The High Cost of Cynicism

*DR. PAUL GOULD*



In a comical scene that turns tragic, the Dwarfs in C. S. Lewis’s Narnian tale [*The Last Battle*](http://www.amazon.com/Last-Battle-Chronicles-Narnia-Book/dp/B000OFLSV6/ref%3Dsr_1_3?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1424885591&sr=1-3&keywords=Narnia+The+Last+Battle)vow to never again allow themselves to believe in Aslan. Why? They had been duped into thinking that Puzzle (the donkey) was Aslan and once King Tirian revealed the truth about Puzzle, the Dwarfs become mystified at how easily they had been fooled. They determined to never be fooled again. They would rather remain in unbelief and cynicism than believe in Aslan, out of fear of being “taken” once more. While speaking to King Tirian, a Dwarf named Griffle explained:

 “I don’t think we want any more Kings—if you *are* Tirian, which you don’t look like him—no more than we want any Aslans. We’re going to look out for ourselves from now on and touch our caps to nobody. See?”

And the rest of the dwarfs replied:

“That’s right . . . We’re on our own now. No more Aslan, no more Kings, no more silly stories about other worlds. The Dwarfs are for the Dwarfs.”[[1]](https://www.paul-gould.com/2015/04/15/the-high-cost-of-cynicism-and-unbelief/#_ftn1)

As Lewis powerfully illustrates in this Narnian tale, there is a high cost to such blind cynicism and unbelief. Let me share three such costs.

First, while it might be a good strategy for minimizing false beliefs, blind cynicism and unbelief *misconstrues our job as knowers*. The goal of our epistemic life is not just to minimize false beliefs. It is also to maximize true beliefs. Being rightly related to reality is part of the good life, and the “head in the sand” posture of “the Dwarfs are for the Dwarfs” will keep one from knowing important truths. We should place all of our epistemic life, which includes our beliefs, unbeliefs, and withheld beliefs  under rational scrutiny.

Second, blind cynicism and unbelief *wrongly shifts the burden of proof*. There is no special burden of proof for our positive beliefs. Unbelief, as much as belief, are both postures toward reality; they both are a kind of epistemic attitude. As such, both equally share a burden of providing grounds or sufficient reasons for their (respective) epistemic attitude. There is no special burden of proof for the believer (in God, the world, or self) than the unbeliever. Antony Flew once suggested that there was a “presumption of atheism” with respect to God: the “onus of proof must lie on the theist.”[[2]](https://www.paul-gould.com/2015/04/15/the-high-cost-of-cynicism-and-unbelief/#_ftn2) But this is false—neither the theist nor the atheist wins by default—each must present a cumulative case.

Third, blind cynicism and unbelief *diminishes our chances at seeing the truth* even when we stand before it. Real Narnia, even Aslan himself were on offer, yet the Dwarfs were unable to see the truth in front of them. Lewis here reveals not only the impossibility of being fair-minded and objective given such a posture, but also the fact that blind cynicism is actually counter-productive—diminishing our chances of finding the truth that lies ever before us. Consider again Antony Flew’s suggestion that we should adopt a presumption of atheism with respect to the God question. In doing so it may (i) prevent one from noticing relevant positive evidence for God (because we are already justified in our atheism); (ii) blind one to the significance of the positive evidence which one does notice; and (iii) rule out the possibility of finding God on such a presumption, since Scripture seems to indicate that one who adopts such a poster may in fact not find God (e.g., Hebrews 11:6, Jer. 29:12-14).

We should, therefore reject the “Dwarfs are for the Dwarfs” posture in our epistemic life. The question then is this:

What policy ought we adopt in our epistemic life?

I suggest that we adopt a posture of “genuine openness” to the truth about reality.[[3]](https://www.paul-gould.com/2015/04/15/the-high-cost-of-cynicism-and-unbelief/#_ftn3) In other words, we should adopt a policy that gives us the best chance at finding the truth about God, the world, and ourselves. This posture pushes against the zeitgeist of our day as well as its chief virtue of apathy. We ought to care about our epistemic life, for without being rightly related to reality the chance of living a good life—a flourishing life—are nil.

I submit to you that such a posture will lead one to the living God and an enchanted world of deep beauty, value, and significance. Narnia is all around you and Aslan bids you to “awake.”

[[1]](https://www.paul-gould.com/2015/04/15/the-high-cost-of-cynicism-and-unbelief/#_ftnref1) C. S. Lewis, *The Last Battle*, in *The Chronicles of Narnia in One Volume* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 707.

[[2]](https://www.paul-gould.com/2015/04/15/the-high-cost-of-cynicism-and-unbelief/#_ftnref2) Antony Flew, “The Presumption of Atheism,” in Geivett, Doug and Sweetman, Brendon eds., *Contemporary Perspectives on Religious Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 19.

[[3]](https://www.paul-gould.com/2015/04/15/the-high-cost-of-cynicism-and-unbelief/#_ftnref3) I am following here professor Doug Geivett in his “A Pascalian Rejoinder to the Presumption of Atheism,” in Raymond Martin and Christopher Bernard eds., *God Matters: Readings in the Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Longman, 2003), 162-175.