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No Fault Unbelief Defended: A Reply to Roberto Di Ceglie

Abstract: In the philosophy of religion, ‘no fault unbelief’ represents the view that a person can fail to believe that God exists through no fault of their own. On the other hand, ‘flawed unbelief’ says a person is always culpable for failing to believe that God exists. In a recent article in *Sophia*, Roberto Di Ceglie argues that some might find the usual reasons for rejecting ‘no fault belief’ (i.e. intellectual or moral failure) to be offensive. In light of this he proposes an alternative rejection of ‘no fault unbelief’ based on the consequences it entails for both non-believers and believers. I argue that Di Ceglie does not do nearly enough to establish these consequences. I conclude that his rejection of ‘no fault belief’ is at best incomplete or at worst it is false.

1. Introduction

In his recent article, “No-Fault Unbelief” Roberto Di Ceglie presents a novel case against ‘no fault unbelief’ (from here on ‘NFU’) which is the view that a person can fail to believe that God exists through no fault of their own. He further explains that NFU runs contrary to ‘flawed unbelief’ (from here on ‘FU’) which says a person is always culpable for failing to believe that God exists (Di Ceglie 2020, 1). He describes this culpability in terms of a “cognitive or moral flaw” (Di Ceglie 2020, 1). According to Di Ceglie, NFU is often rejected because it ‘causes a certain uneasiness’ at least partly because it appears to be disrespectful or offensive to non-believers (Di Ceglie 2020, 1-2). He thus offers a novel rejection of NFU in focusing on the consequences of it. However, after outlining his view, I argue that Di Ceglie does not do nearly enough to establish these

consequences. I conclude that his rejection of ‘no fault belief’ is at best incomplete or at worst it is false.

Di Ceglie begins his article by outlining the traditional case for FU. I won’t rehearse the details of that description here since I think Di Ceglie is quite right. At least within the Christian tradition, FU has certainly been the standard. Likewise, it has often been defended with assertions about the faulty moral or intellectual character of non-believers. Furthermore, Di Ceglie is right to highlight the importance of the debate between NFU and FU for arguments for atheism based on divine hiddenness. If a loving relationship with God is a great good, then there should be no instances of NFU. For God would seek to establish a loving relationship with any person that desired one. But there are instances of NFU. So, God doesn’t exist (e.g. Schellenberg 2015). My own reason for explaining this connection to divine hiddenness is because it shows the significance of the NFU/FU debate for other areas of philosophy of religion, including arguments about God’s existence.

2. Di Ceglie on NFU’s Consequences

Di Ceglie’s main goal in his article is to undermine NFU by assuming its truth and then explaining its consequences for both believers and non-believers. He first observes that the truth of NFU is consistent with the following:

(1) it is obvious the there is no God

and

(2) it is obvious that there is a God who (at least in some cases) is responsible for religious unbelief (Di Ceglie 2020, 4).

According to Di Ceglie, if (1) and (2) are true then the case for NFU is strengthened (2020, 4). While Di Ceglie uses the term ‘consistent’ when describing (1) and (2) in the context of NFU, what he really seems to mean is that (1) and (2) *follow* from the truth of NFU. This distinction matters: NFU is consistent with the fact that I’ve had three cups of coffee today, but neither one is entailed by the other. In any case, for the sake of argument I’m going to grant that (1) and (2) follow from the truth of NFU. So far, so good.

But according to Di Ceglie the problems arise for NFU because (1) entails that:

(1a) unbelievers are entitled to hold that there is moral or intellectual failure in believers
(Di Ceglie 2020, 5).

And (2) entails that:

(2a) since God (at least in some cases) is responsible for religious unbelief, *God is evil*.

Or

(2b) although God (at least in some cases) is responsible for religious unbelief, *God is good*
(Di Ceglie 2020, 5).

That (1a) follows from (1) and (2a), and (2b) follow from (2) is problematic and hence NFU itself is problematic. In what follows I explain why Di Ceglie holds that this is the case and offer reasons for rejecting his position along the way.

3. Di Ceglie on NFU’s Consequences for Non-Believers

Di Ceglie begins his critique of NFU by examining the consequences of it for non-believers. He first explores the consequences of the truth of (1) before turning his attention to the truth of (2). I take each in turn.

3.1 Di Ceglie on (1) and (2a) for Non-Believers

Consider that the combination of (1) and (2a) entitle non-believers to hold:

(3) “believers, *qua* believers, suffer from a moral or intellectual flaw” (Di Ceglie 2020, 5)

For according to Di Ceglie, “[o]nly such flaws can explain belief in and reliance on a God who is evil, not to mention a God who simply does not exist” (Di Ceglie 2020, 5). In light of this he concludes that:

The fact that unbelievers put themselves in a position to ascribe both intellectual and moral flaws to believers somewhat absolves the believers who do the same in the reverse direction from the accusation of being offensive. Or, more precisely, this fact leads to the awareness that this is the way both believers and unbelievers sometimes look at each other (Di Ceglie 2020, 5).

Finally:

This seems to be a negative outcome for unbelievers. The assumption of NFU has been motivated by the persuasion that accusing unbelievers of being intellectually or morally disturbed is in some respect unacceptable. If the assumption in question leads to the employment of the same attitude in the reverse direction, then nothing has changed, except the fact that now unbelievers, and not believers, are responsible for adopting a stance which is usually perceived to be unpleasant” (Di Ceglie 2020, 6)

3.2 Problems for (2a)

While Di Ceglie says he is exploring the implications of (1) and (2a) he also needs to assume (1a) in his discussion. For part of the problem he is attempting to highlight is the fact that if NFU is true, then non-believers are entitled to hold that believers are morally or intellectually flawed. But Di Ceglie’s claim that (1a) follows from (1) is false. Consider the following methodological point

implied by Di Ceglie's claim near the beginning of his article that "nothing prevents one from adopting [NFU], which is confirmed by the fact that mutual opposition between supporters of FU and NFU continues to receive significant consideration from contemporary philosophers of religion with at least seemingly plausible arguments on both sides of the spectrum" (Di Ceglie 2020, 4). This implies that Di Ceglie believes that there can be *reasonable philosophical disagreement*. An atheist could claim the non-existence of God is perfectly obvious to her while simultaneously recognizing that the existence of God is *just as obvious* to her theist opponent. All else being equal, nothing entitles one who thinks the truth of *P* is obvious to infer that anyone who sees the truth of *not-P* as obvious is morally or intellectually faulty. Di Ceglie can't block this move by saying he rejects the notion of reasonable disagreement since he has clearly affirmed it. It furthermore doesn't follow from the fact that Hume, Freud, and the New Atheists, etc., appear to think that people who believe in God are stupid that they are in fact stupid (or more precisely, that they're entitled to this view).

I said I would assume the truth of (2) for the sake of argument but as a brief aside: Strictly speaking (2) doesn't follow from the truth of NFU. In fact, some have argued that NFU is inconsistent with (2) because a relationship with God is such a great good. This is part of what gives arguments from divine hiddenness traction. So according to some NFU serves as evidence for God's non-existence, rather than evidence that God somehow causes non-culpable non-resistant non-belief. But even proceeding as if (2) does indeed follow from NFU the problem is that (2a) is a non-starter. If God is evil, then by definition, God does not exist. So even granting the assumption that God is (at least in some cases) responsible for non-belief there has to be some other explanation that is consistent with a morally perfect God. Otherwise these considerations are just another argument for atheism.

3.3 Di Ceglie on (1) and (2b) for Non-Believers

Since I'm assuming the truth of (2) it's safe to say that (2b) follows from it. Whatever the explanation as to why God is responsible for non-belief is, it has to be consistent with divine goodness. Di Ceglie explains that a relationship with God is the 'greatest possible good for humans'. If this is right, then "it seems that exclusion from communion with him through no fault of their own, together with lack of understanding the reasons why this occurs, should cause unbelievers to suffer tremendously" (Di Ceglie 2020, 6). So if (1) and (2b) are true then:

(4) NFU causes non-believers to suffer tremendously.

But Di Ceglie says that (4) is actually false since it "is simply incompatible with their unbelieving" (Di Ceglie 2020 6). He continues:

No one can, in fact, suffer because of being (probably unfairly) excluded from what others have instead been given if one believes that the good which one has in this way been deprived of does not exist. The unbeliever, therefore, should not suffer because of his/her unbelief. Nor should s/he suffer because of being considered intellectually or morally deficient by the believers. In fact, once (1a) is assumed, s/he may even find it satisfactory that s/he is blamed by those whom s/he considers intellectually or morally deprived.

This seems to constitute a positive outcome for unbelievers. I mean that they can feel satisfied with their stance and in a position to not care about what the believer may say against them (Di Ceglie 2020, 6).

Di Ceglie closes this section by addressing a potential objection: Maybe suffering is compatible with non-belief. Consider that "[o]ne may suffer from an illness whether or not one thinks that the medicine to the illness in question exists" (Di Ceglie 2020, 6). In the same way, one

could suffer from a lack of relationship with God even if she doesn't believe that God exists. Di Ceglie counters that these cases are disanalogous because "[i]n the latter case [...] one can suffer from lack of religious belief *only* if one holds that religious belief is something good, and one holds that religious belief is something good *only* if one believes God exists" (Di Ceglie 2020, 6). Finally, Di Ceglie is careful to note that this is consistent with the non-believer holding that there are moral or social benefits to religious belief. For such benefits are distinct from those of an actual relationship with God (Di Ceglie 2020, 6).

3.4 Problems for (1) and (2b)

Recall that Di Ceglie's main strategy is to demonstrate that given the consequences of NFU, it should be rejected. But the part of Di Ceglie's article dealing with (1) and (2b) is unclear in this regard. More charitably, it may just be undeveloped such that it fails to get the point across to the reader. Here's why: it doesn't seem to follow from the fact that if NFU doesn't actually entail that non-believers suffer tremendously, then NFU is false. This would merely show that (4) is false, not that NFU is false. So, Di Ceglie needs to establish that the falsity of (4) entails the falsity of NFU. As it stands, this connection just isn't well-established.

One way to understand what Di Ceglie is doing here is that he is attempting to legitimize the strategy of attributing moral or intellectual flaws to non-believers. For he says that it could even be a source of satisfaction to be blamed by those one thinks are morally or intellectually flawed. But remember that I have already shown above that the truth of NFU doesn't allow the non-believer to assign moral or intellectual flaws to believers. Consider also that satisfaction is hardly appropriate when one is blamed, even by those who one believes are seriously flawed. For example, suppose the evidence for a round earth is identical to what it is now. But further suppose that through very misleading marketing campaigns, the belief in a flat earth rises in popularity such

that flat earthers comprise over half of the world's population. I might be dismayed by this fact, but I hardly gain satisfaction if I'm labelled morally or intellectually flawed by the flat earthers. The same goes for a more pertinent examples in climate change deniers and anti-vaxxers. Finally, the same is true for atheists who think it's quite clear God doesn't exist. Satisfaction is not the appropriate response to having been labelled flawed by those one disagrees with, no matter how irrational one finds the opposing view.

Finally, maybe Di Ceglie's discussion about the consequences of (1) and (2b) has more to do with its implications for arguments for atheism based on divine hiddenness. After all, such arguments assume that an individual who seeks out a relationship with God but is denied this relationship does indeed suffer. This idea is part of what motivates hiddenness arguments since a good God wouldn't allow that to happen. Consider: *If* God exists and NFU is true, then (4) is true. Maybe the argument is that (4) is required for hiddenness to get off the ground since the suffering aspect is important. If one didn't suffer as a result of not being able to have a relationship with God, then there wouldn't really be a problem here. But it turns out that (4) isn't necessary for (at least some) hiddenness arguments. It's not that there is tremendous suffering by those who cannot have a relationship with God. Rather, the worry is that non-believers miss out on a potential good. They don't claim to be suffering because God denies them a relationship. For they don't believe God exists. The point is that the lack of a particular good (i.e. a relationship with God), indicates a lack of what would bring about the good in question (i.e. God). So, the fact that a relationship with God is unavailable to people (through no fault of their own) is evidence that God doesn't exist. Suffering or harm needn't be part of the analysis. In sum, Di Ceglie needs to do a lot more work to show why the consequences of (1) and (2b) in (4) are supposed to undermined NFU.

4. Di Ceglie on NFU's Consequences for Believers

Di Ceglie also explores the consequences of the truth of NFU for religious believers. He begins by explaining that this will include religious faith and also theistic belief. Religious faith includes theistic belief but also religious experience (Di Ceglie 2020, 7). Since (1) and (2a) are non-starters for religious believers, Di Ceglie examines the consequences of (2b). Why might a good God be sometimes responsible for religious unbelief?

4.1 Di Ceglie on (2b) for Believers

Part of the consequences of (2b) are that believers will take more seriously their religious experience. It's not entirely clear what Di Ceglie means, but much of what he says in this section seems to say (2b) will push believers to strive for more faith and greater closeness to God. He explains that "[i]t is part of their belief – especially the Christian one – that only sometimes do they find themselves satisfactorily provided with the positive relationship and the communion with God" (Di Ceglie 2020, 7). While communion with God is a great good, perhaps the greatest good, Di Ceglie appears to think that it's built right into the very concept of religious faith (especially Christianity) that God will sometimes be hidden and hence responsible for unbelief.

4.2 Problems for (2b)

Yet again, it's unclear how this discussion is meant to undermine NFU. I suppose in the context of divine hiddenness arguments it could serve as a response to why God sometimes remains hidden from certain individuals. While this would indeed provide a response to some types of hiddenness arguments, it still wouldn't account for those persons who *never* achieve a relationship with God through no fault of their own. Additionally, NFU, on its own (without additional assumptions), is not an argument for atheism. The fact that NFU might be consistent with theistic belief says

nothing about its truth value. At the very least, Di Ceglie needs to do a lot more work to make such a connection. Finally, if Di Ceglie is merely trying to establish that the consequences of (2a) are worse for non-believers than for believers, he has failed given my above rejection of the consequences of NFU that he attaches to non-believers.

5. Conclusion

Di Ceglie should be commended for offering a rejection of NFU that doesn't rely on claims about moral or intellectual flaws. Focusing on the consequences of NFU for non-believers and believers is an innovative approach. However, this approach isn't ultimately successful. This is because it's doubtful that the consequences Di Ceglie attributes to NFU are in fact consequences. With respect to non-believers, the truth of NFU doesn't entitle non-believers to hold that believers are morally or intellectually flawed. That God is evil can't be a consequence of NFU since there is no such thing as a God that is evil. Even if it's the case that it's false that NFU causes non-believers to suffer tremendously it's unclear why this entails that NFU itself is false. Furthermore, a better understanding is that they simply lack the good of a relationship with God, not that they're suffering. With respect to the consequences for believers, Di Ceglie seems to think that NFU can lead one to more earnestly seek out a stronger relationship and greater closeness with God. However, even if this is true it's again unclear how this would undermine NFU. Thus, while I haven't offered a positive defense of NFU, I have shown that Di Ceglie's rejection of it is at best incomplete or at worst it is false. As it stands, NFU remains available and this is important because it is a key cog in the wheel of certain arguments for atheism such as ones based on divine hiddenness.

Bibliography

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