

MATTER AND MIND

A non-theist exploration.

CATHERINE BYRNE

This essay explores two non-theist approaches to mind and matter—Buddhism and Humanism. It examines these differing views in relation to Paley’s ‘design argument’ for the existence of God from a philosophical and biological perspective. While tracking along a path similar to one which a theologian may travel, this essay does not refer to theist doctrine.

ATHEISM IS A world view that rejects the idea of God. Non-theism rejects the importance of the choice ‘to God or not to God’. The Oxford Dictionary (2009) noted that atheism combines the Greek ‘a’ (meaning ‘without’) and ‘theos’ (meaning ‘God’). Humanism and Buddhism provide two different examples of systems of belief that do not rely on a God as a basic premise, although adherents differ in the extent to which such an idea is fundamental. Some Buddhists, for example, prefer the term non-theism, since the Buddha would not be drawn on the question of deity one way or the other. While both claim independence of divine agency, they have variant perspectives on the relative importance of humans in the scheme of life, the function of the mind and its emotions, the limits of nature, and even the importance of the God question itself.

Humanism

Humanism is a rational belief system. The label is a 19th century construct, however renaissance ‘humanists’ were inspired by the 5th century BCE Greek philosopher, Protagoras (Cline, 2009). He sought natural explanations, valued free inquiry and placed humans at the centre of moral and social concerns. As a belief system, it has contemporary expressions in various Humanist Manifestos (Bragg, 1933; Kurtz, 1973; IHEU, 2002).

According to the British Humanist Organization (www.humanism.org.uk, 2009), Humanists believe that people can live good lives ‘without religious or superstitious beliefs’, by mak-

ing the ‘best of the one life we have, by creating meaning and purpose’ and by taking ‘responsibility for our actions’ and working ‘in mutual respect for the common good’. It noted that Humanists ‘make sense of the world using reason, experience and shared human values’.

For the Humanist, morality is not based on any doctrine or sacred text. It is derived and measured by utility (Singer, 1981). In other words, what is ‘good’ is that which contributes to the greatest communal human welfare. Humanists balance individual freedoms and an Epicurean delight in the good life with social responsibilities and justice born of a commitment to human rights and equity.

Humanist reverence is reserved for the natural world. For the Humanist, the primary function for the mind is to weigh up empirical evidence in pursuit of scientific truth that can be methodically examined. The humanist’s mind is thus a tool to perceive the world as it actually (materially) exists. Humanists therefore have a belief in a structured universe that can be perceived. This belief system has no need of, nor rationale for, the existence of a deity. It explicitly denies God’s existence and charges religions with abetting ignorance.

Regarding nature, the Humanist’s world is bound by the senses. With no belief in anything beyond sensory limits—no soul, no spirit, no afterlife—there is no realm of the super-natural. Whatever exists must be, by its nature, natural. Mystical experience is akin to madness. Humanists argue that everything has a scientific explanation. Regarding emotion, Rifkin (2008) noted that Humanists do not let

emotions dominate cognitions. The heart resides below the head. Secular humanists speak of sublime experiences such as ‘the grandeur of the universe, the wonder of being alive, the mysteries of existence’, but ‘the resplendent does not entail the transcendent’ (Rifkin, 2008, p. 57). Eller (in Rifkin, p. 58) argued that, what some call spiritual experiences are rather ‘ultra-human’ ... ‘the best, the strongest, the most profound human experiences, (are) human nonetheless... (and that) we impoverish ourselves when we credit these soaring feelings and capacities ... to realms ... unknown, and almost certainly unreal’.

Buddhism

Like Humanism, Buddhism also has a rational outlook. Established in the 6th century BCE, in northern India and based on the teachings and practices of Gautama Sakyamuni, it has a variety of contemporary forms. Its basic aims: to understand suffering; abandon its causes; experience its cessation and develop a path for self and others to a state of being beyond suffering, present (in many versions of Buddhism) as psycho-philosophy rather than religion. Emotion (both positive and negative) is considered simply one of the many distractions and obstacles to the enlightened state beyond suffering.

The Buddhist’s mind is both a tool for perception and the source of creative being itself. Buddhists believe that the world is constantly in creation and that the mind and the senses participate in this process, and therefore the world cannot be studied purely objectively (as Humanists aim to do). Where Buddhism and Humanism concur is on the importance of individual practical experience. Buddhist morality is highly self-referent. In a very Humanist approach, the Buddha himself undertook an empirical enquiry into the nature of consciousness to establish Buddhism’s fundamental tenets. According to Mishra (2004, p. 29) the Buddha was ‘more of a trenchant thinker and psychologist than a religious figure’.

Buddhism sees no need for an Abrahamic-style God. However, some forms of Buddhism



Catherine Byrne is a PhD candidate at Macquarie University’s Centre for Research on Social Inclusion. She is also undertaking a graduate Diploma in Religious and Values Education. Her interest is in pedagogies of religion, particularly in public primary schools.

may be considered quasi-theist. For example, Surya Das noted that ‘the Ultimate in Buddhism and the Ultimate in theistic religions may just be two sides of the same thing’ (2009, np). Buddhists neither deny nor confirm the existence of God, but find the whole argument an irrelevant distraction, since (in their belief) no being outside of oneself can reduce suffering. Harvey (1990, p. 36) claimed that Buddhism sees no need for a creator. He commented that Buddhism ‘postulates no beginning to the world and regards the world as sustained by natural laws’. Bikshu (2008) noted that, Buddhist teachings are non-theistic as opposed to atheistic. There is no reference made to God’s existence or otherwise. However, the notions of God and consciousness sometimes merge.

Buddhists differ from Humanists in the recognition of a higher order of consciousness and a broader function for the mind – one that lies beyond the sensory-limitations of rational empirics. There is reference (especially in Mahayana Buddhism) to a super-mental principle, variously referred to as ‘divine presence, infinite wholeness and all-inclusive completeness’ (Surya Das, 2009). The Dalai Lama referred to this principle as ‘clear light’. He noted (2005) that this light can be perceived at the moment of death and that practised monks can remain voluntarily in the clear light state for several days after death without their bodies decomposing.

Sogyal Rinpoche (1992, p. 46) claimed that the nature of mind is that which ‘Christians and Jews call God, Hindus call the Self, Shiva, Brahma and Visnu, Sufis call the Hidden Es-

sence, and Buddhists call the Buddha nature'. He displaces 'God' with consciousness, since 'Mind is revealed as the universal basis of experience—the creator of happiness ... and suffering, the creator of what we call life and what we call death'. In this sense, the Buddhist 'mind' becomes untouched by concepts of theism or atheism since it is the very arena in which such conceptions and arguments take place. While Humanists are, first and foremost, thinking beings, the act of conscious thinking makes the Buddhist a creator-being.

Regarding morality, the Buddhist's ethic appears to stretch wider than the Humanist's, to encompass all creatures and to not view humans as the most important. The Buddhist notions of karma and reincarnation (where a being can return as any kind of animal) urges a holistic view of ecosystems and a sense of responsibility for all beings. In this, Buddhists generally differ from the one-life Humanists. However, in some streams of Buddhism the doctrine of rebirth is recognised as a cultural accretion, rather than a central Buddhist tenet.

How does Atheism counter Paley's 'design argument' for the existence of God?

Vice President of the British Humanist Association, Richard Dawkins, had little to say of Buddhism in his book *The God Delusion*, other than that it might be viewed as a 'herbivorous memplex' (2006, p. 200). He denounced any position other than that which argues strongly against the existence of God and placed karma and reincarnation in the fairy-tale category.

Dawkins claimed that 'life's improbability' provided the strongest logic against God's existence. He went so far as to say it 'comes close to proving that God does not exist' (p. 113). This argument relies on the incredible odds against life existing at all on a 'speck of debris from the cosmic explosion' (p. 117). It postulates that good design would not have left such a narrow margin for error and as such could not have been produced by an omnipotent being. Dawkins claimed that this lack of finesse reduced the omnipotence of God—

perhaps to zero.

Dawkins positions natural selection as the only plausible, 'workable alternative to (the) statistical improbability (p. 120)' of life on earth. By emphasising the implausibility of both deity and chance, he opens the way for an alternative - the likelihood of a systematic process for life (evolution by natural selection). As such, Dawkins highlights the lack of a need for a divine creator. Lennox (2007, p. 262) noted that Dawkins' view of life's origin requires no intelligence - that it arises 'by the spontaneous accidents of chemistry'.

Australian scientist, Robin Williams (2006) extended this argument by pointing out the apparently clunky solutions that life has produced via evolutionary experimentation. For example, Williams took issue with the upside-down design of human nasal passages – which he claimed resulted from the recent development of an upright posture. He noted nature's upside-down koala pouches, human hernias, bad breath, tail bones and appendixes and the less than ideal co-location of sexual and waste-removal functions. In Smith (2006) he claimed these flaws provide a case against intelligent design which argues that certain biological features (such as the eye or wing) are too complex to have evolved by Darwinian increments.

Both Dawkins and Williams claimed that with modern science, humans no longer need God as an explanation to life's wonders. Not only that, but life's weird and wonderfuls show that there must *not* be a central intelligence agency.

What are the strength and weaknesses of the non-God argument?

Theists counter Dawkins' improbability argument by flipping it - by saying that the incredible occurrence of life is so astounding that it must therefore have a controller. This is the classic 18th century 'Design Argument' of Paley, a Christian theologian. He positioned the question of God's existence in the scenario of a person finding a watch. In contrast to the simple, natural rocks and grass of the forest

floor, such a complex machine must have a maker. He likened the watch to the complex systems in the natural world, including humans and argued that the grand order and purpose of the cosmos oblige us to believe God exists. However, this argument assumes order must have purpose. Scottish philosopher David Hume, (writing prior to Paley) had already raised objections to this leap of logic (see Crowder, 1993).

Modern 'Intelligent Design' proponents (such as Behe, 1996 and Dembski, 1998) claim that natural selection is God's way of enabling design, a kind of deist auto-pilot. Evolution itself explains some apparently unintelligent design. For example, Smith (p. 2) noted that koalas evolved from wombat-like marsupials with backwards-facing pouches so that digging did not sand-blast their babies and that inverted koala pouches did not indicate that God was heartless to small furry critters. Evolution as God's remote seems a reasonable idea – though it raises the question of which forces are now in control, the natural or the divine? It seems that any attempt to answer is purely speculative.

Crowder (1993, 1994) critiques the theist side of the Design Argument on account of its inductive reasoning and in deference to Hume's questions regarding its mechanistic (the watch) analogy, its exaggerated scope (a watch is on a different scale to the universe) and its problematic hint of infinite regress (who made God?). Crowder noted other issues raised by Hume's analysis. For example, even *if* the Design Argument concluded in favour of God, there is no rationale for what *kind* of, nor *how many* Gods. The questions of 'deist?' or 'monotheist?' or 'polytheist?' or 'pantheist?' are no closer to being answered. Crowder (1994, p. 54) concluded that the Design Argument 'still points us to a shadowy cosmic architect, not a creator'.

British theologian Keith Ward argues faithfully for God, but takes an almost Buddhist (psychological and holistic approach) to refuting Dawkins' improbability argument. Like Sogyal Rinpoche, he appears to equate the

creator to consciousness. Ward claimed that:

...ultimate mind is the actual basis of all possible states... uniquely self-existent, ... It can be spoken of as omniscient, in the sense that it conceives or generates all possible states, knows what they are and knows that there are no more than it conceives... it brings whatever is actual into existence from the realm of possibility. Nothing that comes into being can have more power than ultimate mind, since the latter is the source of all actuality' (2006, p. 132).

Ward presents consciousness as self-evident proof that 'something must exist eternally and necessarily'. Interestingly, he defines God as 'mind-like', rather than 'being-like'.

In reviewing Ward's *The Big Questions in Science and Religion*, McGrath (2009, p. 235) noted that the God hypothesis 'seems to be at least as good as the available alternatives, though this alone will not intellectually compel anyone to believe there is a God'. According to Ward (2006, p. 242), science has not made religion obsolete but rather offers a way for both religion and science to engage in conversation about possibilities undiscovered. He claimed that for such dialogue to benefit humanity, both theist and atheist must set aside their certainties.

Conclusion

Atheism has various strands and underlying rationales. Buddhism and Humanism provide some insight into the logic of those who do not rely on the existence of a creator God. There are strengths and weaknesses in their arguments. Regarding Improbability, I tend to think with Hume, but not Dawkins. The awesome complexity of life need not demand a deity. Nor does it rule one out. The intricate dance of natural selection through the ages explains many things, but gives little reason for human love, mystical experience or the fortifying nature of faith. However, these innately human traits ought not be simply yoked to meta-human forces. As many of the Eastern traditions suggest, great power and insight might be attained by human endeavour.

In a similar vein (lacking absolutes), perhaps evolution falls short of absolute proof that there is nothing more than biology. Or perhaps we have yet to discover everything that biology has in store for us. The theory does little to explain the original emergence of self-replicating cells or the majesty of its carbon building blocks.

As the Drummond character in the famous Monkey Trials play *Inherit the Wind* noted: ‘Darwin moved us forward to a hilltop, where we could look back from where we came. But for this insight, this knowledge, we must abandon our faith in the pleasant poetry of Genesis’ (Lawrence & Lee, 2000, p. 60). Accept-

ing Genesis as poetry does not mean abandoning avenues for discovery in the unexplored realms, where the polemics of nature and spirit, science and religion, physics and consciousness might have something to teach us.

Either way, it appears that the need for a definitive answer on the possibility or implausibility of God cannot rely on any factor that carries the weight of proof. After all, ‘When we speak about what we call God, no-one has the last word’ (Armstrong, 2009). It seems that a viable alternative may be to sit for a while in a Buddhist state of enquiry and simply witness how the Mind stirs up such interesting dilemmas for us to be distracted by.

REFERENCES

- Armstrong, K. (2009). *Why Interfaith?* Presentation to the Royal Society supporting the Arts. 17 June, 2009. Accessed at <http://www.thersa.org/events/vision/vision-videos/karen-armstrong>
- Behe, M. (1996). *Darwin's Black Box*. Touchstone, New York.
- Bikshu, K. (2008) *Do Buddhists Believe in God?* UrbanDharma.org. Accessed Sept 2009 at <http://www.urbandharma.org/udharma3/budgod.html>
- Bragg, R. (1993) *Humanist Manifesto I*. Accessed September, 2009 at http://www.americanhumanist.org/who_we_are/about_humanism/Humanist_Manifesto_I
- Cline, A. (2009). Humanism in Ancient Greece. History of Humanism with Ancient Greek Philosophers. Accessed Sept, 2009 at <http://atheism.about.com/od/abouthumanism/a/ancientgreece.htm>
- Crowder, C. (1993). The Design Argument, Part 1, *Dialogue*, (1) November.
- Crowder, C. (1994). The Design Argument, Part 2, *Dialogue*, (2) April.
- Dalai Lama (2005). *Philosophical questions on consciousness*. His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama of Tibet. Accessed September, 2009 at <http://hhdl.dharmakara.net/hhdlquotes3.html>
- Dawkins, R. (2006). *The God Delusion*. Bantam Press, London.
- Dembski, W. (1998). *The Design Inference*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Eller, D. (2004). *Why Spirituality Is Antihumanistic*. *Free Inquiry - The Secular Humanist Bulletin*, 24, (2).
- Humanism Organisation UK. (2009). Official Website accessed September 2009 at www.humanism.org.uk
- IHEU (2002). *Humanist Manifesto 2000*. International Humanist and Ethical Union. Accessed Septemeber 2009 at <http://www.ih.eu.org/node/356>
- Kurtz, P. (1973) *Humanist Manifesto II*. Accessed September, 2009 at http://www.americanhumanist.org/who_we_are/about_humanism/Humanist_Manifesto_II
- Lawrence, J. & Lee, R.E. (2000) *Inherit the Wind*. Dramatists Play Service Inc. New York.
- Lennox, J.C. (2007). *God's undertaker: has science buried God?* Lion Hudson, Oxford.
- McGrath, J. (2009) Keith Ward, Big Questions in Science and Religion 9: Has Science Made Belief in God Obsolete? Accessed September 2009, at <http://exploringourmatrix.blogspot.com/2009/01/keith-ward-big-questions-in-science-and.html>
- Rifkin, L. (2009). Faith and Reason - Sublime Naturalism. *Free Inquiry—The Secular Humanist Bulletin*, 29 (5).
- Singer, P. (1981). *The Expanding Circle: Ethics and Sociobiology*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Smith, D. (2006) *The gods must be crazy if they call this intelligence*. Sydney Morning Herald, August 5, 2006. Fairfax, Sydney.
- Surya Das (2009). *Ask the Lama*. Accessed September, 2009 at <http://www.surya.org/ask4.html>
- Ward, K. (2006). *Pascal's Fire: Scientific Faith and Religious Understanding*. Oneworld Publications, Oxford.
- Williams, R. (2006). *Unintelligent Design—Why God Isn't as Smart as She Thinks She Is*. Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest.