FAITH VERSUS NATURALISM

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THE NEW ATHEISM acts like a magnet drawing a congenial array of 'isms' to itself, such as secularism, liberalism, utilitarianism, various versions of humanism, and naturalism. It has to be a magnet because in itself it is a 'denial' and it needs all the help it can get to be an attractive alternative to religion for modern Westerners. Given that it goes much further than the simple 'not knowing' of agnosticism, the New Atheism requires grounding for its 'denial', which it finds in scientifically based 'naturalism'.

Naturalism, a reincarnation of materialism, piggybacks on science, and draws its modern prestige from that free ride, even though it goes far beyond legitimate scientific research methods and findings. Not content with investigating the material world as true science does, naturalism claims that the material universe and all it contains is all there is: all of life, with all its features and activities, is to be understood exclusively within a closed material framework.

Naturalism seems to fit neatly into our modern mindset, which is so highly dependent on the instrumental reasoning of science, technology and commerce: our culture seems more and more focused on material production, resources, goods and services; we live in large anonymous cities with impersonal legal, bureaucratic and governance structures. All of that seems to slide naturally into conceiving the universe and all it contains in a similar vein. Facts rule our lives: subjectivity, heart, soul and values, all struggle to find a toe-hold.

Religious faith, however, is embedded in that threatened subjectivity, with its underpinning systems of relatedness, commitments, meaning, values and purposes—without that soil to grow in faith shrivels. Naturalism, on the other hand, thrives in that other environment: it takes scientific methodology, which is properly concerned with calculation and empirical observation, and, using its own form of alchemy, turns it into a very saleable commodity:

First, as Kerry Walters in his *Atheism: A Guide for the Perplexed* so succinctly states: 'there is nothing in reality that can't be understood ultimately in material physico-chemical, naturalistic terms';¹ the only admissible evidence, therefore, for any claim whatsoever must consist in empirical, observable changes in the world—this is then taken to define what 'reason' is; so it is not surprising that Richard Dawkins considers God an 'unequivocally scientific question'.²

Secondly, as Sam Harris states, this rules out all religious claims, because there is 'nothing about this world, or about the world of their experience, that would demonstrate the falsity of their core beliefs', even 'the Holocaust' he goes on, 'didn't lead most Jews to doubt the existence of an omnipotent and benevolent God';3 this eviscerates all religious claims as personal experience, spiritual benefits and beneficial actions, are all said to be susceptible to naturalistic explanations⁴, thus unleashing a witch-hunt for the most unflattering explanations they can devise for any form of 'religious' experience or practice-from 'placebo', 'gullibility' or gene 'misfiring' to an overactive intentional stance creating 'spiritual beings' out of fear and ignorance⁵; faith, therefore, is always blind or an exercise in incredulity.

Thirdly, natural selection, 'the non-random survival of randomly varying hereditary equipment', plus an 'improbable' (but not as improbable as God) series of chance events, is sufficient to describe the world we know -

'there is no overall plan of development, no blueprint, no architect's plan, no architect', it is 'the only game in town'.

Fourthly, subjectivity and mind are either reduced to or determined by chemical processes and physical mechanisms—as Richard Dawkins explains, citing approvingly a fellow atheist, Julian Baggini, 'although there is only one kind of stuff in the universe and it is physical, out of this stuff come minds, beauty, emotions, moral values—in short the full gamut of phenomena that gives richness to human life'.⁷ A similar fate awaits 'freedom', which Kerry Walters describes as 'illusory', but because we 'feel' free, 'we accept personal responsibilities and assign social ones as if we were free'.⁸

Fifthly, morality, always problematic in a material universe, receives a circuitous evolutionary explanation via 'selfish' genes misfiring, through the intricate manoeuvres of game theory, until some form of reciprocity gains a tenuous foothold through a combination of natural feelings of sympathy and compulsion.⁹

Finally, in this system human meaning can never be 'intrinsic' or 'ultimate', but only ever be 'pockets of meaning' created by ourselves, which 'have a point or significance, such that it's well worth living—even if the universe isn't'; 10 and as Christopher Hitchens adds, we have 'the study of literature and poetry' to draw upon, rather than 'sacred texts that have been found to be corrupt and confected.' 11

Despite the long standing Enlightenment fear that belief in God conflicted with human autonomy, it is rather modern disbelief that entails a devaluation of human meaning and value. Naturalism strips humanity to its bare bones and holds that everything else is a matter of physics, chemistry, and survival strategies. While it is true all that is the scaffolding of life, there is also the flesh and blood of human consciousness, reasons of the heart and mind that differentiate human experience, and the sheer inventiveness of the human spirit, none of which



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can be reduced to its material structures without catastrophic loss.

While science has become ever more successful at mapping the human brain and explaining how it comes to have the content it does, the 'what' of consciousness always depends on our own personal accounts of experiencing or thinking or intending. We are always more than physics, chemistry and our genetic packages: we have personal experience, history, culture and community. As subjects we thrive on ideas, meanings, symbols, relationships, commitments, values and choice. Chemical substances and outside physical stimuli, whether medicinal or otherwise, will affect us bodily and mentally, but we are who we are in another realm, and that realm cannot be collapsed to its substratum. To say otherwise is to open ourselves up to those futuristic scenarios where we can be artificially programmed according to some social formula or plan.

From the original 'stuff' of the universe has emerged life, consciousness, subjectivity, freedom, culture and spirit: science investigates the physical and chemical properties of this 'stuff', but there are also qualitative aspects that are crucial to our humanity; on occasion, even the New Atheists admit that these exist, although they arbitrarily rule religion out of contention as a possible contributor to their meaning.¹²

For the New Atheists the universe is a closed system, an accident waiting to happen, an unfolding algorithm in the vastness of space, until the whole system collapses in on itself.

Quoting E.O. Wilson, Kerry Walters believes that the 'evolutionary epic, retold as poetry, is as intrinsically ennobling as any religious epic.'13

In this same vein, Daniel Dennett lyrically maintains that what is left when God is removed from the equation,

...is what the process shuffling through eternity, mindlessly finds (when it finds anything): a timeless Platonic possibility of order. That is, indeed, a thing of beauty, as mathematicians are forever exclaiming, but it is not itself something intelligent but, wonder of wonders, something intelligible. Being abstract and outside of time, it is nothing with an initiation or origin in need of explanation.¹⁴

While mathematical equations may be beautiful, there is little to nourish the human heart and soul in that 'epic'. Yet, despite Dennett's best efforts to outlaw further questions, the scenario he describes begs for an explanation of where this beauty and 'intelligibility' comes from. Yet, again, it is no wonder that these further questions arise given what we understand about ourselves, as Philip Clayton and Steven Knapp ask:

What exactly is it about finite beings who are self-aware, self-transcending, conscious of but also awed and mystified by death, and fascinated by ideas like goodness, truth, and freedom—what it is it about such beings that their very existence should seem, at least to many of us, to demand an explanation that grounds those properties in the ultimate source of existence itself?¹⁵

The New Atheists delight in hurling derogatory epithets at that kind of questioning, such as 'delusion', and 'magical or wishful thinking', but, within the debate, it does seem that it is the *value* placed on human life that is the determining factor as to whether or not you look for a 'personal' or some other explanation of the universe beyond naturalism and its put-downs. The well known author and scientist Paul Davies, for example, because he does regard 'life' and 'mind' as 'special', searches for 'life friendly laws' to account for this value, even if he does not go as far as

belief in God—still, for him, more than physics and chemistry are required to explain who we are.¹⁶

There is much to debate about with regard to the origins and make-up of the universe, but the British philosopher, John Cottingham, offers some important advice about one important way forward that should not be overlooked:

What does the *work* in bringing people to God is not intellectual debates about the transcendent, but the *immanent* aspects of religion—the transformative power of religious ideas and practice in our human lives and experience. Belief in a God who transcends all natural categories of thought comes as result of trust and involvement in a living community of faith...¹⁷

The evolutionary epic offers little to support such values as unconditional love, justice as redistribution, breaking through the barriers of reciprocity to those in need, gratitude, forgiveness, intrinsic human worth and meaning, hope, and a way to understand suffering and the plight of victims of injustice and atrocity. Why also, given the evolutionary epic, should our response to one another be 'sympathy' as the New Atheists seem to take for granted? Why not 'cupidity' and 'avarice', which Christopher Hitchens reminds us are 'by a nice chance... the spur to economic development', just as he finds 'love thy neighbour as thyself 'too extreme and too strenuous'.18

It is not that atheists can't be moral, but that morality requires an 'epic' able to provide meaning and values to live by—in reality, the tooth and claw story of survival, without any other dimension to it, is so bleak and flat a view of human life that it tends to subvert meaning and value rather than enhance it. If that is the 'epic' that wins the day, life and culture as we know it will change dramatically.

Naturalism arbitrarily closes the universe to anything 'beyond', and so closes human experience in on itself. Richard Dawkins, a little too conveniently, supposes that all religious experience consists in hearing 'voices', ¹⁹ but that is not what believers ordinarily mean when they speak of their religious experience—what they refer to is that within their practice of such things as love of others, caring for creation, seeking justice, forgiveness and worship, they experience a 'Presence' that they have come to recognise as the Presence of God.

As human beings we rely on many ways to come to conclusions about each other and our world, in particular, about the qualitative dimensions of life, which escape the narrow and sometimes destructive, confines of 'instrumental reason'—such ways as perception, aesthetics, empathy, metaphysics, moral reasoning and consideration of virtue, and most fundamental of all, our coming to love one another.

Kerry Walters, one of the most reflective of the New Atheists, admits that at base 'naturalism' is a 'choice', 'a matter of non-scientific opinion or ideology which is hard to separate from personal preferences'. ²⁰ This is so, because as many have pointed out, naturalism,

as a theory, can't measure up to its own rigorous principles of empirical verification.

Our own religious experience then may lead us to make other 'choices'. Coming to faith is both personal and relational, and is based on the evidence of our reflection and experience as pieces of the jigsaw of life fall into some kind of order. We will not find an 'object' of the kind that science is able to investigate, but rather find that the traces of the divine in the universe, the personal glimpses and intimations we have, the energies we experience, and the values we discover, all converge so that we are 'found' by God in faith.

This faith will be an affirmation of our human subjectivity and agency, which exist so precariously in our modern world. It will also open up for us a way to understand, value and respect other faiths, which New Atheism's disparaging epithets dangerously undermine. ²¹ Faith in God is the choice that truly accepts who we are in all our aspirations and frailty, and provides the meaning and value our hearts and souls so desperately need.

NOTES

- 1 Atheism: A Guide for the Perplexed (New York: Continuum, 2010), 37.
- 2 The God Delusion (New York: Bantam Press, 2006), 59.
- 3 *The End of Faith* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2006), 66-7.
- 4 See *The God Delusion*, 87-97, 347-374; Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 249-277.
- 5 See The God Delusion, 163-207; Breaking the Spell, 97-152.
- 6 Richard Dawkins, *The Greatest Show on Earth* (London: Transworld, 2009), 63, 247, 426.
- 7 The God Delusion, 13-14.
- 8 Atheism: A Guide for the Perplexed, 146-147.
- 9 Colin Howson, *Objecting to God* (Cambridge: University Press, 2011), 136-168; also see *The God Delusion*, 211-233, 262- 272, 291-301.

- 10 Atheism: A Guide for the Perplexed, 139-149. 11 God is Not Great (New York: Allen & Unwin, 2008), 340.
- 12 See *The God Delusion*, 54-61; *The End of Faith*, 204-214.
- 13 Atheism: A Guide for the Perplexed, 172.
- 14 Breaking the Spell, 243-4.
- 15 *The Predicament of Belief* (Oxford: University Press, 2011), 28.
- 16 *The Goldilocks Enigma* (Boston: Houghton Miffin, 2006), 191-260.
- 17 *The Spiritual Dimension* (Cambridge: University Press, 2005), 112.
- 18 God is Not Great, 255.
- 19 The God Delusion, 154.
- 20 Atheism: A Guide for the Perplexed, 50.
- 21 See for example, Sam Harris' dismissal of Islam, *The End of the Faith*, 108-152, 223-7.