
The “I used to be an atheist” Claim

By Paul Almond

10 August 2010

Website:

<http://www.paul-almond.com>

E-mail:

info@paul-almond.com

A theist will often claim that *he used to be an atheist*. This is often an attempt by the theist to put *himself* in a position of authority. This is a fallacy. Even if the theist is vastly more experienced than a non-believer, the theist should still have a good reason for his god belief, and we are entitled to ask for it anyway, just as if the claim of prior atheism had never been made. There is an implied claim that the theist’s thinking was the same as that of the atheist he is addressing. Just because a theist once happened to lack god belief, this does not mean that he thought in the same way as the particular atheist to whom he is talking. It is a fallacy to claim that people should regard you as correct due to sharing a common past with them. In making this claim, the theist is claiming that he was wrong in the past, and is therefore admitting that he is capable of serious philosophical errors. In trying to use the claim that he used to be an atheist, a theist is effectively trying to set himself up as a future version of the atheist with whom he is arguing, and this future version is supposed to be better-informed, but if such an argument is used on me I do not need to assume that a future version of myself would be better-informed or more rational. A claim like this does not justify a particular religion: Anyone could use it for any religion. We should also ask how the theist would react if someone claimed to be a former theist. This kind of claim has nothing to do with rationality, and everything to do with wanting a cheap, worthless win.

The “I used to be an atheist” Claim

Many theists seem to like using appeals to *authority*. A theist will often claim that *he* used to be an atheist. This is often an attempt by the theist to put *himself* in a position of authority. The suggestion is clearly as follows.

“I used to be like you, so I know everything that you know now. The same way of thinking that you use to justify your atheism was once used by me to justify my atheism. I learned other things later that caused me to believe in God. Because I fully understand how you justify atheism, but also have the extra knowledge that made me change my mind, I know more than you. As a former atheist, I am therefore in a position of authority compared to an atheist.”

This argument is a fallacy. If someone is perceived by someone else to believe in something that does not exist, or to have a delusion of some sort, then a claim not to have once had that belief does not really help.

We can see how useless an “I used to be like you” claim is by looking at an example. Let us suppose that someone with a certain belief meets someone who does not have it. The conversation might go something like the following one.

Believer: Why do you reject my claim that the President of the United States is a shape-shifting alien sent here to prepare Earth for colonization?

Non-Believer: I reject your claim, because it is extreme and you have not given me any good reason for accepting it.

Believer: Yes, I understand only too well, my friend. I was once in your position. I too once thought that the President was not an alien. I knew all the arguments that people like you use against my case. That was before I realized how irrational those arguments are.

And the believer is clearly providing *no* useful argument in this discussion. A theist could, of course, argue that I am making an unfair comparison by using a deliberately stupid case, but the point is that the believer’s assertion that he used to be like the unbeliever does not help to make a case less stupid. If a theist thinks that *his* case is more sensible, then his time would be better spent explaining *why* it is more sensible.

The “I used to be a non-believer” claim is useless both to argue for the existence of alien Presidents and gods, for a number of reasons.

The obvious problem is that the theist is in the position of a vacuum cleaner salesman who visits your home and talks endlessly about his own qualifications in choosing the perfect vacuum cleaner (which happens to be the one he is trying to sell), when all that is expected of him is that he demonstrate the vacuum cleaner that he has with him. If

the theist started to believe in God, then he should have had a good reason for starting to believe. All he has to do is give us that reason and defend it adequately, which is exactly what he would have to do if he had never made the claim that he is a former atheist in the first place.

A further problem is that, if the theist is claiming to have once thought in *exactly* the same way as the atheist to whom he is talking, then he is making quite an extreme claim, particularly if he does not know the atheist to whom he is talking very well. Just because a theist once happened to lack god belief does not mean that he thought in the same way as the particular atheist he is addressing, and atheism in itself is *not* proof of rationality or advanced thought processes.

If we were expected to presume that people are (or were) rational merely because they agree (or agreed) with us in one matter, then we would be in trouble because we would have to admit that someone who appears to have a delusional belief about anything is totally rational, merely because he happens to agree with the rest of us that the sky is blue. Just because someone used to be an atheist does not mean that I have to think that he was rational even then, or that he considered his reasons as deeply, or as accurately, as I believe that I have. His justification for his atheism may have been based on a hatred of God, or other emotional reasons, or actually on reasoning that is completely wrong, but still happens to end up with non-existence of God as the answer. As an example, he may have been an atheist because he simply thought that Charles Darwin's theory of evolution proved that there was no god, and may have had a poor understanding of the theory anyway. He may have thought that the existence of suffering in the world means that any sort of creator is impossible when, in reality, it does no such thing.

Even if the theist claims to have once had exactly the same understanding of the reasons not to believe in God that I have, and even if I accept that he once had a way of thinking about philosophical matters which appeared to be the same as mine, that does not rule out the possibility that he may be capable of acquiring a delusional belief to which I am less vulnerable, or may simply have made a mistake when he decided that there is a god. Having had once had the same philosophical view of the world that I have does *not* mean that an individual cannot have a mental breakdown, which causes god belief, that I cannot have, or that an individual cannot acquire various emotional needs for God.

If we assume that a person can *never* make mistakes because he agreed with us in the past, then we are also being irrational. Let us assume that you and another person are given a few hundred mathematical problems to solve. You both agree on the answers for all of them, but then the other person says, "Listen! I have had an insight about these mathematical problems. We were both wrong about the answers. You should accept this because I know as much about mathematics as you do. I have proved that by getting the same answers as you when we both worked on the mathematical problems

in the first place. As I can clearly do mathematics as well, but also have the benefit of my later insight, you must accept that I have authority here! I am right!" Would it be rational to accept this? Both of you have previously completed the mathematical problems and obtained the same answers, so his "insight" is no more authoritative than your rejection of it! Similarly, when a theist tries to pass himself off as being more authoritative than atheists, because he used to be one, at the very best he is only claiming that he and atheists share a common past, but this sharing of a common past does not, in itself, make either side authoritative in a discussion about any new insights that one side has decided to have. Ultimately, the philosophical views that a person holds, and his justification for them, do not fully describe the person's mind, or define its grip on reality, or his reliability.

The theist is in a ridiculous situation if he expects us to regard him as authoritative, merely because of what he has thought in the past and the fact that he has changed his mind. He is claiming that he once thought that there was no good reason to believe in a god, but has now changed his mind. He is therefore claiming to have been *wrong* in the past, and accepting his claim of being authoritative would be highly unreasonable, as it would mean that we would have to assume that the theist has the capability of being wrong, but cannot be wrong now!

Even if I concede that a former atheist once *did* think as I do, and was no more vulnerable to acquiring delusions or making mistakes than I am, that is still not grounds for accepting that he must be right if he happens to have changed his mind. That would be to presume that there is no event that can happen in the future that can make me adopt an irrational point of view. The theist is basing his whole argument on me assuming this: In fact, in a way, he is trying to place himself in a position of authority by passing himself off as a future version of *me*, with a full understanding of what I know now, but also some understanding that I may acquire in the future, so that I am supposed then to defer to the superior understanding of this future version of me. This makes no sense. When we judge a claim that somebody makes, we make that judgment based on what appears to us to be reality *now*, not based on how the world might appear to hypothetical future versions of us who might have learned different things, nor on the advice of people who may assure us that they are like these more informed future versions of us. How does the theist know that I am certain that nothing could ever make me lose my rationality?

If the above objections are not enough, the whole argument does not justify a particular religion. If Christians can produce someone who says, "I was an atheist like you, but I am now a Christian," then so can Islam and other religions. In fact someone could say, "I was a Christian like you, but now I am a Muslim and know better." Christians, of course, could make the same claim to have previously been Muslims. The fact that the argument can be used to support contradictory claims makes it, like many other religious arguments, suspect.

We should also ask how the theist would behave if confronted by somebody who said, "I once believed in God. I saw everything just as you do, but now I know better and I am an atheist." While the effects of religious indoctrination are hard to escape, there are atheists who are, for example, former Christians, and who regard themselves as having escaped from a cult. Will the theist accept that these people are as authoritative as him? This seems unlikely, as the argument that we are discussing here is used only when it supports *their* claims. The theist could argue that a former theist is admitting that he was once wrong, and that I previously used this in an attack on the theistic side of this argument, but this would be a fallacy: I am not saying that a person's case is invalid merely because he/she has been wrong in the past, but I am arguing that for someone to think that their past position on a philosophical matter somehow gives them authority, when their past must by definition involve a serious philosophical error, is absurd.

Finally, in many situations, when the claim is used, it is worthless as evidence, because it is not certain whether or not the theist was once an atheist, except perhaps as a young child before someone subjected him to religious indoctrination. A theist who is making the claim, without any evidence, that he "used to be an atheist" is simply expecting us to trust his word.

Ultimately, this kind of claim has nothing to do with rationality, and everything to do with wanting a cheap, worthless win.