



ST GEORGE'S LECTURES

18 - The New Atheists

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The New Atheists

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Who are the new atheists? The trouble with calling something 'new' is that by the time you have said it, it is already on the way to becoming old. But at the time I write there is a group of writers who have gained a great deal of publicity by attacking belief in God in a particularly emotional and vitriolic way. They include the zoologist Richard Dawkins, the philosopher Daniel Dennett, and American essayists Christopher Hitchens and Sam Harris. They argue that belief in God is irrational and obsolete, and incompatible with scientific knowledge. They have even proposed calling themselves the 'brights', as opposed to religious believers, who presumably are the 'dims'. Their proposal is that no intelligent and informed person can any longer believe in God.

This is an extraordinary proposal, since thousands, if not millions, of intelligent and informed people do believe in God. But, the new atheists say, such people are suffering from a delusion, a form of mental illness or instability. I think it could be said that this is a pretty vitriolic form of atheism. The irony is that to attack people who disagree with you as mentally deluded and irrational is itself a common sign of irrationality, so the new atheism is from the start in danger of appearing at least as irrational as the beliefs it attacks.

Why do they say that belief in God is irrational and incompatible with scientific knowledge? One main reason is succinctly stated by the Harvard scientist Richard Lewontin, who wrote, in the course of a book review, 'We take the side of science because we have a prior commitment, a commitment to materialism, moreover that commitment is absolute, for we cannot allow a Divine Foot in the door'. For some people, apparently, science somehow entails materialism, and the renunciation of any possibility of God acting in the world. I do not think such a view has the slightest degree of plausibility. In fact I think it is pretty plainly false. But since it has been asserted, I shall have to take time to show that it is false.

First of all, we need to get some idea of what materialism is. It is a philosophical view, in the grand manner. That is, it makes a statement about what sorts of things exist, and how we can get to know about them. It is metaphysics, a general theory about the nature of reality – or, to put it in a more linguistic frame, about the nature of our most general conceptual scheme for talking about reality. For those who are influenced by the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, that is already enough to turn it into some sort of nonsense. When I was teaching philosophy at Cambridge University (where I was Director of Studies in Philosophy at Trinity Hall), materialism was widely regarded



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as a rather naive and primitive philosophy that was hardly worth refuting. But it is a remarkable fact that since then materialism has become a metaphysical view that is defended by some very good philosophers, indeed by some of the very best philosophers. It is still very much a minority view, so it should never be thought that philosophers all accept it, or that it is other than highly controversial. To base science upon such a very controversial philosophy would be very unwise. It is highly unlikely that science entails any specific philosophical view. So we can at once say that the new atheists are building their case on very shaky ground.

In any case, materialism is a view that has major problems. Materialism, in brief, is the philosophical theory that the only sorts of things that exist are material things. A more extreme form of the theory is that there could not possibly be any things that are not material. Both these forms of materialism usually add that the only way of knowing truths about the world is by scientific methods of experimental observation and testing.

In these days of quantum field theory it is extremely difficult to say what material things are. In the old days of classical physics it could be said that everything was made of atoms, hard solid indivisible objects with mass, position and momentum. They existed in three-dimensional space, and moved around in accordance with a set of absolute and inflexible laws of nature. Rocks, trees, brains and human beings are all made of atoms and nothing but atoms, albeit in very complicated arrangements. And that is all there is.

That form of materialism is wholly obsolete. Atoms were split long ago, and we now talk about electrons, quarks and possibly super-strings. Such objects are no longer solid and indivisible, and they do not all have mass, position and momentum. For quantum physics, they are not really precisely locatable objects in three-dimensional space at all. Electrons, for example, are probability-waves in Hilbert space. They are waves as well as particles, and they may exist in ten or eleven dimensions. According to Heisenberg's indeterminacy principle, they do not have both position and momentum at the same time. According to the Bell theorem, they may be entangled in a non-local way, so that it is in principle impossible to detect all the influences that may be acting on them at any given time. They are superposed, so that, in the 'many worlds' interpretation, they may exist in a number of different 'spaces' at the same time. And even space and time may be interchangeable and dissolve into a quantum foam below the Planck length and time.

All this may seem very rarefied stuff, though it is the everyday talk of quantum physicists, and it, or the mathematics behind it, is actually used to produce micro-chips and electronic devices that really work. Without wanting to commit myself to a particular view of quantum physics, it is apparent that the old classical physics world of solid particles and three-dimensional space and time has gone. What has replaced it is a very complex mathematical model, or set of models, which works, but which is almost impossible to interpret in a realist way (a way in which each concept would correspond to some physical reality).

This gives rise to deep problems in the interpretation of quantum physics. Of course, we can refuse to give an interpretation, and just say that the mathematics works. But even then, we have to say that the world as described by the best modern science is totally unlike the world as we experience it with our senses. The whole of quantum physics may be a mathematical construct which does not correspond to reality at all. We really have no way of telling, but it may seem just too 'odd' to be true. But if we say this (and some quantum physicists do), we are saying that science does not after all tell us the truth about the world. It rather provides a set of abstract mathematical models which is useful – it 'works' – but does not correspond to reality. One plank of materialism – that it is science,



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and only science, that tells us the truth about reality – disappears. Science, the best science, does not tell us the truth about reality at all. In the words of Professor Polkinghorne, a quantum physicist who was the Professor of Mathematical Physics at Cambridge University, 'We have no compelling grounds for regarding current theories as being more than a form of approximation to actual physical reality as it is encountered in the limit of effective isolatability'. Polkinghorne is more of a realist than many quantum physicists, but he still thinks that current physical theories are approximations, not precise descriptions. That is, they give helpful models we can use, but they leave much undescribed and unexplained. Also, such theories only describe physical reality as it is encountered, that is, in artificially set up laboratory situations, where we try to isolate what we are investigating from all outside influences as far as possible. We may not be describing physical reality as it exists in itself, when it is not being encountered by us – that is, when the wave-functions are not being collapsed in experimental situations – but only reality as it appears to us under specific conditions of observation. These are pretty severe limitations, and throw doubt on any claim that science tells us the whole truth about reality.

If you think this, you can hardly be called a materialist. Physics will provide abstract models for how reality appears to us in specific conditions of observation, and that will hardly assure us that the whole of reality in itself consists of nothing but matter, whatever that is. If matter is defined as 'what science says about reality', then this view of quantum physics would specifically and strongly deny that reality consists of nothing but matter. Physics will only tell us how reality appears to us in specific, idealised or severely controlled conditions. And what science tells us will be in the form of abstract models, which do not at all picture what reality is really like. In other words, what science tells us about reality is not the whole truth, and it may not even be a literal descriptive truth at all.

I have so far talked about interpretations of quantum physics that regard it as giving non-picturing models of physical reality, rather than correct descriptions of what there really is. For some such views, we simply have no idea what the underlying reality even of the physical universe is like. It is what Bernard d'Espagnat calls a 'veiled reality'. But suppose you are a quantum physicist who thinks that the equations of quantum theory do give a correct depiction of physical reality. Even then, or especially then, the philosophy of classical materialism becomes almost impossible to defend. This is because it has become virtually impossible to say exactly and exhaustively what the properties of matter are. Matter is now viewed in physics as one form of energy. There are no limits on what other forms of energy there may be, and there is no reason why we should be able to envisage them all. Most extraordinarily, quantum physics speaks without hesitation of realms beyond space and time as we know them – that is, it speaks of 'supernatural' realities.

The word 'supernatural' is calculated to put a shiver up the spine of any respectable physicists. But if you ask what the 'natural' is, a widely accepted definition is that natural things are the same as material things, things in space and time. If something has no location in space or time it is pretty clearly not material or natural. One major problem in modern physics is the problem of how to account for the 'Big Bang', that moment, 13.7 billion years ago, when this universe, this space-time, originated. In classical physics this might have been regarded as an improper question. But now physicists recognise that space and time themselves are finite, and stand in need of a scientific explanation. Why are they the way they are? Do they have a cause of their existence?

One widely accepted view in quantum cosmology – the science that speaks of the early universe when it was so small that quantum theory applies directly to it as a whole – is that this space-time originates through quantum



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fluctuations in a vacuum. Space-time originates from a regime beyond space and time, where immense energies, like gravitational energy and inflationary energy, balance out to produce a 'vacuum', an overall balance of zero energy. Yet this is an unstable vacuum, in which quantum laws cause particles to flash in and out of existence spontaneously. Such strange goings-on produce many regimes of possible reality, some of them being space-times rather like ours. Most of them only exist for very short periods of time. Most of them do not produce viable universes at all. But some of them produce more stable space-times, and one of them is ours. Maybe ours is the only viable space-time, or maybe ours is one of many, each with slightly different laws of gravity, electro-magnetism and nuclear forces.

Thus the theory is that there may be many universes, and they all originate from a regime beyond their own space-times. The natural, material, realms of space-time are caused by some reality beyond space-time – that is to say, a trans-natural or supernatural reality. Moreover that reality has, if quantum physics is correct, a beautiful, elegant and intelligible mathematical structure, which brings it about that universes come into existence in accordance with the principles of quantum theory. Materialism has been decisively transcended in physics itself. There is a realm beyond space-time. It is beautiful, intelligible and rationally (mathematically) structured. It exists by necessity, since it could not be otherwise than it is, and it generates all possible worlds by a necessary process.

What I want to draw attention to is the fact that this speculative physics, well-grounded in a widespread interpretation of quantum theory, is very close indeed to much traditional theological language about God. God is precisely a reality beyond space-time, which generates space-time from itself, which is beautiful, intelligible and rational (wise), which exists by necessity, and which includes within itself every possible universe, being omniscient. The similarity is astonishing. The quantum cosmologists' hypothesis is fully and properly scientific. Yet it is not true that this science entails materialism. The truth is that it has left materialism (the theory that everything that exists must exist in space and time) far behind. What it leads the mind to is the conception of an intelligible and beautiful realm that is eternal (beyond time), necessary (excluding all alternatives) and rational (mathematically structured). Modern physics renders materialism, in anything like its classical form, obsolete.

That does not mean that all quantum physicists now believe in God. But it does mean that they are pursuing lines of thought that are remarkably similar to those followed by the long tradition of classical philosophers who believed in God, from Plato and Aristotle on. That is because they are all seeking some form of ultimate explanation of why the universe is as it is. Quantum physics as it actually exists does not provide such an ultimate explanation. What it provides, or seeks to provide, is a relatively simple set of mathematical laws, operating on a few basic forces of nature, at least some of the consequences of which can be experimentally tested, which will provide a consistent and coherent explanation of our physical universe. This could still be called a form of naturalism, in an extended sense, since it appeals only to an ultimate set of laws and forces, the existence of which remains unexplained. As far as we can foresee, alternative sets of laws, mathematical axioms and forces could exist, so cosmology does not look likely to reach that ultimate explanation that would give a reason why the laws and forces are the way they are. It is interesting, though, that many physicists dream of an explanatory ideal of a 'theory of everything', which would show why ultimate reality has to be the way it is, and how this universe arises from that supra-temporal reality for a good reason.

That 'dream of a final theory', as Nobel Laureate Steven Weinberg calls it, in fact lies beyond physics, as we presently conceive it. And I think that to achieve it we need to introduce a factor that does not lie within the province of the



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natural sciences. That factor is mind or consciousness. Sciences like physics, chemistry and biology do not deal with consciousness; it is not a concept that occurs in their vocabulary. The natural sciences have been amazingly successful in analysing the structures of physical reality without any mention of consciousness. They deal with the world simply as a set of physical objects or forces. They select and measure various properties of those objects. They set up laws of regular and predictable interactions of those properties. And they test their predictions by setting up experimental conditions that enable precise public observations to be made.

Natural science is dispassionate and objective; the experimental observer does not enter into passionate and life-changing relationships with the objects of study. Those objects can be modified, experimented upon and observed without any reference to the observer's feelings or motives. Laws of observable and regular cause and effect are what natural scientists seek to elicit.

However, when scientists leave their laboratories, they live and act in a different way. They think about how they are going to spend their leisure time. They weigh up possible alternatives and make choices about what to do. They form intentions to do what they wish, and then they, hopefully, enjoy doing what they have decided to do. In all this, they probably interact with other persons, with various degrees of like and dislike, of argument and compromise, often involving passionate feeling and modification of behaviour by consideration of how others think, evaluate and act. They are no longer looking for scientific explanations of how objects behave. They are looking for what may be called personal or axiological explanations.

Such explanations involve knowledge of possible futures, evaluations of them, intentions as to what possibilities to choose, and feelings of frustration or pleasure, gratitude or resentment, as persons interact with other persons to form new evaluations and intentions in a social world. Personal explanations are perfectly familiar and proper forms of explanation. I can explain why I am writing this by reference to my knowledge that I have been asked to do so, my evaluation that it would be an interesting thing to do, my intention to get out my computer and do it, and my hope that somebody might read and enjoy it. If I mention those things, that would be accepted as a perfectly reasonable explanation of my typing away on this computer. But it is not a scientific explanation, or one that any physicists or chemists would have any interest or special expertise in providing.

Personal explanations are quite different from scientific explanations in terms of regular laws of cause and effect. They are used in history and in some forms of psychology as well as in everyday life. They essentially involve reference to consciousness. Knowledge, evaluation, intention, enjoyment and personal intercourse all entail the existence of consciousness, of awareness of various sorts of objects of attention. We feel no need of collapsing personal into scientific explanation or vice versa. Both forms of explanation are in order, and they can live alongside one another without any strain.

As well as consciousness, personal explanations involve the ideas of value and purpose, which are also not usually mentioned in the natural sciences. Indeed, it could well be argued that it was precisely by ejecting the search for value and purpose from natural science that modern scientific progress began. Aristotle had spoken of formal and final causes in nature, meaning that there was a value, an ideal or proper nature, that all physical things embodied, and that all things existed for the sake of embodying this value as fully as possible. Early modern scientists rightly discerned that values, intrinsically worthwhile states, only exist for consciousness. Values are what rational conscious



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beings envisage and choose. And purposes only exist for consciousness, since purposes are intentional processes aimed at realising values. So if natural science is not to be concerned with consciousness, it should not be concerned with values and purposes either.

The much-vaunted and almost wholly fictional 'battle' between science and religion in sixteenth and seventeenth century Europe was not primarily between science and religion at all. It was between Aristotelian science and the 'new science' of experimental observation and mathematical description that excluded consciousness from the consideration of physical objects. The new science won. But the price was that it became difficult to locate the place of consciousness in the natural world at all, even though animals and humans were clearly conscious physical beings.

Many of the problems of modern philosophy stem from this difficulty. Dualists like Descartes separated mind or consciousness from matter as two different sorts of substances, and then had difficulty in connecting them again. Materialists like Thomas Hobbes tried to solve the problem by eliminating consciousness altogether. Idealists like Leibniz tried somehow to reduce matter to consciousness by making it something like a confused appearance of mental reality. And there were various more or less sophisticated variants of these basic positions.

I think it would be fair to say that the problem has never been resolved to the satisfaction of all concerned. My own view is that materialism is a non-starter, if it seriously tries to argue that consciousness – the thoughts, feelings, dreams, and sensations that we all seem to be aware of in a way that no-one else is – is reducible to material events in the brain. On the other hand, many philosophers feel that mental events are so dependent on the structure and efficient working of the brain that mind cannot exist in a sort of parallel inner world, with only occasional causal connections with the brain. The exact relation of consciousness to matter, and in particular to the material brain, remains highly contentious. At the very least we can say that the materialism that the new atheists seem to espouse is not obviously true, and that most philosophers think it is pretty obviously false.

One favourite view among neuropsychologists like Malcolm Jeeves and Warren Brown is that consciousness is an emergent reality. As the organisation of physical structures becomes more complex and integrated, organised structures develop new properties that are not simply new combinations of the properties of their parts. Even at a simple level, we see that when hydrogen and oxygen atoms unite in the proper proportions, a new set of properties like the 'wetness' and 'transparency' of water emerge, which were not properties either of hydrogen or of oxygen on their own. At more complex biological levels, animal bodies have properties of perception, motion and reproduction that are not possessed by the simpler physical elements which make up their bodies. And when the brain and neo-cortex develop, consciousness may be a property that is emergent from a functionally interactive subset of the neurons of the cortex.

It also appears that the emergent property of consciousness can have what is called a 'top-down' influence on the physical brain and body. To put it simply, things that I decide cause my body to move. More strikingly, perhaps, there is much evidence that early experiences can construct neural pathways in the Fusiform Face Area (part of the medial surface of the temporal lobe) that enable faces to be recognised by adults, so that subjective experiences have physical effects on the brain. Consciousness seems to be an emergent property of the human person that has some causal influence on lower-level physical structures.



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Many theorists think that such an emergent property as consciousness could not exist without the complex physical structure of the brain that generates it. That may be so. But if it is true, it is a contingent matter of fact, not a necessary truth. It may be the case that human consciousness could not in fact exist without the brain, just as water could not in fact exist without hydrogen and oxygen. Yet there could be a substance with the wetness and liquidity of water that was not made of H₂O. It is a fact of science, which was not known to generations of humans, that water is H₂O. Things could have been different. Water could just be a basic sort of stuff, not made up of atoms at all. I agree, of course, that it is H₂O. My point is that this is a contingent fact. It could have been different, and in some other universe it might actually be different.

So with consciousness. There is no question that in humans our thoughts, feelings and sensations depend on the functioning of the brain. But there could be thoughts and feelings which depend on some other physical complex. For instance, computers made of silicon might have thoughts and feelings. Some physicists think that human thoughts and feelings could in principle be down-loaded into super parallel processing computers. Whether or not that is true, we can see that it could be true. So perhaps thoughts and feelings could exist without any physical basis at all.

That may at first seem an absurd thought. But if we reflect upon it, there seems to be no necessary link between a mind with knowledge and thoughts and any particular physical organism. Those who believe in God suppose that God is a being with knowledge of the universe and with intentions for the universe, but that God has no physical brain. That is not a self-contradictory thought, and it is a factual matter whether or not there is such a God.

The mind of God would be very different from any human or finite mind. It would not emerge by a long process of evolution from simple forms of matter, it would not depend upon sense-organs to receive information, and it would not have to think one thing after another, due to the constraints of the information-processing capacities of a brain. It could have complete knowledge of every possible world that could ever exist, it could correctly evaluate every possible world for the intrinsic values and disvalues that it would contain, and it could intend to make one or more of those possible worlds actual, thereby generating a physical universe.

This does not prove that there is such a God. But it strongly suggests that there could be such a supreme creative mind of the universe. It is not a necessary truth that minds have to evolve from matter. We simply cannot take materialism for granted. If it is proposed that non-material things (like the mind of God) cannot exist, that proposal seems to be both unduly dogmatic and almost certainly false. Whether the mind of God does in fact exist, the idea of God makes sense.

This is where we can reconnect with the dream of a final theory. That dream, I said, is not really a properly scientific theory, because we can never show that the ultimate axioms of the theory are really necessary (having no alternatives), or that the ultimate forces of the universe have to be just what they are. So it does not provide a compelling reason why the universe should be the way it is. It is in fact a philosophical theory, going back to Plato and Aristotle, that an ultimate explanation of the universe would lie in the existence of some eternal and necessary being. As timeless, it could not possibly be caused, or brought into being. And as necessary, it excludes all alternatives, and so needs no further explanation of why it is as it is. But now we can perhaps see that there is another element that is needed to provide a compelling philosophical theory of everything. The eternal and necessary cause of the universe may have the nature of pure mind. If it does, we can say that every possible



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universe, every possible state of affairs there could ever be, does exist – in the mind of God. God evaluates all those possible universes, and can discern that some of them contain special sorts of values that no other universe could contain. Many possible universes will also contain disvalues of various sorts. But if, for every sentient being that is capable of a sense of continuing existence, it is possible to guarantee that the values can vastly outweigh the disvalues, God can decide to bring one such universe into being for the sake of forms of goodness that otherwise could not exist.

Necessity can be obtained on this hypothesis, because God envisages every possible set of mathematical axioms and every possible array of physical forces. A compelling reason for the existence of a universe can be obtained, because universes are brought into being for the sake of their goodness, which God envisages and whose realisation God can guarantee.

The physicists' supposedly necessary array of laws and forces is without actual value, because no actual values exist unless they are valued by some conscious being. A beautiful painting, for example, may be extremely valuable – not for money, but just for its own sake. But it will only actually possess that value if it is contemplated by some conscious being. An unperceived and unappreciated painting may have hypothetical value, but it has no actual value until it is perceived and appreciated.

Now this universe is of great value. Its laws are elegant and of great intellectual beauty, and the objects in it – stars, planets, animals and people – are of amazing complexity and beauty. And the universe can be of great actual value, even before finite minds exist, if it is perceived and appreciated. It is God who perceives and appreciates it. In fact God will create the universe in order to appreciate it, and so to make its distinctive values actual.

We may say of the being of God, also, that it is of supreme goodness and beauty. In envisaging and in being able to make actual every possible form of goodness, God will naturally make the greatest possible forms of goodness actual in the divine being itself. So God not only exists because God has to. God also exists because it is a supremely good thing that God exists. The best reason for the existence of anything is that its existence is of supreme intrinsic value, that it is well worth choosing by any intelligent being. Thus God exists for the best possible reason. Such a being would not be accidental or irrational. It would be the most reasonable and intelligible form of reality. God is not an irrational addition to an otherwise intelligible universe. God is the only completely intelligible being, and the only adequate basis of a completely intelligible universe.

Now we can see that God provides the simplest and most intellectually satisfactory explanation for the existence of the universe. God is a necessary and eternal mind that is itself supremely worth existing, and that creates one or more universes because it is good that they exist. This is a compelling reason for the existence of this universe. It is the best form of ultimate explanation, and perhaps the only form, there could possibly be.

The basic philosophical choice we have is this: we can say that mind is a chance by-product of a blind and purposeless set of physical laws and states that just exist for no reason at all. The existence of consciousness, like the existence of everything, simply has no explanation. Or we can say that there is a supremely good and beautiful mind that exists by necessity (it cannot be caused, so the question 'What caused God?' is a misformed question), and that exists for the best of all reasons – because it is supremely good that it exists. God brings physical things into existence for the best of all reasons – for the sake of their distinctive goodness. Moreover, that mind will ensure that such goodness is fully



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realised, so that the universe has an envisaged purpose that God will bring about. Consciousness becomes central to being itself, and without the consciousness of God there would be no physical universe at all. The scientists' dream of a universe that is fully rational, since everything in it has a reason for its existence, would then have come true.

The God hypothesis is the simplest, most elegant and most reasonable hypothesis there is for explaining why the universe is as it is. There is, of course, no possibility of testing it experimentally under controlled conditions. Humans cannot control or test God. But if the hypothesis is true, it strongly suggests that the universal mind will in some way disclose its nature and purpose to humans. It suggests that there will be some form of divine revelation or some types of human experience that will confirm the hypothesis that there is a mind-like reality underlying the universe and human experience of the universe.

Millions of human beings attest that such experiences do occur. Humans often feel a sense of transcendent presence in and through the beauties of nature and the arts, in the experience of moral obligation, in the sense of a sustaining presence in times of danger and difficulty, in awe before the amazing complexity of the world that the sciences reveal, as well as in the more overtly religious experiences of meditation and prayer. Atheists have to dismiss all such experiences of transcendence as illusory, even when they occur to some of the most psychologically balanced, morally heroic, intelligent and informed human beings throughout history and in every culture. It seems a more reasonable procedure to accept them as experiences that confirm what is after all the most reasonable hypothesis for explaining the universe, the hypothesis of a creative mind as ultimate cause of the universe.

If there can be confirming experiences for the God hypothesis, there can also be disconfirming experiences. The most obvious disconfirmation is that the universe contains too many disvalues, too much evil, for it to have been created for the sake of its goodness. On the God hypothesis, however, the being of God has to be what it is. There is no alternative to it. If certain forms of goodness can only exist in a universe where there are many disvalues, and if God necessarily creates that universe, then even God cannot eliminate those disvalues. We might say that God intends the goods such a universe contains, but if God wants those goods, God cannot eliminate the evils that exist in the universe, even though God does not actually intend them. The evils are necessary conditions or consequences of good.

So is God bound by necessity? Yes, but that necessity is not something other than God, somehow constraining what God can do. The necessity lies in the nature of God itself, which follows from the fact that God is, by definition, necessary and eternal. We cannot treat God as a person who might easily have created a universe like this, with us in it, but without any evil. That would be a contradiction in terms, for we are essentially part of and can only exist in this universe. So if God intends to create us, God must permit the evils, the sufferings and frustrations of this universe to exist.

Most classical Christian theologians thought this, which was why the problem of evil was not as serious for them as it is for those who have a more naive idea of God as someone who could easily have been different, and have made a different and better world. Yet the naive believers have a point: surely God did not have to create precisely this universe. Is God not free? The clearest logical response to this question is to say that God, as eternal and necessary mind, is necessary in some but not all respects. God is timeless and necessary in existence, in goodness, in wisdom and (for Christians) in love. But God necessarily expresses the divine nature in free creative and response acts in time.



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For instance, God necessarily creates an overwhelmingly good universe, and perhaps (we do not know) God necessarily creates some universe with free intelligent beings in it. This could be because for God's nature as love to be realised, God necessarily creates a society of free creative minds, with which God can creatively interact in loving relationship. Yet precisely because God is necessarily creative and necessarily relates in love to finite creatures, God is free to act in many different particular ways, even though all of them must be loving, just and merciful. We might say that God is necessary in nature, yet freely creative in the particular acts that express that nature.

Maybe God did not have to create precisely this universe, but God had to create some universe containing finite agents who might freely choose selfish desire over the love of goodness. That would explain the existence of evil in our universe, as a necessary part of the evolutionary process that leads to the existence of carbon-based conscious life-forms, or as a consequence of evil freely chosen by finite persons that even God cannot wholly prevent, if creaturely freedom is to exist.

It needs to be added that an essential part of what Christians believe to be the divine self-revelation in Jesus is that there is a continuing conscious life beyond this universe, in which the evils conscious beings have suffered will be mitigated and transfigured by being included in an overwhelmingly greater good. Within this context, the existence of evil is no longer a disconfirmation of God's existence, but part of the story of a universe generating human freedom, falling away from God into hatred, greed and ignorance, and called back to God through divine self-sacrifice and re-union or atonement. Christian revelation in the cross and resurrection of Jesus is a decisive confirmation of the God hypothesis, which makes God not simply a supreme cosmic mind, but also a suffering and loving saviour to whom the human heart can be surrendered in grateful love.

Why do the new atheists think this is an irrational, anti-scientific and even harmful belief? Any dispassionate critic might say that the new atheism takes for granted a very contentious and weakly evidenced philosophy of materialism. It has no understanding of religion, which it always interprets in negative and naively literalistic ways, as though religion was a sort of failed science. It fails to see that God is not some extra invisible person outside the universe, but the deep nature of the universe as Mind. It fails to see that this has been the preferred view of almost all classical philosophers and of the great classical theologians. Indeed it is dismissive of their work, as though some of the most profound expressions of the human spirit were simply not worth reading. It fails to understand the difference between personal, scientific and philosophical explanations. It has no feeling for transcendent presence, objective beauty or for objective moral ideals. It has no sense of the history of ideas, or of how religious thought has changed and developed over the centuries. It does not grapple seriously with the profound revolution in science that came about with the birth of quantum mechanics in 1925. And it has grave difficulty in providing any sort of rational justification for affirming the unique moral dignity of human persons.

In short, the new atheism has a number of weaknesses that, taken together, render it less than plausible. But it may have one very useful function – to send us back to the great classical texts and to the best interpretations of modern physics and cosmology and to a less literalistic and myopic presentation of religious beliefs than is sometimes to be found in popular religious writings. That may be something we can profitably learn even from writings as polemical and vitriolic as those of the new atheists.