

THE NEW ATHEISM AND THE EXISTENCE OF GOD

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MANY OF THE New Atheism best selling writers, for example, Christopher Hitchens¹, AC Grayling² and Alain De Botton³, are more interested in demonstrating the evils of religion or finding an alternative worldview to replace it—the non-existence of God is their starting point not a conclusion. Little interest is shown in the traditional ‘proofs’ of God’s existence, and what interest there is tends to be more scientific than philosophical. Hence it is only the argument from design rather than any of the other traditional arguments that receives attention.

Can we see any indications of intelligent design in the world around us? New Atheism gives a loud ‘No’ to that question. Instead of ‘design’ what they see are ‘chance’, ‘improbabilities’, ‘random changes’ and ‘natural selection’. We need to consider these arguments at two levels: first, the evolution of life on earth; secondly, at the cosmological level of the origins of the universe.

Richard Dawkins, the best known proponent of these views, is on his own turf as an evolutionary biologist when he is talking about evolution. He holds that any appearance of design is only apparent: ‘The general case is the non-random survival of randomly varying hereditary equipment.’⁴ As genes are shuffled over billions of years in response to the earth’s changing environment, DNA information is preserved, so that imperceptible changes and adaptations eventuate in the immense variety and complexity we see around us today. In sum:

There is no overall plan of development, no blueprint, no architect’s plan, no architect. The development of an embryo, and ultimately of the adult, is achieved by local rules, imple-

mented by cells, interacting with other cells on a local basis.⁵

What exists, he argues, could not have been otherwise. Our sun is the source of all we wonder at:

While never actually disobeying the laws of physics and chemistry... energy from the sun powers life, to coax and stretch the laws of physics and chemistry to evolve prodigious feats of complexity, diversity, beauty, and an uncanny illusion of statistical improbability and deliberate design.⁶

The downside of this improbable grandeur is that it leaves the end products of this process, beings who are conscious, reflective and able to make choices, as survivors marooned in an indifferent and pointless universe. This ‘fact’ seemingly is the price we must pay:

Unlike our hypothetically beneficent designer, natural selection is indifferent to the intensity of suffering - except in so far as it affects survival and reproduction.⁷

As human beings we are bound to ask ‘why are we here?’ and to wonder at our own improbable existence, even if we can’t find any answers. Such questioning invariably shifts the argument back to beginnings—the beginnings of life itself and the beginning of the universe. Can we detect intelligent design in those events? The pros and cons here, however, are decidedly more speculative than they seem to be with the theory of evolution.

Scientists seem agreed that we live in an expanding universe which began some 13.5 billion years ago with the Big Bang. From the fact that we exist, we know that the laws and numbers which govern our universe, such as electromagnetism, quantum mechanics and carbon synthesis conditions, were such that life

on a planet such as ours might be possible—if conditions had been ever so slightly different we would not be here. This is often called the anthropic principle or Goldilocks value.⁸ Things become even more speculative when you ask how these laws and numbers were set; Were they fine-tuned? If chance is the answer, how probable or improbable was that setting?

Once life began, however improbable that event, the principle of natural selection, it is claimed, does the heavy work of explaining the appearance of ‘design’ we see around us. Cosmology has no such accepted theory. The Big Bang has captured popular imagination, and many believers have seen it as compatible with a Creator God, but many questions remain: What, if anything, preceded the Big Bang? Did the laws and numbers that make life possible pre-exist it or were they produced with it or by it? Will the universe expand/inflate forever? Or is it a multiverse, that is, is our universe one of a series of bounces as universes explode and implode to produce new universes? Is this possible series finite or infinite? If there is bouncing, how do we explain it? Is there some form of cosmological natural selection to explain the eventual setting of the Goldilocks value? Given the unlikelihood of any such principle being discovered, how can we explain the Goldilocks setting, made out of a hugely variable possible number of settings, which would produce vastly different possible universes? Such questions do not exhaust the issues, but they do suggest it may be somewhat premature to hang our believer’s hat on the Big Bang theory.

What then of design? Dawkins argues that while life on earth is hugely improbable, still given the immensity of the universe, it was able to happen:

The beauty of the anthropic principle is that it tells us, against all intuition, that a chemical model need only predict that life will arise on one planet in a billion billion to give us a good and satisfying explanation for the presence of life here.⁹

Dawkins calls his anti-design argument



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‘The Ultimate Boeing 747’. He uses an image from the astronomer Fred Hoyle: ‘Hoyle said that the probability of life originating on Earth is no greater than the chance that a hurricane, sweeping through a scrap yard, would have the luck to assemble a Boeing 747.’¹⁰ His argument is that the ‘higher the improbability, the more implausible intelligent design becomes.’¹¹

Is this a knockout blow to the argument from design? Dawkins thinks so, but he does concede that this improbability ‘makes heavier demands on luck... more luck than our limited human intuition is comfortable with.’¹² Perhaps we are uncomfortable because ‘improbability’ is such a tricky thing to draw conclusions from: By how much does improbability have to decrease to make ‘design’ more plausible? The argument is that a truly intelligent Creator wouldn’t employ ‘improbability’ at all. Hitchens, in fact, calls God a ‘fumbling fool’.¹³ But that is a highly debatable conclusion, if design is the product of a *divine* mind: the end result of this whole cosmic process is the world as we know it, with its intelligibility, complexity, variety, beauty and wonder—do we yet understand the mechanisms so well that we can call it ‘fumbling’ or its improbability ‘unnecessary’. Does ‘improbability’ run off the scale or diminish in a multiverse? How could we ever know?

The debate does raise the issue of what we think ‘design’ consists in. The Boeing 747 seems to be Dawkins preferred model, a product of efficient human engineering intelligence. But is ‘design’ the same for Boeings as it is

for universes? Boeings, while complex in human terms, are assemblages of material and electrical components. Universes are cosmic laws and numbers, matter and energy, bangs and/or bounces, staggering improbabilities, and the storage of DNA information with the end result of conscious life. Whether we can detect design or not, it seems premature to decide what kind of ‘intelligence’ such design requires. It is not at all clear that ‘improbability’ rules intelligence automatically out of court.

The argument from design might seem precariously balanced given the complex riddles and theories surrounding the issue. Perhaps it collapses into the traditional argument from contingency (not considered by Dawkins): that the real wonder and fact to be explained is that anything exists at all: that the universe or multiverse exists at all; that the laws and numbers that give rise to universes exist at all; that we exist at all. Is a Creator God a possible explanation for such facts as these?

Dawkins exclusively scientific approach leads to one enormous misconception. He states at the outset of his enquiry:

The God hypothesis suggests that the reality we inhabit also contains a supernatural agent who designed the universe and—at least in many versions of the hypothesis—maintains it even intervenes in it with miracles, which are temporary violations of his otherwise grandly immutable laws.¹⁴

In another place, Dawkins complains ‘It would be so nice if those who oppose evolution would take a tiny bit of trouble to learn the merest rudiment of what they are opposing’.¹⁵ Jewish, Christian and Islamic believers might also ask the same for their own beliefs because the God of Dawkins’ God hypothesis is totally unrecognisable as their God, who is, they believe, totally other than creation.

Because Dawkins is locked into a scientific approach and explanation only, he goes on to argue:

Who made God?...A designer cannot be used

to explain organised complexity because any God capable of designing anything would have to be complex enough to demand the same kind of explanation in his own right. God presents an infinite regress from which he cannot help us to escape. This argument...demonstrates that God, though not technically disprovable, is very very improbable indeed.¹⁶

As far as theists are concerned, Dawkins’ God is a straw god. We believe that God is not complex as are things within creation, but ‘simple’, that is, not composed of parts, and is more a *verb* than a noun. We can identify some ways God is like us, such as, that God knows, wills and acts, but such attributes are only windows on the Mystery of God which surpasses human understanding, for God *is* Act, *is* Wisdom, *is* Love—while these attributes mean different things for us, they do not signify different properties of God, but rather only point to the way God is.

For believers, God is the explanation of why there is anything at all: why there is intelligibility, why there is freedom. God is not a cause within creation, the end of a series of material causes, but rather a Cause totally other than creation, the One on whom all that exists depends. God’s causality is akin to our moral causality which has effects from within ourselves, and is radically different from physical causality.

Judaism, Christianity and Islam believe that God created the universe *ex nihilo*, out of nothing. For science ‘nothing’ often means something different from what it does for theism: in science ‘nothing’ signifies the absence of material particles, but is compatible with the existence of quantum laws and fields within a vacuum state that is, a state without any material particles; for theism, on the other hand, ‘nothing’ means the absence of absolutely everything—space, time, laws, quantum fields and vacuum states.¹⁷ *Ex nihilo* means the total dependence of all that is on God as Creator. Believers therefore are not surprised that Dawkins’ God hypothesis is unproven on his own terms!

What if, as some suggest, what exists is eternal, whether as material particles, energy, quantum fields or bouncing universes? Again the answer lies in the radical Otherness of God. God's eternity is not measured in time: God is the Creator of space/time—God is eternal Now, totally beyond time. God creates in the Now, creates time, which may or may not be eternal—that is a question for science to speculate about, although we may never know the answer. Surprisingly, this was a question debated by ancient Greek philosophers and later by Islamic and Christian medieval thinkers.

Faith does need to stay in touch with such discussions. We come to believe, at least partly, because, within faith, reasons of all kinds converge, many of which are deep personal reasons to do with the heart, our rela-

tionships with others, and revelation, and some are about our understanding of the world around us, as in the previous discussion. Ultimately, however, faith is more than all such reasons: it is a handing of ourselves over to God in trust. At the very least, we need to be able to see that faith has at its disposal the means to respond to movements such as the New Atheism. More importantly, we need to see the meaning and value that faith offers for our personal lives and relationships. In place of New Atheism's cold and indifferent universe, faith is a vision of a universe that is a gift of a Creator God, that life as we know it is within God's plan of creation, and that we ourselves are able to find our purpose and value within God's eternal care for each and every one of us.

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8. See Paul Davies, *The Goldilocks Enigma*. New York: First Mariner Books, 2008.
9. *The God Delusion*. (London: Bantam Press, 2006), 139.
10. *Ibid*, 113.
11. *Ibid*, 120.
12. *Ibid*, 158.
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The dialogue between faith and reason, between theology and philosophy, is therefore required not only by faith but also by reason[...] It is necessary because a faith which rejects or is contemptuous of reason risks falling into superstition or fanaticism, while reason which deliberately closes itself to faith, though it may make great strides, fails to rise to the full heights of what can be known. This dialogue is possible because of the unity of truth in the variety of its aspects. The truths embraced in faith and the truths discovered by reason not only cannot ultimately contradict one another, since they proceed from the same source, the very truth of God, the creator of reason and the giver of faith, but in fact they support and enlighten one another: right reason demonstrates the grounds of faith, and, illumined by the latter's light, pursues the understanding of divine things, while faith frees and protects reason from errors and provides it with manifold insights.

—The International Theological Commission, *Theology Today: Perspectives, Principles and Criteria*, no. 64.