quickly as the pilot announced that he had to shut down one engine and we would be making an emergency landing in Chicago. It was then that I suddenly realized John's *psychological condition (his fear of flying) was irrelevant to the safe or unsafe condition of the plane*. By this I mean that John happened to be right,

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but, not for the right reason. The right reason should have been based on the actual condition of the plane's engine not John's fear.

Welcome to the next informal fallacy of logic called the "psychogenetic fallacy." The word "psycho" in the term refers to the mind, while the word "genetic" (genesis) is indicative of the fallacy's origin. This fallacy is committed when you assume that you have refuted an idea or belief just because you have discovered the psychological reason why someone believes the idea. It is incorrect to think that just because the origin of an idea came from a biased mind, it must necessarily be a false idea.

At one time or another you may have heard someone say that belief in God is "just in the mind." I once had a friend tell me that if I needed to believe in God that was fine for me, but as for him, he had no such need. This need, he pointed out, was indicative of an insecurity I had and therefore, subsequently posited this cosmic security blanket called "God." I am sure you have heard the familiar line, "religion is merely a crutch for the mentally weak." These retorts are nothing new; in fact, they are rooted in thinkers such as Freud and Feuerbach.

A.J. Hoover gives us an example of this fal-

lacy as he describes Sigmund Freud's attack on those who believe in God. Hoover writes,

"The great Viennese doctor said that God was nothing but a psychological projection. He argued that God doesn't exist, but that the belief in God is widespread in all human cultures because man 'projects' his fears onto the

universe as a whole. As a child grows up he learns to lean on his (real) earthly father for psychological support in the early, fragile years. When he matures, he finds out that he must give up this parental crutch and face the world alone. Such isolation is too much for people; they

create an imaginary cosmic father, God, and then proceed to fear and propitiate him for lifelong protection. Thus did Freud explain religion as a universal neurosis. Three other thinkers who committed the same fallacy on theism were Ludwig Feuerbach, Karl Marx and Friedrich Nietzsche" (Hoover, Don't You Believe It!, p.32).

Now the question we need to ask is, "How is the psychological reason for a person's belief connected to the truth or falsity of that belief?" Can someone's psychological condition be the basis for the existence or non-existence of any entity, including God? No, the psychological reasons as to why a person believes some particular entity exists or not are

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irrelevant to the truth or falsity of its existence or its non-existence. It proves nothing either way.

In fact, we could commit the same fallacy by applying it to the other person. I happen to know that my friend, who pointed out that my belief in God was based on my insecurity and psychological weakness, had a very poor relationship with his father. I can therefore conclude that as a result of his bad experience with his father, he too had developed a childhood neurosis which led to a certain level of insecurity. This insecurity in relating to his father has now tainted all authoritative relationships. Consequently, his weak mind cannot handle the ultimate authoritative relationship between him and God. This psychological flaw causes him to reject the existence of God. But, if I argued in this way, I would be just as incorrect as he was in his analysis of my belief in God.

C.S. Lewis has left us a brilliant illustration of this fallacy, he writes,

“Some of the things I should like to believe must in fact be true; it is impossible to arrange a universe which contradicts everyone’s wishes, in every respect, at every moment. Suppose I think, after doing my accounts, that I have a large balance at the bank. And suppose you want to find out whether this belief of mine is ‘wishful thinking’. You can never come to any conclusion by examining my psychological condition. Your only chance of finding

out is to sit down and work through the sum yourself. When you have checked my figures, then, and then only, will you know whether I have that balance or not. If you find my arithmetic correct, then no amount of vapouring about my psychological condition can be anything but a waste of time. If you find my arithmetic wrong, then it may be relevant to explain psychologically how I came to be so bad at my arithmetic, and the doctrine of the concealed wish will become relevant - but only after you have yourself done the sum and discovered me to be wrong on purely arithmetical grounds. It is the same with all thinking and all systems of thought. If you try to find out which are tainted by speculating about the wishes of the thinkers, you are merely making a fool of yourself. You must first find out on purely logical grounds which of them do, in fact, break down as arguments. Afterwards, if you like, go on and discover the psychological causes of the error.

In other words, you must show that a man is wrong before you start explaining why he is wrong. The modern method is to assume without discussion that he is wrong and then distract his attention from this (the only real issue) by busily explaining how he became so silly” (Lewis, *God In The Dock*, pp. 272-273, emphasis added).

We can avoid this fallacy by simply remembering that an idea or a belief is not refuted

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by simply appealing to, or identifying, the psychological reason why someone may cling to it.