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THE EMPEROR'S NEW CLOTHES:  
HOW THE NEW ATHEISTS ARE REMINDING THE HUMANITIES  
OF THEIR PLACE AND PURPOSE IN SOCIETY

By

David Ira Buckner

B.S., East Tennessee State University, 2006  
M.A., East Tennessee State University, 2008

A Dissertation  
Submitted to the Faculty of the  
College of Arts and Sciences of the University of Louisville  
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy in Humanities

Department of Comparative Humanities  
University of Louisville  
Louisville, Kentucky

December 2018



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A Dissertation Approved on

November 9, 2018

by the following Dissertation Committee:

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Professor Thomas Maloney

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Professor George Shields

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Professor Patrick Pranke

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Professor Guy Dove

## DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my mom, Mary Ruth Buckner,  
to whom I owe all the best parts of myself,  
and to my niece, Bella Neely,  
in whom my faith in humanity is reaffirmed each day.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the members of my committee for their guidance and expertise these past several years. Dr. Shields, your captaining of this project has been exemplary from day one, consistently serving to steer my oft erratic efforts toward more maneuverable harbors and evermore enlightened horizons. Sir, I am forever in your debt. Dr. Maloney, your affable enthusiasm and rapier wit made you both a trusted friend and a formidable opponent on this project. Sparring with you has been one of the singular joys of my professional life and has sharpened the focus of my work considerably. For that, sir, I am eternally grateful. Dr. Pranke, your knowledge and politely probing demeanor have opened my eyes to new worlds and ways of thinking I simply could not have conceived of before. Thank you for helping me to look past the limitations and liabilities of my own worldview to explore the intricacies and ideals of others. A special thank you to Drs. Annette Allen and Osborne Wiggins, whose kindness, friendship, and tutelage I can never repay. My heartfelt thanks and affection to you both. To my mother, Mary Ruth Buckner, and my uncle, Travis Ball, Jr., my deepest gratitude for serving as my editors and sounding boards not only on this project but indeed throughout my entire academic career. Much of my success I owe directly to you. And finally, a special thanks to Lisa Schonburg, whose compassion and selfless dedication to this department make the more burdensome aspects of academic bureaucracy infinitely more bearable for me and my fellow students. For all your many kindnesses, Lisa, thank you.

## ABSTRACT

### THE EMPORER'S NEW CLOTHES: HOW THE NEW ATHEISTS ARE REMINDING THE HUMANITIES OF THEIR PLACE AND PURPOSE IN SOCIETY

David Ira Buckner

November 9, 2018

This dissertation will examine the social and intellectual impact of the so-called “New Atheism” as evidenced by the writings and public careers of its four principal protagonists: evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, philosopher Daniel Dennett, journalist Christopher Hitchens, and neuroscientist Sam Harris. I will argue that the New Atheists together provide an account of reality philosophically superior to that of theism, including those superficially sophisticated variations espoused in the writings of scholars William Lane Craig, John Lennox, Allister McGrath, Alvin Plantinga, etc. Yet, even if this were not so, I would still contend that the accessible, informative, and provocative style of the New Atheists’ prose nevertheless epitomizes precisely what academic writing could and should be. Their commitment to the Enlightenment principles of philosophical objectivity, reason, and the successes of the scientific method stands in stark contrast not only to the more malleable methodology of their religious opponents, but also to the prevailing (and ideologically-conflicting) traditions of deconstructive postmodernism and post-structuralism (as exemplified in the works of Jean Baudrillard, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, and others) which have greatly influenced humanities’ scholarship in recent decades.

Therefore, while I very much intend to defend the substance of the New Atheists' arguments against the various objections of their philosophical, religious, and scientific critics, I simultaneously mean to defend their stylistic choices as well (not only against their critics but also as compared to the obscurant, equivocal, and highly subjective style so often employed by postmodernists). It is my fervent hope that even those who should ultimately disagree with either the New Atheists' assertions or my defense of them will still be able to see the value of their (and hopefully my) clear, concise brand of communication. For theirs is a style no longer widely employed within the confines of the academy. That said, I believe that the humanities disciplines of history, literary theory, cultural studies, and philosophy would greatly benefit, were they to adopt (or perhaps re-embrace) the communicative model and underlying realist epistemology of the New Atheists.



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## INTRODUCTION: A SWAN SONG AND A SIREN CALL

In order to better situate and communicate my work to as wide an audience as possible, I have chosen to employ a frame tale of sorts upon which the various folds of my argument might be better supported and thus more fully unfurled. Not simply an eponymous reference, my reason(s) for repurposing this children's narrative into a literary device will, I trust, be made clear in the pages that follow.

*So off went the Emperor in procession under his splendid canopy. Everyone in the streets and the windows said, "Oh, how fine are the Emperor's new clothes! Don't they fit him to perfection? And see his long train!" Nobody would confess that he couldn't see anything, for that would prove him either unfit for his position, or a fool. No costume the Emperor had worn before was ever such a complete success.*

*"But he hasn't got anything on," a little child said.*

*"Did you ever hear such innocent prattle?" said its father. And one person whispered to another what the child had said, "He hasn't anything on. A child says he hasn't anything on."*

*"But he hasn't got anything on!" the whole town cried out at last.*

*The Emperor shivered, for he suspected they were right. But he thought, "This procession has got to go on." So he walked more proudly than ever, as his noblemen held high the train that wasn't there at all.<sup>1</sup>*

Undoubtedly one of the most widely recognized stories in all of Western literature, Hans Christian Andersen's "The Emperor's New Clothes" has been translated

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<sup>1</sup> Hans Christian Andersen, "The Emperor's New Clothes," trans. Jean Hersholt, The Hans Christian Andersen Centre, 11 August 2015, accessed 25 May 2016, [http://www.andersen.sdu.dk/vaerk/hersholt/TheEmperorsNewClothes\\_e.html](http://www.andersen.sdu.dk/vaerk/hersholt/TheEmperorsNewClothes_e.html).

into more than one hundred languages,<sup>2</sup> set to stage or screen on no fewer than twelve occasions, and served as the inspirational springboard to numerous other artistic enterprises and literary endeavors.<sup>3</sup> Its basic plot and premise are so well-known to Western audiences that even a brief summarization would likely prove superfluous in explaining my decision to co-opt its title (and moral) to my own present purposes. In fact, its very mention has become synonymous with a critique of pluralistic ignorance and the perils such thinking engenders.<sup>4</sup> Such is my intention. However, what is less widely known is that Andersen's now iconic last paragraph was not part of the original text.

Jackie Wullschlager explains, "Andersen's simple, classical tale only acquired its punch line at the last moment. The manuscript ends with everyone simply admiring the clothes; when it was already at the printer's, Andersen hit on the now famous ending of the small child announcing, 'But he doesn't have anything on!' He sent a new last paragraph to the printer, asking for its insertion, 'as it will give everything a more satirical appearance.'"<sup>5</sup> This late addition is of great significance, both for Andersen's intended audience as well as for my own. For had he chosen to omit this revision, and simply allowed the charade to continue unchecked and unchallenged, satire is not all that

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<sup>2</sup> Hans Christian Andersen, *Fairy Tales*, ed. Jackie Wullschlager, trans. Tiina Nunnally (New York: Viking, 2005), 4.

<sup>3</sup> Heidi Ann Heiner, "Modern Interpretations of the Emperor's New Clothes," *SurLaLunefairytale.com*, January 2005, accessed 25 May 2016, <http://www.surlalunefairytales.com/emperorclothes/themes.html>.

<sup>4</sup> According to Deborah Prentice and Dale Miller, "Pluralistic ignorance is a psychological state characterized by the belief that one's private attitudes and judgments are different from those of others, even though one's public behavior is identical.... If participants understood this state of affairs, the situation would be self-correcting. However, they typically make the mistake of assuming that even though others are acting similarly, they [themselves] are feeling differently. Their own behavior may be driven by social pressure, but they assume that other people's identical behavior is an accurate reflection of their true feelings." "Pluralistic Ignorance and Alcohol Use on Campus: Some Consequences of Misperceiving the Social Norm," *The Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* Vol. 64, No. 2 (1993): 244.

<sup>5</sup> Wullschlager, in Andersen's *Fairy Tales*, 427.

might have perished from his tale; hopefulness and a sense of individual agency may have been lost to it as well.<sup>6</sup>

At the time of Andersen's composition (1837), Romanticism was at its creative and intellectual peak, and the Romantics had long considered children to be founts of wisdom and purity in an otherwise capricious and corruptible world. This would hardly have been lost on an author of fairy tales. What's more, his affinity for (and subsequent acquaintance with) Charles Dickens and the socially conscious work he was then producing (*The Adventures of Oliver Twist*, *The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby*) could well have nurtured Andersen's underlying sensibilities concerning the plight and promise of youth in the wake of inhumane industrialization. So when considered from both a cultural and personal perspective, Andersen's last-minute decision seems both bitingly satirical *and* sincerely hopeful. After all, had the child remained silent or been omitted from the story altogether, then widespread feelings of futility and resignation toward the artifices and inequities of life would have been a much more reasonable response; such is, indeed, *the way of the world*. But because of the courage and conviction of one small voice unburdened by the grownup concerns of social acceptance or economic security, many others soon rediscovered what they had inadvertently lost somewhere along the way. Passive acceptance of the status quo no longer seemed one's only option. People instead began to realize that one person, no matter how small or seemingly insignificant, can change the course of history. And that is certainly cause for optimism.

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<sup>6</sup> This notion is supported by the fact that Andersen knew this story through a German translation "So ist der Lauf der Welt" ("Such Is the Way of the World"), in Eduard von Bülow's *Das Novellenbuch*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (Leipzig: F. A. Brockhaus, 1836), 40-44.

My hopes for this project are at once as small as those of that innocent, young child and as vast as those of the incisive author who chose to include her in his tale. I simply want to say what is, and in so doing, I hope to change the world (or, at the very least, my own small corner of it). For my principal subject, I have chosen the (anti)religious writings and professional careers of four individuals whom I believe embody the same sense of childlike courage and conviction, coupled with a steadfast willingness to speak truth to power and tradition, no matter what it costs them. Alternatively dubbed “The Four Horsemen of the New Atheism,” and “The Four Horsemen of the (Non)Apocalypse,” evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, philosopher Daniel Dennett, neuroscientist Sam Harris, and (the late) journalist Christopher Hitchens have, for over a decade now, dedicated themselves to challenging some of the pretenses and presumptions of organized religion (as well as the presumed existence of the various deities upon which it, in all its innumerable forms, was originally established). In doing so, they have disputed and disillusioned many members of the faithful, but perhaps more surprisingly, they have also earned the ire and disparagement of a great many of their professional colleagues, as well as those ostensibly impartial (i.e. agnostic) readers, for both the candor of their remarks and the simplicity and straightforwardness with which they offer them. While the former response is not altogether unexpected, motivations for the latter are less obvious and thus in need of further explanation.

I would contend that such opposition to the so-called New Atheism can be comfortably housed within one of three possible camps. To continue with my previous analogy, I would liken these groups to the knowingly fraudulent tailors, the cravenly

complicit aristocracy, and the unsuspecting populace of Mr. Andersen's tale. To the tailors, I would equate those specific philosophers and scientists who have so distorted their disciplines and twisted their logic so as to lend support for a position that they (should) know to be, by definition, both philosophically and scientifically indefensible. I believe it is these individuals who must shoulder the lion's share of the burden for our current state of affairs. After all, it is they who have literally and figuratively spun their yarns in order to deliberately enwrap their unwary victims. (Incredibly, some even practice their pseudointellectual sleight-of-hand so long and so well that they forget their initially deceitful intentions and are themselves eventually ensnared by the tricks of their own duplicitous trade.) To the accommodating aristocracy, I would liken those subsequent so-called academics, ecclesiastics, and would-be representatives of the populace who, while always remaining privately unconvinced of their forerunners' theories and conclusions, nevertheless publicly declare their adherence and support for them for fear of what outright obstinacy or objection might cost them. (This group is particularly difficult to dissuade, as their station, power, and privilege are often largely predicated, from both above and below, upon their acceptance and transmission of the perceived status quo.) My third comparison is far more obvious; the unsuspecting populace represents precisely that: those individuals only peripherally acquainted with the subject in question. Although their unfamiliarity and relative inexperience leaves them most vulnerable to misinformation and specious logic, this segment of the public is also (and for those very same reasons) most open to thoughtful discussion and spirited debate, and, as a consequence, freest to follow where evidence and argument leads them. For unlike the previous two categories, the general population has, for the most part, only

passively and unwittingly conspired in the machinations of their so-called superiors; they have simply never invested (or been asked to invest) the same level of personal attention and self-serving calculation as their “expert” counterparts. And while they have been traditionally led to believe that they have much to gain from maintaining this societal status quo (divine love, communal acceptance, eternal life, etc.), in reality, the public can be easily shown that should they ever acquire the knowledge and muster the collective will to overcome it, they, like the proletariat in Marx’ manifesto, “have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win.”<sup>7</sup>

I believe it is for this reason that the ironically-named “Four Horsemen,” like the child from Andersen’s fable, have chosen to address themselves primarily to the population at large. In much the same way that successful revolutionary movements have historically realized that social, political, and/or economic change can only be achieved and sustained with the express, informed consent of the people, Dawkins, Dennett, Harris, and Hitchens have time and again bypassed the dry, dusty colloquiums of academia and instead taken their cases directly to a general audience. In addition to their easily accessible prose and comprehensible logic, they have chosen to employ both traditional and social media platforms to spread their scientifically conscious, socially inclusive message to as wide an audience as possible. Not wishing to exclude the academic community (of which they themselves are/were a part), but simply to force them from their ivory towers and their often circuitous style, the New Atheists have also engaged in a significant number of public debates and roundtable discussions with their philosophical, religious, and scientific adversaries in lecture halls and university

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<sup>7</sup> Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, “Manifesto of the Communist Party, IV: Position of the Communists in Relation to the Various Existing Opposition Parties,” Marxists Internet Archive, 2010, accessed 19 October 2017, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/Manifesto.pdf>.



auditoriums throughout Europe and North America.<sup>8</sup> After all, such conversations stand to accomplish very little for very few if they are only ever held behind closed doors.

For their democratizing efforts, the New Atheists and their arguments have been frequently maligned as unsophisticated, unconvincing, and ultimately undeserving of serious academic scrutiny or public consideration. Of course, these facile attacks most often originate from those among the aforementioned tailor and aristocratic camps, whose own interests are hardly served by the continued presence and biting critiques of these societal gadflies. Consequently, their critics are forced to inhabit a sort of oppositional limbo, in which they can neither accept nor directly challenge the validity of the New Atheists' claims, for to do either might be construed as having lent support to the ways and means by which the New Atheists seek to advance them. That, in and of itself, would almost certainly spell inevitable defeat. (For when clothed in invisible garments, what can one hope to gain with talk of possible alterations?) Rather, the opposition must seek to deride and dismiss them as either artless or tactless (or both), and in so doing, discourage those they mean to prevent from opening their eyes to the undeniable truth: the emperor is naked... what's more, he always has been. Though my charge of duplicitousness may appear unduly conspiratorial in nature, one must remember that such behavior is not without historical precedent. As Edward Gibbon once put it, when describing the religiosity of the old Roman state:

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<sup>8</sup> The majority of these events have been either televised or streamed live on the Internet. Excerpts from five such debates have been transcribed and included in the appendix. Special attention will be paid to those involving academics William Lane Craig, John Lennox, Allister McGrath, and Alvin Plantinga. Upon examination, one will discover that, despite their collective attempts to promote more scientifically supportable explanations or plausible philosophical defenses of their faith, opponents of the New Atheists are invariably forced to concede (either explicitly or de facto) that such arguments are themselves faith-based. The circularity (and, I would argue, self-defeating nature) of such a presuppositional strategy should become increasingly apparent as one moves through the debates.

The policy of the emperors and the senate, as far as it concerned religion, was happily seconded by the reflections of the enlightened, and by the habits of the superstitious, part of their subjects. The various modes of worship which prevailed in the Roman world were all considered by the people as equally true; by the philosopher as equally false; and by the magistrate as equally useful. And thus toleration produced not only mutual indulgence, but even religious concord.<sup>9</sup>

This unfortunate situation can, in many ways, be considered a microcosm of what is happening today in the humanities as a whole. Since the advent of postmodernism in the mid to late twentieth century, the humanities have been metaphorically clothing themselves in increasingly sumptuous and sophisticated, albeit immaterial, garb. This is arguably because postmodernism is itself a reaction against the presumed certainty of scientific (or other ostensibly objective) efforts to explain reality that is foundational to the so-called modernist period that preceded it. In this highly subjective, pluralistic, and yet exceedingly individualistic environment, their writings and conversations, one to another, have begun to resemble those between the first two groups I outlined in Andersen's cautionary tale.<sup>10</sup> There are some, though I would hazard the percentage to be quite small, who genuinely believe in the product they're peddling. There are many more who consider their individual status and professional wellbeing to be entirely dependent upon the perceived stability of its general market value, and thus "go along to get along" in an arrangement they consider to be immutable, regardless of its relation to reality. And there are more still, who either as a result of obliviousness or indifference, have never

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<sup>9</sup> Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Vol 1 (New York: Fred de Fau and Company, 1906), 35-36.

<sup>10</sup> This is made not only possible but inevitable by postmodernism's (particularly deconstructive postmodernism's) core rejection of the existence of an objective, universally-applicable reality. This, coupled with deconstructionism's insistence upon the equivocality of meaning in the use of language, has resulted in unavoidably-ambiguous prose that necessitates a multiplicity of perspectives on almost every subject. If, for example, my perception of reality contains within its purview an invisible royal garment, there can be no objective means to disprove its existence. Consequently, any outside or counterintuitive perspective must be regarded with at least as much conviction and respect as one's own, and so previously absurd conversations concerning the necessary materials, requisite costs, sartorial elegance, etc., of such a garment are not only allowed but required to continue unimpeded.

bothered to question the validity of the present economic system, not to mention the creeds and credentials of the artificers, merchants, and moneymen who established and ensconced it in the first place. It is to this last group that the present work is primarily addressed. Just as the New Atheists are redefining the norms of scholarly disputation and public discourse within the sphere of religion, I hope to inspire a similar paradigm shift within the humanities at large... a return to the socially conscious and/or activist roots of our own once great discipline.

After all, we in the humanities are not curing cancer, inventing new technologies, or plumbing the depths of the observable universe. This is not to say that we have nothing to contribute with regard to these developments, but only that our work is unlikely to be driving the advances themselves. Rather, it is our task to inquire, understand, and relate these enterprises to our fellow human beings... to help us to ask the right questions, to weigh and appreciate the consequences of our actions, to anticipate future needs and dilemmas in light of our current efforts, and so on. In other words, our subject is humanity itself, and yet somehow our discourse with our fellow human beings has been allowed to regress from a once mutually beneficial conversation among members of a shared social, intellectual, and linguistic community to a dolefully tone-deaf inner monologue to which only we are now privileged (or subjected, as the case may be). As a result, this siren call of sorts is, in fact, a plea to my fellow academics to broaden their collective horizons and the scope of their scholarship... to once again enter into the forum of public discourse in order to make both ours and our colleagues' works accessible (and thus relevant) again. This, too, is not without certain perils – to ourselves,

our positions, and our society – but I believe that the potential benefits far outweigh the dangers.

In the first half of each of the first four chapters of this work, I will present the central arguments of the New Atheists, as set forth in their respective books on the subject. Although each is making a similar case for the abandonment of traditional religious belief and the embrace of a more secular, humanistic worldview, there are subtle differences in their styles and perspectives. To begin, I will simply attempt to present my protagonists' primary arguments, in succession, without extensive commentary or critique. Although one may question the usefulness of such extensive summarization, my motivation to do so comes from one of the New Atheists' own critics, Gregory Peterson, who cautions that "for most religion-and-science scholars, the likely action will be to read the reviews, perhaps listen to an interview or two on public radio, and then go on with one's life and research, secure in the knowledge that much of what these books contain is not sophisticated enough to bother with... But... these books have something to say."<sup>11</sup> Wishing to avoid this sort of superficial familiarity and shallow erudition, and because I expressly want the reader to grasp both *the style and substance* of the New Atheists' arguments, I believe it is necessary to allow the authors to speak for themselves when and wherever possible, relying upon direct quotation at least as often as upon my own ability to sufficiently synthesize their collective ideas and perspectives. I will employ a similar methodology in the opening half of Chapter Five, when discussing the various foundational and supplemental authors and texts of postmodernism.<sup>12</sup> My

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<sup>11</sup> Gregory R. Peterson, "Why the New Atheism Shouldn't Be (Completely) Dismissed," *Zygon* Vol. 42, No. 4 (December 2007): 803.

<sup>12</sup> In short, my methodology will be to paraphrase when possible, to summarize when necessary, and to quote when essential.

hope is that this will create a sort of natural juxtaposition in which the conflicting styles and varying degrees of substance between the two groups is made all the more manifest and unmistakable.

My first chapter, “God, the Devil, and Dawkins: *The God Delusion* and its Critics,” will examine the basic premise of Richard Dawkins’ text, which primarily employs Darwin’s theory of evolution by natural selection as a means of countering religion’s more traditional creationist and/or intelligent design explanations for how both the world and humanity came to be. I believe the scaffolding of Dawkins’ book will serve both to contextualize and to buttress many of the arguments in Daniel Dennett’s *Breaking the Spell* [both written in 2006], which likewise employs Darwinian science, but this time principally as a means of exploring the evolution of religious belief itself. In his opening chapter, Dennett explains precisely how and why he considers religion to be a distinctly natural (i.e. not *supernatural*) enterprise. “[It] is a human phenomenon composed of events, organisms, structures, patterns, and the like that all obey the laws of physics or biology... it could be true that God exists, that God is indeed the intelligent, conscious, loving creator of us all, and yet *still* religion itself, as a complex set of phenomena, is a perfectly natural phenomenon.”<sup>13</sup> This observation and ensuing argument will be the primary focus of Chapter Two, “*Breaking the Spell*: Dennett and his Discontents.”

In Chapter Three, “A Real Life Devil’s Advocate: The Conscientious Contrarianism of Christopher Hitchens,” I will turn my attention to Hitchens’ 2007 *god is not Great* which (like Sam Harris’ 2004 *The End of Faith*) is much more attuned to the historical and sociological realities of organized religion, primarily with an eye (or ear)

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<sup>13</sup> Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 25.

toward establishing both a dialogue and a dichotomy between faith and reason. (My analysis of Harris' book is the subject of Chapter Four: "Superseding the Supernatural: Sam Harris and *The End of Faith*."") In this respect, the primary difference between Harris and Hitchens lies not in their tenor but in their temporality. While there is considerable overlap between them, Hitchens' book more frequently looks backward as a means of understanding the present, whereas Harris' book focuses far more on the present as a means of glimpsing (and hopefully affecting) the future. Thus while complementing the largely scientific and chronologically expansive treatises of Dawkins and Dennett, Hitchens' and Harris' books likewise serve to ground them in the everyday lives and geopolitical realities of our increasingly interconnected world. Once complete, it is my hope that the reader will have recognized that though few of the New Atheists' arguments may be wholly original or absolute, their forthright treatment of religion and their jarringly candid tone toward the faithful are, in many ways, novel and refreshing... perhaps purposely more provocative, but most assuredly more accessible (and thus relevant) to the average reader as well.

Once the New Atheists' arguments have been sufficiently outlined, I will turn my attention to the numerous rebuffs and rebuttals that have been leveled against them. Wishing to cast as wide a net as possible in my research (and to avoid the charge of cherry-picking and/or scapegoating my examples), I scoured not only academic publications but also public periodicals and mass media platforms. The resultant writers, debaters, panelists, and interviewees included in this volume comprise a veritable cross-section of university academics, independent (though legitimately credentialed) scholars, and other generally recognized experts in their respective fields, whose works singularly

and collectively embody the most tangible, hard-hitting critiques I have yet encountered. (These will be subdivided by author and relegated to the second half of each of the aforementioned chapters.)<sup>14</sup>

Although ample space will be allocated for dozens of specific religious, philosophical, and scientific critiques, my hope is not only to challenge them individually, but also to demonstrate the existence of a common theme that runs throughout the various accounts... specifically the suggestion that the New Atheists' arguments are largely unsophisticated and frequently waged against mere straw men which they themselves have constructed.<sup>15</sup> I intend to demonstrate that this is incorrect, and that their approach reveals not an inadvertent weakness, but rather a deliberate intention and strength. By and large, the New Atheists meet believers on their own ground. They challenge the assumptions and widely-held beliefs of millions of the faithful on the contents and contemporary implications of scripture, the unfortunate realities of religious history, and the scientific advances that are every day rendering more and more of their myths and appeals to tradition indefensible in the modern world.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> The reader will likely note the inordinate length and seemingly excessive number of quotations contained within each of the above-mentioned sections. Although the critiques are presented at length and *en masse* for the reasons previously listed (to ensure proper context and thus to avoid the charges of cherry-picking and/or of misrepresenting my examples), my efforts to be exhaustive in my research need not necessarily result in the exhaustion of my audience. I remain convinced that whether examined individually, collectively, or in more piecemeal fashion, the general thrust of my argument (that these critiques strike glancing blows at best) remains intact and unanswered.

<sup>15</sup> This, I will contend, is made obvious by their respective and collective failure(s) to pinpoint the source of this supposed lack of sophistication or to demonstrate the speciousness of the "straw men" they would so readily dismiss.

<sup>16</sup> Since one of the aspects of New Atheists I admire most is their conscious and consistent attempt to "meet believers on their own ground," I will endeavor to extend that courtesy and practice to my treatment of the New Atheists themselves as well as to their ideological critics (and compatriots). Consequently, in my defense I intend to broach no arguments (nor employ any methodology or stratagem) which are not themselves already present or specifically referenced in either the works of the New Atheists or in the numerous rebuttals against them.

Therefore, when members of the opposition begin to abandon such traditional defenses (as indeed they almost invariably do) in favor of more semantic, scientific, and/or philosophical critiques and counterproposals, I believe they are, in effect, proving the New Atheists' point and accomplishing their task for them.

To put it another way:

Philosophers stretch the meaning of words until they retain scarcely anything of their original sense. They give the name of "God" to some vague abstraction which they have created for themselves; having done so they can pose before all the world as deists, as believers of God, and they can even boast that they have recognized a higher, purer concept of God, notwithstanding that their God is now nothing more than an insubstantial shadow and no longer the mighty personality of religious doctrines. Critics persist in describing as 'deeply religious' anyone who admits to a sense of man's insignificance or impotence in the face of the universe, although what constitutes the essence of the religious attitude is not this feeling but only the next step after it, the reaction to it which seeks a remedy for it. The man who goes no further, but humbly acquiesces in the small part which human beings play in the great world – such a man is, on the contrary, irreligious in the truest sense of the word.<sup>17</sup>

In other words, if in order to maintain legitimacy and logical cohesion in the face of scientific and social progress, critics of the New Atheists must abandon and attempt to replace many of the theological appeals to tradition and moral authority that once constituted the heart of their arguments, then I would argue that it is they who are in fact grasping at straws.

In my fifth and final chapter, "A Preliminary Postmortem on Postmodernism," I will attempt to demonstrate just how inaccessible, self-absorbed, and esoteric scholarship in the humanities has become in recent decades. Although Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont's *Fashionable Nonsense* will serve as my starting point, I do intend to allow the ambiguities, peculiarities, and incoherencies of so-called foundational postmodern texts

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<sup>17</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton & Company 1961), 32-3.



to speak for themselves as often as possible (sometimes with, but frequently without comment). Within the context and/or critique of Sokal and Bricmont's text, special attention will be paid to the writings of the two Jacques (Lacan and Derrida), as well as those of Luce Irigaray, Jean Baudrillard, Paul Virilio, and Gilles Deleuze. However, given my somewhat limited exposure to the aforementioned authors and wishing to avoid the reciprocal charge of superficial familiarity with which Sokal and Bricmont frequently accuse them in their own writings, I also intend to make use of some of the required reading lists (and resultant responses) from a number of my own graduate seminars. This should serve to establish that the "problems" Sokal and Bricmont expose in their respective fields (mathematics and the natural sciences) exist within the humanities and social sciences as well. These will include books, essays, and plays by postmodernist authors such as Suzan-Lori Parks, Sylvia Winter, Rosi Braidotti, and Avtar Brah, phenomenologists Daniel Zahavi, Shannon Vallor, and Alva Noë, as well as postcolonial writer Frantz Fanon, with all of whom I am far better acquainted.<sup>18</sup> My primary present engagement with the works will be accomplished via an examination of my own previous attempts to analyze, synthesize, and, on occasion, rebut them. That said, I will allow the authors to speak for themselves when and wherever possible and in sufficient context with which to consider my treatment of them. But aware of the limited usefulness of

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<sup>18</sup> I am well aware of the tendency to confuse and/or conflate postmodernism and post-colonialism. However, my interest in them both (as well as with phenomenology, for that matter) is based largely upon their collective inclination to deride, dismiss, or at the very least obscure the principles of the Enlightenment and/or the Scientific Revolution, the former from within and the latter largely from without. Therefore, I will attempt to confine my treatment of them to this predisposition alone (and not make the all-too-common error of considering them as synonyms for the same phenomenon). This will, of course, be in keeping with the spirit of the New Atheists' various attacks on religion, which are themselves largely underwritten by an affirmation in the existence of an objective, observable reality governed by natural laws, a commitment to Enlightenment ideals (such as empiricism, rationality, equality, freedom, secularism, self-determination, tolerance, etc.), as well as to the principles established and advances wrought by utilization of the scientific method.

simply criticizing the status quo, I want to offer, as a means of closing the chapter, a few examples of my own of the sort of accessible, interdisciplinary, and substantive writing that I'd like to see more frequently and forcefully affirmed within our discipline. Though dealing with seemingly disparate topics, these examples are, in fact, intended to serve as a template of sorts for those in any number of sub-fields or specialized traditions within the humanities who might agree with my identification of this wide-ranging problem as well as with my proposed solution to combat it. My hope, like that referenced above between the New Atheists and their critics, is that the contrast in both style and substance between this sort of scholarship and that which it attempts to rebuke will become increasingly more obvious as I progress, to the point where any concluding arguments or commentary on my part would feel redundant. If I am successful, then maybe those of similar dispositions (and in similarly tenuous situations) will feel emboldened to follow suit, and perhaps the paradigm shift that the New Atheists have begun in the religious realm can be harnessed and repurposed by humanities scholars in service of their own honorable ends.

## CHAPTER ONE: GOD, THE DEVIL, AND DAWKINS: *THE GOD DELUSION* AND ITS CRITICS

### Introduction

As an ethologist and evolutionary biologist, almost the entirety of Richard Dawkins' professional career has been in some way indebted to the conceptual and scientific work of Charles Darwin. In fact, Dawkins' first publication, 1976's *The Selfish Gene*, is primarily a defense (and perchance an extension) of Darwin's famous theory of evolution by means of natural selection. In it, Dawkins endeavors to provide a gene-centered account of evolution that satisfactorily reconciles Darwin's work with that of geneticist Gregor Mendel, and in so doing replaces (or at the very least expands upon) the more organism and/or group-centered interpretations of the theory that had largely come before it.

Dawkins' seven subsequent books – from 1982's *The Extended Phenotype* to 2004's *The Ancestor's Tale* – all dealt with exploring the intricacies and implications of Darwin's theory in as accessible, palatable, and profitable a manner as his talents permitted. It is for this reason that many critics consider his 2008 *The God Delusion* to be a deliberate departure from the scientifically-centered focus of his previous work and thus argue that, like Dante, Dawkins has inadvertently wandered into a dark wood through which he is ill-prepared to traverse. To paraphrase the oft-repeated reproach: a scientist

should stick to science and leave metaphysics and belief to the philosophers and the faithful.

In this chapter, I aim to both contextualize this critique and to contest its ill-considered implications. After all, it was the work of Charles Darwin that first advanced a successful challenge to the so-called teleological (or design) argument that had been variously conceived, advanced, and defended by as motley a crew of intellectuals as the ancient pagan philosopher Aristotle, the Golden Age Islamic theologian Al-Ghazali, the medieval scholastic Thomas Aquinas, and (just seven years prior to Darwin's birth) the Anglican clergyman William Paley. That Dawkins would decide to consider the ramifications of Darwin's theory on this, the last bastion of socially-acceptable creationist thought, thus seems less a deviation from his professional journey and more like its most logical and long-intended destination. The fact that he was so skillfully able to navigate this admittedly treacherous terrain, all the while leaving intellectual breadcrumbs substantial enough for the rest of us to follow, is both a tribute to his wit and a nod to the position he held from 1995 until his retirement in 2008: the University of Oxford's Professor for the Public Understanding of Science. Consequently, I consider what follows to be the culmination of a career (not its ruination), and, in many ways, Professor Dawkins' most significant cultural contribution to date.

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*The same high mental faculties which first led man to believe in unseen spiritual agencies, then in fetishism, polytheism, and ultimately in monotheism, would infallibly lead him, as long as his reasoning powers remained poorly developed, to various strange superstitions and customs. Many of these are terrible to think of – such as the sacrifice of human beings to a bloodloving god; the trial of innocent persons by the ordeal of poison or fire; witchcraft, etc. – yet it is well occasionally to reflect on these superstitions, for*

*they shew us what an infinite debt of gratitude we owe to the improvement of our reason, to science, and to our accumulated knowledge.*<sup>19</sup>

### Part I: *The God Delusion*

In the preface to *The God Delusion*, Richard Dawkins outlines his basic purpose in writing the book. “It is intended to raise consciousness – raise consciousness to the fact that to be an atheist is a realistic aspiration, and a brave and splendid one. You can be an atheist who is happy, balanced, moral, and intellectually fulfilled. That is the first of my consciousness-raising messages.”<sup>20</sup> He goes on to list three additional consciousness-raisers that he believes will collectively serve to demonstrate to the reader “why there almost certainly is no God.”<sup>21</sup>

The first of these (second overall) has long been the primary focus of Dawkins’ professional life: explaining and defending the intricacies of Darwin’s theory of evolution by natural selection. His impetus this time is as a means of countering the creationist and intelligent design dogmas that have so vehemently taken hold in both the popular imaginations and educational curriculums of many Western nations, the United States in particular. As he explains:

Far from pointing to a designer, the illusion of design in the living world is explained with far greater economy and with devastating elegance by Darwinian natural selection. And, while natural selection itself is limited to explaining the living world, it raises our consciousness to the likelihood of comparable explanatory ‘cranes’ that may aid our understanding of the cosmos itself.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1889), 93-94.

<sup>20</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), 23.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

Dawkins' next consciousness-raiser revolves around (what he considers to be) the deplorable practice of childhood religious indoctrination, in which most if not all of the world's major faiths engage. He strongly dissents: "I shall not apologize for mentioning it here in the Preface as well as in Chapter 9. You can't say it too often. I'll say it again. That is not a Muslim child, but a child of Muslim parents. That child is too young to know whether it is a Muslim or not. There is no such thing as a Muslim child. There is no such thing as a Christian child."<sup>23</sup> His suggestion for countering the effects of such indoctrination is to demonstrate "how a proper understanding of the magnificence of the real world, while never becoming a religion, can fill the inspiration role that religion has historically – and inadequately – usurped."<sup>24</sup>

His fourth, and final, consciousness-raiser Dawkins describes as atheist pride. This he relates to the American gay pride movement of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. He argues that, like the number of gay individuals, the percentage of atheists and agnostics in American society has always been considerably higher than is generally acknowledged or has been historically recorded. The problem in confirming this reality is that "the very word 'atheist' has been assiduously built up as a terrible and frightening label."<sup>25</sup> (Here, one is reminded of former Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's incredulous 2007 comment, "In Iran, we don't have homosexuals like in your country.")<sup>26</sup> To counter this prevailing and assailing notion, Dawkins believes that a general atheistic "coming-out-of-the-closet" must occur. Of course, this push towards a national social and political

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 25-6.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>26</sup> "'We Don't have any Gays in Iran,' Iranian President tells Ivy League Audience," DailyMail.com, 25 September 2007, Accessed 18 July 2016, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-483746/We-dont-gays-Iran-Iranian-president-tells-Ivy-League-audience.html>.

movement is not without its obstacles, but Dawkins maintains that it is a requisite first step.

Organizing atheists has been compared to herding cats, because they tend to think independently and will not conform to authority. But a good first step would be to build up a critical mass of those willing to ‘come out,’ thereby encouraging others to do so. Even if they can’t be herded, cats in sufficient numbers can make a lot of noise and they cannot be ignored.

To encourage those already inclined to do so, Dawkins closes by admitting that he hopes to add to their ranks. “If this book works as I intend, religious readers who open it will be atheists when they put it down.”<sup>27</sup> We shall see.

In Chapter One, “A Deeply Religious Non-Believer,” Dawkins attempts to distinguish between those scientists (such as Albert Einstein and Stephen Hawking) who sometimes metaphorically reference “God” in their respective works, from those individuals who adamantly insist that such allusions ostensibly imply deeply-held religious conviction. As Dawkins asserts, “a quasi-mystical response to nature and the universe is common among scientists and rationalists. It has no connection with supernatural belief.”<sup>28</sup> Noting that the religious have long attempted to co-opt and claim such eminent scientists and thinkers as among their own, Dawkins offers a way to avoid such predicaments in future. First, he attempts to explain, by means of a clarifying definition, how an atheist (such as Hawking revealed himself to be in 2014)<sup>29</sup> might still be defended in utilizing such awe-inspired language without its progressing past the point of no rational return. “An atheist... is somebody who believes there is nothing beyond the natural, physical world, no *supernatural* creative intelligence lurking behind the

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<sup>27</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 28.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>29</sup> Alan Boyle, “‘I’m an Atheist’: Stephen Hawking on God and Space Travel.” NBCNews.com, 23 September 2014, accessed 18 July 2016, <http://www.nbcnews.com/science/space/im-atheist-stephen-hawking-god-space-travel-n210076>.

observable universe, no soul that outlasts the body and no miracles – except in the sense of natural phenomena that we don't yet understand.”<sup>30</sup> For this sort of mysticism and sense of wonder toward the unknown, Dawkins has both a respect and an affinity. That said, it is a linguistic practice that he would like to see go the way of the horse and buggy.

I wish that physicists would refrain from using the word God in their special metaphorical sense. The metaphorical or pantheistic God of the physicists is light years away from the interventionist, miracle-wreaking, thought-reading, sin-punishing, prayer-answering God of the Bible, of priests, mullahs, and rabbis, and of ordinary language. Deliberately to confuse the two is, in my opinion, an act of intellectual high treason.<sup>31</sup>

What he has far less patience and understanding for is the “widespread assumption, which nearly everybody in our society accepts – the non-religious included – ... that religious faith is especially vulnerable to offence and should be protected by an abnormally thick wall of respect, in a different class from the respect that any human being should pay to any other.”<sup>32</sup> Dawkins demonstrates this assumption by way of two examples: both partly historical and partly hypothetical. The first is as follows:

By far the easiest grounds for gaining conscientious objector status in wartime are religious. You can be a brilliant moral philosopher with a prize-winning doctoral thesis expounding the evils of war, and still be given a hard time by a draft board evaluating your claim to be a conscientious objector. Yet if you can say that one or both of your parents is a Quaker you sail through like a breeze, no matter how inarticulate and illiterate you may be on the theory of pacifism or, indeed, Quakerism itself.<sup>33</sup>

The second is intended as a commentary on the real-life reactions to the issuing of fatwas against the author Salman Rushdie for his 1989 novel *The Satanic Verses* and against numerous cartoonists at the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* for their depictions (in

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<sup>30</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 35.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.



2005) of the prophet Muhammad. Not so much shocked at the religious tendency to take offence, Dawkins is far more appalled by so many so-called liberals who, in the immediate aftermath of each event, seemed eager to condemn not the religious incitement to violence, but the simple expressions of free speech that preceded them.

If the advocates of apartheid had their wits about them they would claim – for all I know truthfully – that allowing mixed races is against their religion. A good part of the opposition would respectfully tip-toe away. And it is no use claiming that this is an unfair parallel because apartheid has no rational justification. The whole point of religious faith, its strength and its chief glory, is that it does not depend on rational justification. The rest of us are expected to defend our prejudices. But ask a religious person to justify their faith and you infringe ‘religious liberty’.<sup>34</sup>

Dawkins concludes, “It is in the light of the unparalleled presumption of respect for religion that I make my own disclaimer for this book. I shall not go out of my way to offend, but nor shall I don kid gloves to handle religion any more gently than I would handle anything else.”<sup>35</sup>

In Chapter Two, Dawkins argues that the existence of god (whether deistic or theistic, simple creator or anthropomorphic interventionist) is, at its core, a scientific hypothesis that can be tested... in principle, if not in practice. And though he dedicates the opening few pages of the chapter to distinguishing between the various forms of polytheism, monotheism, and the more ethical Eastern systems such as Buddhism and Confucianism, he ultimately concedes that such distinctions are, for his purposes, ultimately irrelevant. Anticipating the charge that his critique hones in on an antiquated notion of God, Dawkins responds “I know you don’t believe in an old bearded man sitting on a cloud, so let’s not waste any more time on that. I am not attacking any particular version of God or gods. I am attacking God, all gods, anything and everything

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 50.

supernatural, wherever and whenever they have been or will be invented.”<sup>36</sup> For example, after going to reasonably great lengths to established the deistic leanings of most of America’s founding fathers, Dawkins ultimately argues that though their creator god “is certainly an improvement over the monster of the Bible... it is scarcely more likely that he exists or ever did.”<sup>37</sup>

Dawkins then attempts to dismantle two popularly-held conventions that have cropped up as a means of either defending the notion that God remains outside the purview of science or of side-stepping the issue altogether: unconsidered, egalitarian agnosticism and the late Stephen Jay Gould’s concept of “non-overlapping magisteria,” hereafter referred to as NOMA. His critique of the former rests on the idea that any proposition currently deemed unverifiable does not automatically enjoy an equal probability of eventual confirmation or falsifiability. Though seemingly a sticking point when it comes to religious conviction, Dawkins demonstrates the short-sightedness of such objections. Referencing popular children’s beliefs as well as the work of Bertrand Russell, Dawkins posits:

The fact that orbiting teapots and tooth fairies are undisprovable is not felt, by any reasonable person, to be the kind of fact that settles any interesting argument. None of us feels an obligation to disprove any of the far-fetched things that a fertile or facetious imagination might dream up. I have found it an amusing strategy, when asked whether I am an atheist, to point out that the questioner is also an atheist when considering Zeus, Apollo, Amon Ra, Mithras, Baal, Thor, Wotan, the Golden Calf and the Flying Spaghetti Monster. I just go one god further.<sup>38</sup>

Where NOMA is concerned, Dawkins attempts to pinpoint the reason(s) why so many of the religious and non-religious alike have so readily appealed to its tenet of

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 77.

mutual inapplicability. This, he argues, is less the consequence of the impossibility of scientifically studying religious phenomena and more a result of the current paucity of such efforts.

The presence or absence of a creative super-intelligence is unequivocally a scientific question, even if it is not in practice – or not yet – a decided one. So also is the truth or falsehood of every one of the miracle stories that religions rely upon to impress multitudes of the faithful. Did Jesus have a human father, or was his mother a virgin at the time of his birth? Whether or not there is enough surviving evidence to decide it, this is still a strictly scientific question with a definite answer in principle: yes or no. Did Jesus raise Lazarus from the dead? Did he himself come alive again, three days after being crucified? There is an answer to every such question, whether or not we can discover it in practice, and it is a strictly scientific answer. The methods we should use to settle the matter, in the unlikely event that relevant evidence ever became available, would be purely and entirely scientific methods. To dramatize the point, imagine, by some remarkable set of circumstances, that forensic archaeologists unearthed DNA evidence to show that Jesus really did lack a biological father. Can you imagine religious apologists shrugging their shoulders and saying anything remotely like the following? ‘Who cares? Scientific evidence is completely irrelevant to theological questions. Wrong magisterium! We’re concerned only with ultimate questions and with moral values. Neither DNA nor any other scientific evidence could ever have any bearing on the matter, one way or the other.’ The very idea is a joke. You can bet your boots that the scientific evidence, if any were to turn up, would be seized upon and trumpeted to the skies. NOMA is popular only because there is no evidence to favour the God Hypothesis. The moment there was the smallest suggestion of any evidence in favour of religious belief, religious apologists would lose no time in throwing NOMA out of the window.<sup>39</sup>

In other words, Dawkins maintains that the validity of agnosticism and the adherence to NOMA are current realities, not eternal ones. Just as science has advanced our knowledge of other natural phenomena (disease, natural disasters, astronomical events, etc.) to the point where supernatural explanations are neither required nor desired, Dawkins remains confident that such scholarship shall someday illuminate the dark depths of these and other religious mysteries as well. In the meantime, he bemusedly,

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 82-3.

though somewhat leadingly, asks “Why are scientists so cravenly respectful towards the ambitions of theologians, over questions that theologians are certainly no more qualified to answer than scientists themselves?”<sup>40</sup> Dawkins is, in effect, reminding us that though science may not yet be able to provide a completely plausible account, it does not necessarily stand to reason that theology is either as close (or as far) from a likewise satisfactory explanation. Simply put, uncertainty cannot be presumed to automatically result in a dichotomous fifty-fifty proposition.

In Chapter Three, Dawkins attempts to refute some of the most common arguments for God’s existence, from the metaphysical (St. Anselm’s Ontological Argument, Thomas Aquinas’ Five Proofs, and Pascal’s Wager) to the material (the arguments from beauty, scripture, and personal experience). With biting wit and succinct precision (not all of it his), Dawkins rebukes Anselm’s argument by showing that “it reached such a significant conclusion without feeding in a single piece of data from the real world,” and then by subsequently noting the way(s) in which the Australian philosopher Douglas Gasking once turned the entire argument on its head.<sup>41</sup> I present his contributions below:

1. The creation of the world is the most marvelous achievement imaginable.
2. The merit of an achievement is the product of (a) its intrinsic quality, and (b) the ability of its creator.
3. The greater the disability (or handicap) of the creator, the more impressive the achievement.
4. The most formidable handicap for a creator would be non-existence.
5. Therefore, if we suppose that the universe is the product of an existent creator we can conceive a greater being – namely, one who created everything while not existing.

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 107.

6. An existing God therefore would not be a being greater than which a greater cannot be conceived because an even more formidable and incredible creator would be a God which did not exist.

Ergo:

7. God does not exist.<sup>42</sup>

As Dawkins wryly remarks “Gasking didn’t really prove that God does not exist. By the same token, Anselm didn’t prove that he does. The only difference is, Gasking was being funny on purpose.”<sup>43</sup> But lest one think that the intentional facetiousness of Gasking’s parody is less than Anselm’s argument deserves, allow me to present an excerpt from David Hume’s *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, in which two of the fictional participants, first Cleanthes and then Philo, attempt to respond to Anselm’s claims (and their companion Demea’s defense of them) with admittedly more substance, but all the while with similar derision.

I shall not leave it to Philo, said Cleanthes, though I know that the starting objections is his chief delight, to point out the weakness of this metaphysical reasoning....

I shall begin with observing, that there is an evident absurdity in pretending to demonstrate a matter of fact, or to prove it by any arguments *a priori*. Nothing is demonstrable, unless the contrary implies a contradiction. Nothing, that is distinctly conceivable, implies a contradiction. Whatever we conceive as existent, we can also conceive as non-existent. There is no being, therefore, whose non-existence implies a contradiction. Consequently there is no being, whose existence is demonstrable....

It is pretended that the Deity is a necessarily existent being; and this necessity of his existence is attempted to be explained by asserting, that if we knew his whole essence or nature, we should perceive it to be as impossible for him not to exist, as for twice two not to be four. But it is evident that this can never happen, while our faculties remain the same as at present. It will still be possible for us, at any time, to conceive the non-existence of what we formerly conceived to exist; nor can the mind ever lie under a necessity of supposing any object to remain always in being; in the same manner as we lie under a necessity of always conceiving twice

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 107-8.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 108.

two to be four. The words, therefore, necessary existence, have no meaning; or, which is the same thing, none that is consistent.

But further, why may not the material universe be the necessarily existent being, according to this pretended explication of necessity? We dare not affirm that we know all the qualities of matter; and for aught we can determine, it may contain some qualities, which, were they known, would make its non-existence appear as great a contradiction as that twice two is five. I find only one argument employed to prove, that the material world is not the necessarily existent Being: and this argument is derived from the contingency both of the matter and the form of the world. "Any particle of matter," it is said, "may be conceived to be annihilated; and any form may be conceived to be altered. Such an annihilation or alteration, therefore, is not impossible." But it seems a great partiality not to perceive, that the same argument extends equally to the Deity, so far as we have any conception of him; and that the mind can at least imagine him to be non-existent, or his attributes to be altered. It must be some unknown, inconceivable qualities, which can make his non-existence appear impossible, or his attributes unalterable: and no reason can be assigned, why these qualities may not belong to matter. As they are altogether unknown and inconceivable, they can never be proved incompatible with it....

Though the reasonings which you have urged, Cleanthes, may well excuse me, said Philo, from starting any further difficulties... I shall venture to add an observation, that the argument *a priori* has seldom been found very convincing, except to people of a metaphysical head, who have accustomed themselves to abstract reasoning, and who, finding from mathematics, that the understanding frequently leads to truth through obscurity, and, contrary to first appearances, have transferred the same habit of thinking to subjects where it ought not to have place. Other people, even of good sense and the best inclined to religion, feel always some deficiency in such arguments, though they are not perhaps able to explain distinctly where it lies; a certain truth that men ever did, and ever will derive their religion from other sources than from this species of reasoning.<sup>44</sup>

To return to Dawkins' critique, the first three of Aquinas' proofs Dawkins simply criticizes as leading to an illogical and infinite regress. These arguments, respectively known as the Unmoved Mover, the Uncaused Cause, and the Cosmological Argument, Dawkins argues "rely upon the idea of a regress and invoke God to terminate it. They

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<sup>44</sup> David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1779), 97-101. Western Michigan University, accessed 19 August 2018, <http://homepages.wmich.edu/~mcgrew/HumeDialogues.pdf>.

make the entirely unwarranted assumption that God himself is immune to the regress.”<sup>45</sup>

The fourth proof, the Argument from Degree, Dawkins’ destroys with mere word substitution. Traditionally, the argument states that since goodness exists to varying degrees in various creatures, its maximum quantity (i.e. complete goodness) must reside outside of said creatures. That perfectly good being we call God. Dawkins merely suggests substituting the word smelliness for goodness, and immediately the logic begins to break down. (The fifth proof, the Argument from Design, is the subject of Chapter Four, so I will omit its implications for now.) Pascal’s Wager Dawkins is inherently dismissive of because, as he notes, “there is something distinctly odd about the argument... believing is not something you can decide to do as a matter of policy.”<sup>46</sup>

The more tangible arguments (from beauty, scripture, and personal experience), I will present solely in the guise of Dawkins’ retorts. I believe this truncation will suffice as a serviceable conclusion for the section while still allowing the reader ample opportunity to grasp both the essence of each argument as well as the weight of the author’s challenges.

#### From Beauty:

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<sup>45</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 101. For confirmation of this, one need only return to pages 99 and 100 of Hume’s *Dialogues*. For when attempting to refute Anselm’s argument, Cleanthes addresses the issue of infinite regress as well. “In tracing an eternal succession of objects, it seems absurd to inquire for a general cause or first author. How can any thing, that exists from eternity, have a cause, since that relation implies a priority in time, and a beginning of existence? In such a chain, too, or succession of objects, each part is caused by that which preceded it, and causes that which succeeds it. Where then is the difficulty? But the WHOLE, you say, wants a cause. I answer, that the uniting of these parts into a whole, like the uniting of several distinct countries into one kingdom, or several distinct members into one body, is performed merely by an arbitrary act of the mind, and has no influence on the nature of things. Did I shew you the particular causes of each individual in a collection of twenty particles of matter, I should think it very unreasonable, should you afterwards ask me, what was the cause of the whole twenty. This is sufficiently explained in explaining the cause of the parts.”

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 130. After all, wanting to believe and/or acting (even incessantly) as though one does believe, is still not the same as truly believing. That is simply beyond one’s ability to control. And while, in terms of our interactions one to another, such qualifications may seem a distinction without a difference, presumably to an omniscient deity, the truth would always invariably out, and the ruse, no matter how well-intentioned or acted, would nevertheless ultimately fail.

Obviously Beethoven's late quartets are sublime. So are Shakespeare's sonnets. They are sublime if God is there and they are sublime if he isn't. They do not prove the existence of God; they prove the existence of Beethoven and of Shakespeare.<sup>47</sup>

From Scripture:

Robert Gillooly shows how all the essential features of the Jesus legend, including the star in the east, the virgin birth, the veneration of the baby by kings, the miracles, the execution, the resurrection and the ascension are borrowed – every last one of them – from other religions already in existence in the Mediterranean and Near East region. [Tom] Flynn suggests that Matthew's desire to fulfil messianic prophecies (descent from David, birth in Bethlehem) for the benefit of Jewish readers came into headlong collision with Luke's desire to adapt Christianity for the Gentiles, and hence to press the familiar hot buttons of pagan Hellenistic religions (virgin birth, worship by kings, etc.). The resulting contradictions are glaring, but consistently overlooked by the faithful.... Although Jesus probably existed, reputable biblical scholars do not in general regard the New Testament (and obviously not the Old Testament) as a reliable record of what actually happened in history, and I shall not consider the Bible further as evidence for any kind of deity.<sup>48</sup>

From Personal Experience:

Constructing models is something the human brain is very good at. When we are asleep it is called dreaming; when we are awake we call it imagination or, when it is exceptionally vivid, hallucination. As Chapter 10 will show, children who have 'imaginary friends'

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 110. While the tendency to relativize sublimity (like beauty) to the point of existing solely in the eye of the beholder is understandable, such ostensibly fair-minded sensibilities are quite problematic. As the authors of *The Book of Life* explain "the phrase 'beauty lies in the eye of the beholder' is in reality almost always unwarranted and deeply troublesome. It should, in our view, be avoided at all costs. For a start, no one really believes in it to its core. We may well accept that there can be legitimate differences in taste within a reasonable spectrum; but we don't actually think that all tastes are equal.... we would seldom say that music was in the ears of beholders, we'd have confidence in asserting that (say) Mozart had an edge over 'The Wheels on the Bus go round and round.'" All of this is simply to say that, whatever one considers to be sublime, that experience of transcendent wonder in no way implies supernatural authorship, but rather confirms this universal (and entirely natural) facet of human existence. "Why You Should Never Say: 'Beauty Lies in the Eye of the Beholder,'" in *The Book of Life*, The School of Life, accessed 27 August 2018, <https://www.theschooloflife.com/thebookoflife/why-you-should-never-say-beauty-lies-in-the-eye-of-the-beholder/>.

<sup>48</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 119-20, 122-3.



sometimes see them clearly, exactly as if they were real.<sup>49</sup> If we are gullible, we don't recognize hallucination or lucid dreaming for what it is and we claim to have seen or heard a ghost; or an angel; or God; or – especially if we happen to be young, female and Catholic – the Virgin Mary.<sup>50</sup> Such visions and manifestations are certainly not good grounds for believing that ghosts or angels, gods or virgins, are actually there.... That is really all that needs to be said about personal 'experiences' of gods or other religious phenomena. If you've had such an experience, you may well find yourself believing firmly that it was real. But don't expect the rest of us to take your word for it, especially if we have the slightest familiarity with the brain and its powerful workings.<sup>51</sup>

In Chapter Four, "Why There Almost Certainly is No God," Dawkins states that "the theory of natural selection is genuinely simple. So is the origin from which it starts. That which it explains, on the other hand, is complex almost beyond telling: more complex than anything we can imagine, save a God capable of designing it."<sup>52</sup> First, he seeks to identify the most common objections; these he lists as the argument from improbability, the argument from irreducible complexity, the God-of-the-Gaps

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<sup>49</sup> As Vaughan Bell explains, "Childhood has long been championed as a time for make-believe, but recent research has found that another form of unreality – hallucinations – is more common in children than we previously imagined. For years, kids' accounts of seeing, hearing and experiencing things that weren't really there were considered to be part of the same invented world – an "overactive imagination"; a "fantasy world". The Alice in Wonderland approach, perhaps. But as it was recognised that hallucinations can be reliably identified in children, science has begun to look at why these illusory experiences are many times more common during our early years.... Recent studies have thrown up some surprising statistics about how common they are. One UK study found that almost two-thirds of children reported having at least one 'psychotic-like experience' in their lives, a category that also includes unshiftable and unrealistic beliefs and fears. When focusing purely on hallucinations, a review of research found that 17% of 9-12-year-olds have these experiences at any one time. The number roughly halves in teenagers and drops again in adults. Since this type of research tends to focus on experiences that are selected because they can appear in mental health problems in adults, such as hearing voices, which are only a small part of the possible range of hallucinations, these figures are likely to be a low estimate." Vaughan Bell, "Childhood Hallucinations are Surprisingly Common – But Why?" *The Guardian*, 7 June 2015, accessed 27 August 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2015/jun/07/childhood-hallucinations-common-research-psychotic-schizophrenia-why>.

<sup>50</sup> Here Dawkins is most likely referring to the numerous mass-witnessed, canonically-approved supernatural appearances of the Virgin Mary, generally referred to as Marion apparitions. The most famous of these instances include Our Lady of Guadalupe in 1531, Our Lady of Lourdes in 1858, Our Lady of Fatima in 1917, and Our Lady of Banneux in 1933, the last three of which were initially reported by young girls.

<sup>51</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 116-117.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 180.

hypothesis, and the anthropic principle. He then goes on to explain how Darwin's theory either effectively refutes or explains the rationale, and thus the appeal, behind each of them.

As Dawkins admits at the onset of the chapter, "The argument from improbability is the big one."<sup>53</sup> This, he believes, is because evolution is in some ways counterintuitive to basic human understanding. He credits Daniel Dennett with pinpointing this misconception. "The idea that it takes a big fancy smart thing to make a lesser thing. I call that the trickle-down theory of creation. You'll never see a spear making a spear maker. You'll never see a horse shoe making a blacksmith. You'll never see a pot making a potter.' Darwin's discovery of a workable process that does that very counterintuitive thing is what makes his contribution to human thought so revolutionary, and so loaded with the power to raise consciousness."<sup>54</sup> But just how might this process occur? Dawkins begins by providing the basic framework of the traditional argument against its feasibility. "The argument from improbability states that complex things could not have come about by chance. But many people define 'come about by chance' as a synonym for 'come about in the absence of deliberate design.' Not surprisingly, therefore, they think improbability is evidence of design."<sup>55</sup> What one must do as a result is explain the role (if any) that chance plays in the process.

Genetic mutations occur quite frequently and at all levels of life; these are random in the truest sense of the word. However, whether or not those alterations are passed down through each successive generation is not. Only those characteristics which provide some timely and tangible advantage (no matter how rudimentary or incremental) allow

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 137.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 142.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 139.

the individual specimens who possess them to outlast or outflank their reproductive competition in the ongoing struggle for life. *Survival of the fittest*.<sup>56</sup> But this point is perhaps better made in Dawkins' subsequent discussions on the argument from irreducible complexity.

As Dawkins explains:

What is it that makes natural selection succeed as a solution to the problem of improbability, where chance and design both fail at the starting gate? The answer is that natural selection is a cumulative process, which breaks the problem of improbability up into small pieces. Each of the small pieces is slightly improbable, but not prohibitively so. When large numbers of these slightly improbable events are stacked up in series, the end product of the accumulation is very very improbable indeed, improbable enough to be far beyond the reach of chance.<sup>57</sup>

Historically, such an argument has been countered by the presentation of an adaptation or organ believed to be so complex that “the removal of one of its parts causes the whole to

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<sup>56</sup> In a study on the correlation between artistic creativity and mental illness, author Daniel Nettle writes “the cystic fibrosis gene is clearly very damaging when it leads to the disease. However, natural selection has not, as yet, removed it from the human gene pool. This is probably because having one copy of the disease variant does the bearer no harm and might even do some good” (*Strong Imagination: Madness, Creativity and Human Nature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 60.) Incidentally, the good to which Nettle is referring is known as *heterozygote advantage*, and refers to, in the case of the cystic fibrosis gene, a natural resistance to cholera and other “dehydratory” illnesses. A similar argument has been made regarding the inborn resistance to malaria by those who possess the so-called “sickle cell trait” (See DJ Weatherall et. al., “Malaria and the Red Cell,” *Hematology Am Soc Hematol Educ Program* (2002):35-57.). However, I would argue that such examples are anecdotal at best and dangerously misleading at worst. After all, these two cases alone hardly serve to balance the six thousand or so other examples of genetic diseases and disorders for which there is no known silver lining or corollary reason to persist (“Hope Through Knowledge,” *Genetic Disease Foundation*, 2010, accessed 17 April 2015, <http://www.geneticdiseasefoundation.org/>.) As Richard Dawkins states on page 304 of *Unweaving the Rainbow*, “genes will spread by reason of pure parasitic effectiveness, as in a virus. We may think this spreading for the sake of spreading rather futile, but nature is not interested in our judgments, of futility or of anything else. If a piece of code has what it takes, it spreads and that’s that.” (*Unweaving the Rainbow: Science, Delusion and the Appetite for Wonder* (Boston: Mariner Books, 1998).) On page 392 of *The Greatest Show on Earth*, Dawkins makes the point even more forcefully. “Futility? What nonsense. Sentimental, human nonsense. Natural selection is *all* futile. It is all about the survival of self-replicating instructions for self-replication. If a variant of DNA survives through an anaconda swallowing me whole, or a variant of RNA survives by making me sneeze, then that is all we need by way of explanation.” (*The Greatest Show on Earth: The Evidence for Evolution* (New York: Free Press, 2009).)

<sup>57</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 147.

cease functioning.”<sup>58</sup> The most common examples given have been the wing and the eye, adaptations that have long manifested themselves in nature in myriad ways and in very disparate species. Dawkins once again explains the misconception:

As soon as we give these assumptions a moment’s thought, we immediately see the fallacy. A cataract patient with the lens of her eye surgically removed can’t see clear images without glasses, but can see enough not to bump into a tree or fall over a cliff. Half a wing is indeed not as good as a whole wing, but it is certainly better than no wing at all. Half a wing could save your life by easing your fall from a tree of a certain height. And 51 per cent of a wing could save you if you fall from a slightly taller tree. Whatever fraction of a wing you have, there is a fall from which it will save your life where a slightly smaller winglet would not. The thought experiment of trees of different height, from which one might fall, is just one way to see, in theory, that there must be a smooth gradient of advantage all the way from 1 per cent of a wing to 100 per cent. The forests are replete with gliding or parachuting animals illustrating, in practice, every step of the way up that particular slope of Mount Improbable.<sup>59</sup>

The God-of-the-Gaps hypothesis Dawkins treats with even more disdain. He laments: “it is precisely the fact that ID [Intelligent Design] has no evidence of its own, but thrives like a weed in gaps left by scientific knowledge, that sits uneasily with science’s need to identify and proclaim the very same gaps as a prelude to researching them.”<sup>60</sup>

Here is the message that an imaginary ‘intelligent design theorist’ might broadcast to scientists: ‘If you don’t understand how something works, never mind: just give up and say God did it. You don’t know how the nerve impulse works? Good! You don’t understand how memories are laid down in the brain? Excellent! Is photosynthesis a bafflingly complex process? Wonderful! Please don’t go to work on the problem, just give up, and appeal to God. Dear scientist, don’t work on your mysteries. Bring us your mysteries, for we can use them. Don’t squander precious ignorance by researching it away. We need those glorious gaps as a last refuge for God.’<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 153.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 159.

The anthropic principle is sometimes referred to as the argument from fine-tuning. It is basically an appeal to an intentionally designed Goldilocksian universe, in which every substance, every law, and every process is precisely tuned to allow for both life and the universe that contains it to have developed exactly as they have. One slight variation and the whole thing would either cease to be or never have existed in the first place. This can be applied on both a planetary and a cosmological scale. Such questions/arguments along this line of thinking include, “Why is there life on earth?” “Why is there something instead of nothing?” “Mustn’t such precision indicate that some sort of (divine) mind is responsible?” Once again, Dawkins’ response is stunningly simple, yet profoundly provocative.

Natural selection works because it is a cumulative one-way street to improvement. It needs some luck to get started, and the ‘billions of planets’ anthropic principle grants it that luck... We live on a planet that is friendly to our kind of life, and we have seen two reasons why this is so. One is that life has evolved to flourish in the conditions provided by the planet. This is because of natural selection. The other reason is the anthropic one. There are billions of planets in the universe, and, however small the minority of evolution-friendly planets may be, our planet necessarily has to be one of them.<sup>62</sup>

Thus, rather than proving the need for a designer, the anthropic principle actually demonstrates that, statistically speaking, such a designer is indeed superfluous. Both the “creation” of the cosmos and the evolution of life upon (at least) one planet within it can remain highly improbable events, and yet still be reasonably expected to occur with at least the frequency and in precisely the manner in which they have. Never one to let sleeping dogs lie, Dawkins also offers some telling examples which demonstrate, at best

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 169.

an inherent *lack* of design, and at worst an inattentiveness or malevolence of some sort on the part of the would-be designer.

Darwinism raises our consciousness in other ways. Evolved organs, elegant and efficient as they often are, also demonstrate revealing flaws – exactly as you’d expect if they have an evolutionary history, and exactly as you would not expect if they were designed. I have discussed examples in other books: the recurrent laryngeal nerve, for one, which betrays its evolutionary history in a massive and wasteful detour on its way to its destination. Many of our human ailments, from lower back pain to hernias, prolapsed uteruses and our susceptibility to sinus infections, result directly from the fact that we now walk upright with a body that was shaped over hundreds of millions of years to walk on all fours. Our consciousness is also raised by the cruelty and wastefulness of natural selection. Predators seem beautifully ‘designed’ to catch prey animals, while the prey animals seem equally beautifully ‘designed’ to escape them. Whose side is God on?<sup>63</sup>

Because Dawkins’ fifth chapter, “The Roots of Religion,” is in many ways a microcosm of Daniel Dennett’s entire book, my treatment of its contents here will be comparatively brief. Like Dennett, Dawkins is primarily interested not in the sociological or historical origins but in the evolutionary roots and the Darwinian imperative(s) of religion, and he offers a number of plausible reasons for its continued existence. Wanting to distinguish these so-called “ultimate” explanations from more proximate ones, Dawkins clarifies: “the question of whether religions are deliberately designed by cynical priests or rulers is an interesting one, to which historians should attend. But it is not, in itself, a Darwinian question. The Darwinian still wants to know why people are *vulnerable* to the charms of religion and therefore open to exploitation by priests, politicians and kings.”<sup>64</sup> Among the more prominent theories that Dawkins’ wishes to

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 161.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 197.

discuss in service of this end, there are two of special significance: group selection theory and the by-product hypothesis.<sup>65</sup>

While not a strong supporter of group selection theory himself, Dawkins nevertheless acknowledges that “those of us who belittle group selection admit that in principle it can happen. The question is whether it amounts to a significant force in evolution. When it is pitted against selection at lower levels – as when group selection is advanced as an explanation for individual self-sacrifice – lower-level selection is likely to be stronger.”<sup>66</sup> In Chapter Six, he offers two possible reasons for the theory’s prolonged (and ultimately misplaced) popularity: kin selection and the notion of reciprocal altruism.

In the interest of full disclosure, Dawkins later admits that “the general theory of religion as an accidental by-product – a misfiring of something useful – is the one I wish to advocate.”<sup>67</sup> To illustrate this tendency to misfire, Dawkins describes what we might call the “self-immolation behavior” of moths.

Moths fly into the candle flame, and it doesn’t look like an accident.... Artificial light is a recent arrival on the night scene. Until recently, the only night lights on view were the moon and the stars. They are at optical infinity, so rays coming from them are parallel. This fits them for use as compasses. Insects are known to use celestial objects such as the sun and the moon to steer accurately in a straight line, and they can use the same compass, with reversed sign, for returning home after a foray.... But the light compass relies critically on the celestial object being at optical infinity. If it isn’t, the rays are not parallel but diverge like the spokes of a wheel. A nervous system applying a 30-degree (or any acute angle) rule of thumb to a nearby candle, as though it were the moon at optical infinity, will steer the moth, via a spiral trajectory, into the flame.... Though fatal in this particular circumstance, the moth’s rule of thumb is still, on average, a good one because, for a moth, sightings of candles are rare

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<sup>65</sup> Group selection theory is hereby defined as natural selection acting collectively upon members of a particular group wherein the group benefits though each individual member may not. The by-product hypothesis is defined as those instances in which normally adaptive and beneficial traits occasionally backfire with often negative consequences. (See Dawkins’ example of self-immolating moths on the next page for an example of this phenomenon.)

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 199.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 218.

compared with sightings of the moon. We don't notice the hundreds of moths that are silently and effectively steering by the moon or a bright star, or even the glow from a distant city. We see only moths wheeling into our candle, and we ask the wrong question: Why are all these moths committing suicide? Instead, we should ask why they have nervous systems that steer by maintaining a fixed angle to light rays, a tactic that we notice only where it goes wrong. When the question is rephrased, the mystery evaporates. It never was right to call it suicide. It is a misfiring byproduct of a normally useful compass.<sup>68</sup>

Dawkins goes on to explain how this behavior might similarly manifest itself in

humans:

My specific hypothesis is about children. More than any other species, we survive by the accumulated experience of previous generations, and that experience needs to be passed on to children for their protection and well-being. Theoretically, children might learn from personal experience not to go too near a cliff edge, not to eat untried red berries, not to swim in crocodile-infested waters. But, to say the least, there will be a selective advantage to child brains that possess the rule of thumb: believe, without question, whatever your grown-ups tell you. Obey your parents; obey the tribal elders, especially when they adopt a solemn, minatory tone. Trust your elders without question. This is a generally valuable rule for a child. But, as with the moths, it can go wrong... the flip side of trusting obedience is slavish gullibility. The inevitable by-product is vulnerability to infection by mind viruses. For excellent reasons related to Darwinian survival, child brains need to trust parents, and elders whom parents tell them to trust. An automatic consequence is that the truster has no way of distinguishing good advice from bad. The child cannot know that 'Don't paddle in the crocodile-infested Limpopo' is good advice but 'You must sacrifice a goat at the time of the full moon, otherwise the rains will fail' is at best a waste of time and goats. Both admonitions sound equally trustworthy. Both come from a respected source and are delivered with a solemn earnestness that commands respect and, demands obedience. The same goes for propositions about the world, about the cosmos, about morality and about human nature. And, very likely, when the child grows up and has children of her own, she will naturally pass the whole lot on to her own children – nonsense as well as sense – using the same infectious gravitas of manner.<sup>69</sup>

In essence, Dawkins is arguing that what allows these individual instances of nonsense to be passed down along with the valuable bits of useful information is that the

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 201-2.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 203, 205.



basic Darwinian framework – that children should listen to their parents/elders – is, for the most part, sound. This, in many ways, parallels the “behaviors” of certain genes which pass down specifically because they are best suited to do so, regardless of what their ultimate effect(s) may be on the organism as a whole. For this reason, Dawkins decides to give this practice a name that implies such similarities of both structure and purpose. Intended as an amalgam between the word *gene* and that of the ancient Greek word, “mīmēisthai,” meaning “to imitate or to copy,” Dawkins created the word “meme.”<sup>70</sup> And as he subsequently explains, “as with genes in a gene pool, the memes that prevail will be the ones that are good at getting themselves copied.”<sup>71</sup> Thus, religion may have been able to endure, irrespective of its ultimate value to the human species. Perhaps for some it remains a reliable compass, illuminating their way in an otherwise dark world, while for others it leads them, sadly and mistakenly, headlong into the flame.

In Chapter Six, “The Roots of Morality: Why are We Good?”, Dawkins explores the possibility that morality may likewise be the by-product of other biologically-useful evolutionary processes. As he states “this chapter is about evil, and its opposite, good; about morality, where it comes from, why we should embrace it, and whether we need religion to do so.”<sup>72</sup> For a Darwinian explanation of this phenomenon, he returns to the two concepts he mentioned in the previous chapter: kin selection and the notion of reciprocal altruism. The first of these he demonstrates quite simply and succinctly. “A gene that programs individual organisms to favour their genetic kin is statistically likely

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<sup>70</sup> “Meme,” Dictionary.com, 2016, accessed 18 July 2016.  
<http://www.dictionary.com/browse/meme>.

<sup>71</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 228.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 245.

to benefit copies of itself.”<sup>73</sup> In other words, the so-called “selfish gene” can manifest that selfishness by encouraging or otherwise allowing its host organism to display protective and nurturing concern towards those with whom it shares its hereditary makeup. (As it is survival of the gene itself that is paramount, not the individual organism in which it resides, this seems a most sensible arrangement.)

Reciprocal altruism, on the other hand, does not depend upon shared genes. “Indeed it works just as well, probably even better, between members of widely different species, when it is often called symbiosis. The principle is the basis of all trade and barter in humans too. The hunter needs a spear and the smith wants meat. The asymmetry brokers a deal.”<sup>74</sup> Explaining the way(s) in which the correlative concept of delayed gratification (an often necessary scaffold in the overall structure of the relationship) manifests itself specifically in humans, Dawkins adds “Natural selection favours genes that predispose individuals, in relationships of asymmetric need and opportunity, to give when they can, and to solicit giving when they can’t. It also favours tendencies to remember obligations, bear grudges, police exchange relationships and punish cheats who take, but don’t give when their turn comes.”<sup>75</sup> It is certainly possible to envision how most (if not all) rudimentary notions of human morality could have developed under such evolutionary conditions. Nevertheless, he notes that even these have a tendency to misfire as well.

In ancestral times, we had the opportunity to be altruistic only towards close kin and potential reciprocators. Nowadays that restriction is no longer there, but the rule of thumb persists. Why would it not? It is just like sexual desire. We can no more help ourselves feeling pity when we see a weeping unfortunate (who is unrelated and unable to reciprocate)

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 247.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 248.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 248-9.

than we can help ourselves feeling lust for a member of the opposite sex (who may be infertile or otherwise unable to reproduce). Both are misfirings, Darwinian mistakes: blessed, precious mistakes.<sup>76</sup>

The ultimate aim of Dawkins' argument is not to make a value judgment upon this modern-day circumstance, but simply to demonstrate that morality need not (indeed cannot) be considered absolute and eternal. Like the organisms in which they reside, morals are constantly subjected to both the biological and cultural demands of incessant evolution. To declare them as both timeless and specifically tethered to a particular faith or tradition is to paradoxically and pugnaciously miss the point.

As proof of this, Chapter Seven, "The 'Good' Book and the Changing Moral *Zeitgeist*," offers numerous examples of so-called timeless and unconditional moral imperatives found within scripture and then demonstrates the way(s) in which the great majority of them are either, he says, distinctly *immoral* or, at the very least, no longer considered binding in today's society. After proceeding through a veritable laundry list of Old Testament stories, the likes of which are so generally well known as to not require further elaboration here – Noah and the Flood, Lot and the destruction of Sodom, Abraham and the near murder of his son Isaac, Moses and the conquering of the Promised Land – Dawkins explains precisely how and why such stories reveal not moral absolutism but cultural relativism of a most obvious sort.

Of course, irritated theologians will protest that we don't take the book of Genesis literally any more. But that is my whole point! We pick and choose which bits of scripture to believe, which bits to write off as symbols or allegories. Such picking and choosing is a matter of personal decision, just as much, or as little, as the atheist's decision to follow this moral precept or that was a personal decision without an absolute foundation. If one of these is 'morality flying by the seat of its pants', so is the other.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 253.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 269.

Turning his attentions to the New Testament, Dawkins actually offers none other than Jesus of Nazareth in support of his previous claims.

Jesus' ethical teachings were – at least by comparison with the ethical disaster area that is the Old Testament – admirable; but... the moral superiority of Jesus precisely bears out my point. Jesus was not content to derive his ethics from the scriptures of his upbringing. He explicitly departed from them, for example when he deflated the dire warnings about breaking the sabbath. 'The sabbath was made for man, not man for the sabbath' has been generalized into a wise proverb. Since a principal thesis of this chapter is that we do not, and should not, derive our morals from scripture, Jesus has to be honoured as a model for that very thesis.<sup>78</sup>

Dawkins nevertheless goes on to demonstrate the ways in which many of the New Testament morals that we still hold to be worthy in today's society were actually much narrower in their original scope and intent. By showing that such long respected pronouncements as "love thy neighbor" and "thou shalt not kill" were initially meant to apply only to the Jewish community (oftentimes at the devastating expense of their most proximate co-inhabitants) he hopes to make plain that

religion is undoubtedly a divisive force, and this is one of the main accusations levelled against it. But it is frequently and rightly said that wars, and feuds between religious groups or sects, are seldom actually about theological disagreements. When an Ulster Protestant paramilitary murders a Catholic, he is not muttering to himself, 'Take that, transubstantiationist, mariolatrous, incense-reeking bastard!' He is much more likely to be avenging the death of another Protestant killed by another Catholic, perhaps in the course of a sustained transgenerational vendetta. Religion is a *label* of in-group/out-group enmity and vendetta, not necessarily worse than other labels such as skin colour, language or preferred football team, but often available when other labels are not.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>78</sup>Ibid., 284.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 294. As the last sentence of the above quotation demonstrates, Dawkins is not arguing for religion's exclusive ownership of this phenomenon, but is rather simply attempting to demonstrate that though underlying political, economic, and/or social considerations might lie at the heart of many ostensibly religious conflicts (the medieval Christian Crusades, the sixteenth century Thirty Years' War, the contemporary Buddhist persecutions of Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar, etc.), it is the disparate, often irreconcilable religious zealotry of one or both parties that is exploited in order to inspire and incite violence against one's perceived enemies. In other words, the "higher purpose" often associated with religious acts serves to trump or mask more material (i.e. earthly) concerns.

To understand how such biblically-limited moral constructs as love for one's neighbor and the imperative not to take the life of another communal relation could have eventually been extended to encompass a fundamental respect and love for all human beings, Dawkins turns to recent examples (both positive and negative) of the changing moral zeitgeist in our own time and culture. Referencing society's changing attitudes towards racial equality, women's suffrage, the conduct of war, and the rights of animals, etc., Dawkins is able to demonstrate a sort of underlying, but undeniable moral progress towards egalitarianism and empathy for all. This he contrasts with the viewpoints of our Victorian counterparts, whose disparate views on race, gender, and common equality are hardly thought to be enlightened by today's standards, but were considered very much so by the measures and milieus of their own. Morals change, and we must be willing to reevaluate our perceptions of both past and present as a result.

In summation and support of this point, Dawkins references two twentieth-century public figures to whom the judgment of history has not been kind: Adolph Hitler and Joseph Stalin. Although generally acknowledged to be immoral (or at the very least amoral) today, neither was initially considered so by either the Catholic Church or the so-called intelligentsia of the West. After all, Hitler's Nazi regime depended heavily upon the silent, obedient consent of the Church and the faithful service of its members, much as Stalin's Soviet empire demanded absolute allegiance from the whole of its citizenry to

both his party and his person.<sup>80</sup> This fact notwithstanding, both men are now often seen as the standard-bearers of atheism and as cautionary tales of the evil(s) it supposedly entails. Dawkins' point is that, regardless of their private religious beliefs (or lack thereof), their respective movements embraced both the structure and the rhetoric of organized religion in order to realize their ambitions. As Dawkins concludes "individual atheists may do evil things but they don't do evil things in the name of atheism... why would anyone go to war for the sake of an *absence* of belief?"<sup>81</sup>

In Chapter Eight, "What's Wrong with Religion? Why Be So Hostile," Dawkins addresses the oft-repeated criticism that his customary defense of Darwinism (and of scientific principles and practices, more generally) reeks of the same sort of absolutism for which he decries the religiously-minded. That said, the majority of his arguments are arranged not so much as an apology for his behavior but instead as an open warning to all those who insist that benign neglect is a much more appropriate, benevolent and constructive (non)response to fundamentalism of a more religious persuasion. The speciousness of this logic he expresses by examining, largely via anecdote, the detriments to science and the injuries to personal liberty that religion (in both its moderate *and* fundamentalist forms) continues to inflict and invite.

The charge of fundamentalism he rebuts with scornful simplicity.

It is all too easy to confuse fundamentalism with passion. I may well appear passionate when I defend evolution against a fundamentalist creationist, but this is not because of a rival fundamentalism of my own. It is because the evidence for evolution is overwhelmingly strong and I am

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<sup>80</sup> Modern-day North Korea is, in many ways, an amalgam of the two. Ostensibly a secular state, the only religions permitted to exist free from persecution are those which have carefully aligned their own interests with those of the ruling political party (the Worker's Party of Korea) and the Kim family specifically. The cult of personality that has surrounded the ruling members of the Kim family both during their time in power and beyond (as apocryphal stories concerning their respective births, deaths, and supposedly divine attributes attest) is evidence of this superficially secular though truly reverential society.

<sup>81</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 315-6.

passionately distressed that my opponent can't see it - or, more usually, refuses to look at it because it contradicts his holy book... Books about evolution are believed not because they are holy. They are believed because they present overwhelming quantities of mutually buttressed evidence. In principle, any reader can go and check that evidence. When a science book is wrong, somebody eventually discovers the mistake and it is corrected in subsequent books. That conspicuously doesn't happen with holy books.<sup>82</sup>

To illustrate the ways in which fundamentalism subverts science, Dawkins relates the story of Kurt Wise, an Ivy-League-educated geologist, who, despite all available evidence to the contrary found himself unable to depart from the creationist teachings of his youth. Here, Dawkins allows Wise to speak for himself. "As I shared with my professors years ago when I was in college, if all the evidence in the universe turns against creationism, I would be the first to admit it, but I would still be a creationist because that is what the Word of God seems to indicate.

Here I must stand."<sup>83</sup> Dawkins then laments, "I am hostile to religion because of what it did to Kurt Wise. And if it did that to a Harvard-educated geologist, just think what it can do to others less gifted and less well armed."<sup>84</sup>

To show the harm of absolutism in its myriad religious forms, Dawkins discusses the offenses of blasphemy and apostasy which still carry, throughout most of the Islamic and some of the Christian world, an unduly harsh and irreversible penalty. "It is pure thoughtcrime, to use George Orwell's *1984* terminology, and the official punishment for it under Islamic law is death."<sup>85</sup> He follows a similar vein of logic when discussing the likewise victimless "crime" of homosexuality. To communicate this circumstance, he relies on the admittedly-tragic biography of Alan Turing, father of the modern computer

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 320, 319.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 323.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 325.

and instrumental contributor in the successful Allied effort to break the German Enigma code machine during the Second World War, who committed suicide after having been convicted of the crime of “indecentcy.” As Dawkins laments:

When Turing’s role was no longer top secret, he should have been knighted and fêted as a saviour of his nation. Instead, this gentle, stammering, eccentric genius was destroyed, for a ‘crime’, committed in private, which harmed nobody. Once again, the unmistakable trademark of the faith-based moralizer is to care passionately about what other people do (or even think) in *private*.<sup>86</sup>

The next section of the chapter, Dawkins dedicates to the anti/abortion debate still raging across the cultural landscape of America. This debate is generally tethered to religious fervor of one stripe or another and almost always takes the form of an absolute respect for the sanctity (and potential) of all human life. This Dawkins not so much challenges as contextualizes, by demonstrating that the fundamentalist’s commitment to both of these precepts is neither unqualified nor steadfast. By recounting a number of recent murders committed by anti-abortionists in America, Dawkins is able to demonstrate that one’s respect for the sanctity of human life does not necessarily extend beyond the womb.<sup>87</sup>

Of course, it might be possible to argue that the potential (and thus ultimate destiny) of the fetus was still unwritten, while the abortion doctor(s) had already made

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 327. And while secular ethicists may appear equally concerned with one’s private thoughts, I would suggest that their focus is much more so on the outward consequences of those thoughts than of their specific contents. In other words, morals are the abstract, often religiously inspired principles on which one’s *individual* judgments of right and wrong are based. Conversely, ethics are principles of right conduct conceived of in strictly social/interactive terms.

<sup>87</sup> One might continue this line of thinking to include anti-abortionists’ general antipathy toward the operation of women’s reproductive and gynecological clinics (Planned Parenthood being the most prominent) which, in addition to performing abortions, also offer the knowledge and resources to minimize the number of unplanned and/or unwanted pregnancies in their communities. Similarly, the lack of support for funding such social safety nets as the Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP), Women, Infants, and Children nutritional services (WIC), Welfare, etc., seems to suggest simply a pro-birth policy rather than the much more holistic pro-life platform they supposedly espouse.



their own metaphorical beds and were simply being made to lie in them. This argument is sometimes referred to as “The Great Beethoven Fallacy.” Dawkins outlines it by quoting from its believed creator, Maurice Baring, who himself cast it in the guise of an imagined dialogue between two doctors.

‘About the terminating of pregnancy, I want your opinion. The father was syphilitic, the mother tuberculous. Of the four children born, the first was blind, the second died, the third was deaf and dumb, the fourth was also tuberculous. What would you have done?’

‘I would have terminated the pregnancy.’

‘Then you would have murdered Beethoven.’<sup>88</sup>

Biographical errors aside (and there are several), Dawkins’ ultimate point in passing on this story is to demonstrate into just how ludicrous and limiting a corner such thinking ultimately paints one. He explains, “the logical conclusion to the ‘human potential’ argument is that we potentially deprive a human soul of the gift of existence every time we fail to seize any opportunity for sexual intercourse. Every refusal of any offer of copulation by a fertile individual is, by this dopey ‘pro-life’ logic, tantamount to the murder of a potential child!”<sup>89</sup> Such an argument is obviously incompatible with the imperatives to modesty and decorum that so often accompany sexual guidelines for religious individuals, particularly women. One wonders which of these beliefs/behaviors is to take precedence when they invariably come into conflict with one another? Who or what can say? Certainly not religion.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 337.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 339.

<sup>90</sup> While one could reasonably argue that the many condemnations of male (and presumably female) masturbation, sodomy, and bestiality by the Abrahamic faiths takes care of one side of this potentiality equation, female menstruation cannot be similarly controlled by a simple act of will or extinguished by threats of violence to one’s person and/or soul. How then is this missed opportunity to create life to be prevented and/or punished when the circumstances dictate? This seems a far more difficult question for the religious to answer, in both moral and logistical terms.

In closing the chapter, Dawkins admits that while there are many among the religious whose more moderate views should not be conflated or confused with those of the fundamentalists whom he has just critiqued, even their comparatively temperate views are not without risks of their own. As Dawkins explains “the teachings of ‘moderate’ religion, though not extremist in themselves, are an open invitation to extremism. It might be said that there is nothing special about religious faith here. Patriotic love of country or ethnic group can also make the world safe for its own version of extremism, can’t it?”<sup>91</sup> The problem, as Dawkins sees it, is that “Christianity, just as much as Islam, teaches children that unquestioned faith is a virtue.”<sup>92</sup> To demonstrate the devastating though possibly unintentional consequences of such belief and in respect for such belief, Dawkins posits a timely hypothesis:

Suicide bombers do what they do because they really believe what they were taught in their religious schools: that duty to God exceeds all other priorities, and that martyrdom in his service will be rewarded in the gardens of Paradise. And they were taught that lesson not necessarily by extremist fanatics but by decent, gentle, mainstream religious instructors, who lined them up in their madrasas, sitting in rows, rhythmically nodding their innocent little heads up and down while they learned every word of the holy book like demented parrots. Faith can be very very dangerous,

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<sup>91</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 346.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

and deliberately to implant it into the vulnerable mind of an innocent child is a grievous wrong.<sup>93</sup>

Chapter Nine, “Childhood, Abuse and the Escape from Religion,” begins with the story of six-year-old Edgardo Mortara, who in 1858, was kidnapped by papal police from his home in Bologna, Italy, forcibly relocated to a religious conversion house in Rome, and “thereafter brought up as a Roman Catholic.”<sup>94</sup> Although unquestionably the child of Jewish parents, the papacy justified this action on the grounds that a secret baptism, performed years earlier (by the child’s teenage babysitter no less), had forever rendered young Edgardo a Catholic. Once this baptism had come to the Church’s attention, leaving the child in the incompetent hands of his Christ-killing, Jewish parents was simply not an option; to do so, from their perspective, would have been grievously immoral. Better, they thought, to separate him from his entire world in order to save his young, yet nevertheless immortal, soul. Though admittedly an extreme example (at least by today’s standards), young Edgardo’s story serves to both ground and to buttress Dawkins’ central point of the chapter. As he explains, “even without physical abduction, isn’t it always a form of child abuse to label children as possessors of beliefs that they are too young to

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 348. To those who would point to other instances of historical suicide squads – such as the 300 Spartans at Thermopylae or the Japanese Kamikaze pilots of World War II – as evidence of secular motivations for self-sacrifice in war, I would offer two retorts. The first is simply to reference Dawkins’ comment on the previous page that “patriotic love of country or ethnic group can also make the world safe for its own version of extremism, can’t it?” But finding that explanation inadequate, I would add that in the case of both the Spartans and the Japanese, underlying cultural and/or religious beliefs about honor, duty, and everlasting glory and/or eternal reward were also contributing factors to their similarly sacrificial acts. For the Spartans, it was most likely a place in the Elysian Fields that they sought, a paradisiacal afterlife reserved solely for the righteous and heroic deceased of Greek society. For the Japanese pilots, evidence for the religious connotations of their actions is present in the very name with which they are most often ascribed. *Kamikaze* translates literally as “god (or divine) wind,” and was meant to reference the typhoons of 1274 and 1281 that were supposedly sent by the gods of Japan to save them from the would-be Mongol invasions of Kublai Khan. What’s more, the honor-shame dynamics in which both cultures were steeped makes a similar case for Dawkins’ final claim that “faith can be very very dangerous, and deliberately to implant it into the vulnerable mind of an innocent child is a grievous wrong.”

<sup>94</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 349.

have thought about? Yet the practice persists to this day, almost entirely unquestioned. To question it is my main purpose in this chapter.”<sup>95</sup>

In order to do so, Dawkins begins by distinguishing the more popularly understood and rightly condemned varieties of physical abuse (such as those deplorable actions taken by pedophile priests and sadistic schoolmarm nuns) from the less considered forms of psychological abuse (the soul-crushing guilt for sins real or imagined, the all-encompassing fear of an eternity in hell, etc.) to which religions are rarely, if ever, held accountable. Dawkins offers two explanations for this. One: the latter are not abusive if they are true, and two: even if they aren't, surely the physical damage is more crippling than the psychological. Dawkins is decidedly and derisively dismissive of the first proposition, but his scorn for the second he defends thusly:

‘Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me.’ The adage is true as long as you don't really *believe* the words. But if your whole upbringing, and everything you have ever been told by parents, teachers and priests, has led you to believe, *really believe*, utterly and completely, that sinners burn in hell (or some other obnoxious article of doctrine such as that a woman is the property of her husband), it is entirely plausible that words could have a more long-lasting and damaging effect than deeds. I am persuaded that the phrase ‘child abuse’ is no exaggeration when used to describe what teachers and priests are doing to children whom they encourage to believe in something like the punishment of unshriven mortal sins in an eternal hell.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 354. One might include the equally extreme crimes of slavery and other forms of human trafficking as well as the seemingly more benign instances of missionary work and/or cross-cultural adoption in which the beliefs of another culture are routinely imprinted upon individuals who often lack the means and/or the will to resist.

<sup>96</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 357-8.

In support of this, he recounts interviews he held with American evangelical pastor Ted Haggard (since infamously disgraced, though once again with a congregation)<sup>97</sup> and Keenan Roberts, whose “Hell House” exhibitions Dawkins vividly describes as places:

where children are brought, by their parents or their Christian schools, to be scared witless over what might happen to them after they die. Actors play out fearsome tableaux of particular ‘sins’ like abortion and homosexuality, with a scarlet-clad devil in gloating attendance. These are a prelude to the *pièce de résistance*, Hell Itself, complete with realistic sulphurous smell of burning brimstone and the agonized screams of the forever damned.”<sup>98</sup>

These extreme examples of systematized self-loathing and the paralyzing fear of hell-fire aside, Dawkins then goes on to demonstrate that even more generally accepted and presumably more benevolent examples of this child abuse nevertheless exist.

Undoubtedly two of the most commonplace in this country are an almost universally-ingrained sense of respect for the religious freedom of the Amish to raise their children in their own isolating and regressive culture, as well as the prevalent practice of genital circumcision (one of the few tenets upon which all three Abrahamic religions agree).

Both of these Dawkins objects to not only because of their obvious physical and psychological risks, but because in neither case is the child in question consulted. Here, he references the work of Psychologist Nicholas Humphrey, who “makes the point that no adult woman who has somehow missed out on circumcision as a child volunteers for the operation later in life.”<sup>99</sup> As for the Amish, he explains:

Even if the children had been asked and had expressed a preference for the Amish religion, can we suppose that they would have done so if they had been educated and informed about the available alternatives? For this to be

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<sup>97</sup> Paul Harris, “Ted Haggard, Mega-Church Founder Felled by Sex Scandal, Returns to Pulpit,” *The Guardian*, 6 June 2010, accessed 19 July 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/jun/06/us-gay-scandal-pastor-church>.

<sup>98</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 359.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 370.

plausible, shouldn't there be examples of young people from the outside world voting with their feet and volunteering to join the Amish?<sup>100</sup>

How and why do these beliefs and practices persist? Dawkins thinks he knows:

The same tendency to glory in the quaintness of ethnic religious habits, and to justify cruelties in their name, crops up again and again. It is the source of squirming internal conflict in the minds of nice liberal people who, on the one hand, cannot bear suffering and cruelty, but on the other hand have been trained by postmodernists and relativists to respect other cultures no less than their own.<sup>101</sup>

What, then, is to be done? Dawkins' admittedly unsurprising recommendation is one which he shares with each of his fellow New Atheists.

A good case can indeed be made for the educational benefits of teaching comparative religion.... Let children learn about different faiths, let them notice their incompatibility, and let them draw their own conclusions about the consequences of that incompatibility. As for whether any are 'valid', let them make up their own minds when they are old enough to do so.<sup>102</sup>

Dawkins' final chapter, "A Much Needed Gap?", deals with the twin issues of consolation and inspiration, two qualities often believed to be strongly tethered to religious belief of one sort or another. For the former, Dawkins makes a comparison to the common childhood experience of having an imaginary friend. He admits that such a belief:

brings me as close as I shall probably come to understanding the consoling and counselling role of imaginary gods in people's lives. A being may exist only in the imagination, yet still seem completely real to the child, and still give real comfort and good advice. Perhaps even better: imaginary friends – and imaginary gods – have the time and patience to devote all their attention to the sufferer. And they are much cheaper than psychiatrists or professional counsellors.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 371.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 369.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 382-3.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 391.

Of course, Dawkins immediately reminds us that “religion’s power to console doesn’t make it true.”<sup>104</sup> What’s more, he questions religion’s ability to actually provide that consolation, specifically as it refers to a belief in life after death. He notes that “polls suggest that approximately 95 per cent of the population of the United States believe they will survive their own death. Aspiring martyrs aside, I can’t help wondering how many people who claim such belief really, in their heart of hearts, hold it.”<sup>105</sup> If this were truly the case, Dawkins argues, then wouldn’t religious people welcome and embrace news of the impending demise of a loved one, or more specifically of themselves? Yet to do so (at least in our society), one risks being derided as callous or cruel, or perhaps even outright ostracism from one’s so-called community. Undoubtedly, there are those who will argue that it is not death but the painful process of *dying* that they fear. To this, Dawkins responds “in that case, why does the most vocal opposition to euthanasia and assisted suicide come from the religious?... The official reason may be that all killing is a sin. But why deem it to be a sin if you sincerely believe you are accelerating a journey to heaven?”<sup>106</sup> In place of such religious (non)consolation, Dawkins offers the more worldly example of Mark Twain, who once said: ““I do not fear death. I had been dead for billions and billions of years before I was born, and had not suffered the slightest inconvenience from it.””<sup>107</sup> In many ways, this seems equally comforting, if not more so. Because in Twain’s view (and in Dawkins’), fears of temporary torment in purgatory or perpetual agony in hell are neither logical nor likely.

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 394.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 398.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 399.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 396.

As for inspiration, Dawkins lambasts the claim that religious belief is a prerequisite for a happy, fulfilled, and purposeful life. He says:

there is something infantile in the presumption that somebody else (parents in the case of children, God in the case of adults) has a responsibility to give your life meaning and point. It is all of a piece with the infantilism of those who, the moment they twist their ankle, look around for someone to sue. Somebody else must be responsible for my well-being, and somebody else must be to blame if I am hurt. Is it a similar infantilism that really lies behind the ‘need’ for a God?... The truly adult view, by contrast, is that our life is as meaningful, as full and as wonderful as we choose to make it. And we can make it very wonderful indeed.<sup>108</sup>

In other words, the responsibility ultimately rests with us. We must find happiness in our own lives, fulfillment in our own actions, and hopefulness in the potential of our own species. What’s more, such individuality cannot be guided by a one-size-fits-all approach to mantra or doctrine. As Dawkins explains, “if the demise of God will leave a gap, different people will fill it in different ways. My way includes a good dose of science, the honest and systematic endeavour to find out the truth about the real world.”<sup>109</sup>

Unsurprisingly, Dawkins believes we have Darwin to thank for this opportunity.

Think about it. On one planet, and possibly only one planet in the entire universe, molecules that would normally make nothing more complicated than a chunk of rock, gather themselves together into chunks of rock-sized matter of such staggering complexity that they are capable of running, jumping, swimming, flying, seeing, hearing, capturing and eating other such animated chunks of complexity; capable in some cases of thinking and feeling, and falling in love with yet other chunks of complex matter. We now understand essentially how the trick is done, but only since 1859. Before 1859 it would have seemed very very odd indeed. Now, thanks to Darwin, it is merely very odd. Darwin seized the window... and wrenched it open, letting in a flood of understanding whose dazzling novelty, and power to uplift the human spirit, perhaps had no precedent.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 403-4.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 405.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 411.



To where will this opportunity lead? Dawkins admits “I genuinely don’t know the answer, but I am thrilled to be alive at a time when humanity is pushing against the limits of understanding.” So shouldn’t we all.

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## Part II: Criticisms and Rebuttals<sup>111</sup>

In his article, “The Fear of Religion,” Thomas Nagel argues that

the fear of religion leads too many scientifically minded atheists to cling to a defensive, world-flattening reductionism. Dawkins, like many of his contemporaries, is hobbled by the assumption that the only alternative to religion is to insist that the ultimate explanation of everything must lie in particle physics, string theory, or whatever purely extensional laws govern the elements of which the material world is composed. This reductionist dream is nourished by the extraordinary success of the physical sciences in our time, not least in their recent application to the understanding of life through molecular biology. It is natural to try to take any successful intellectual method as far as it will go. Yet the impulse to find an explanation of everything in physics has over the last fifty years gotten out of control. The concepts of physical science provide a very special, and partial, description of the world that experience reveals to us. It is the world with all subjective consciousness, sensory appearances, thought, value, purpose, and will left out. What remains is the mathematically describable order of things and events in space and time.<sup>112</sup>

Thus while admitting of the recent and “extraordinary success of the physical sciences” to explain all sorts of previously unexplained natural phenomena (including even the possible origins of life itself), Nagel nevertheless chastises Dawkins for clinging to a “world-flattening reductionism” that, he believes, necessarily precludes the existence of

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<sup>111</sup> As a reminder to the reader, the critiques presented here (and indeed in the second half of each of the first four chapters of this work) contain the entirety of the extant criticism against each of the New Atheists that I was able to locate during my research. Though desirous of proving exhaustive (at least as far as linguistic and temporal limitations would allow), one need not exhaust oneself in their perusal. Any cross-section of the ensuing critiques, no matter how broad, concise, or indeed haphazard, should nevertheless serve to demonstrate their peripheral and/or semantic nature and thus that the secularist, scientific “house of cards” collectively constructed by the New Atheists’ arguments is not so easily dealt with as their many critics initially presumed or posited.

<sup>112</sup> Thomas Nagel, “The Fear of Religion,” *The New Republic* (23 October 2006): 28.

“all subjective consciousness, sensory appearances, thought, value, purpose, and will.” Of course, scientific materialism is not committed to such a proposition at all. As Sophie Elmhirst explains:

The scientific method, for Dawkins, is not merely essential to understanding the physical world; it can be deployed to help answer moral questions as well. “Human society, human love, human hate, art, music, poetry – these are all things which are the products of human brains, and brains are the products of ultimately scientifically explicable phenomena. But not in practice explicable, because it’s too difficult, it’s too complicated.” There is still room in Dawkins’s worldview for mystery – about the nature of human consciousness, for example – but that mystery is neither supernatural nor ultimately inexplicable.<sup>113</sup>

Thus, Nagel appears to be conflating scientific materialism (i.e. naturalism) with an all-encompassing philosophical eliminativism.<sup>114</sup> Scientific materialism merely states that such phenomena, while *plausibly* and *qualitatively* existing, must simultaneously permit of entirely naturalistic explanations. To suggest otherwise is to immediately invite explanatory appeals to supernaturalism, as Nagel seemingly, even consciously, proceeds to do.

He continues:

God, whatever he may be, is not a complex physical inhabitant of the natural world. The explanation of his existence as a chance concatenation of atoms is not a possibility for which we must find an alternative, because that is not what anybody means by God. If the God hypothesis makes sense at all, it offers a different kind of explanation from those of physical science: purpose or intention of a mind without a body, capable nevertheless of creating and forming the entire physical world. The point of the hypothesis is to claim that not all explanation is physical, and that

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<sup>113</sup> Sophie Elmhirst, “Is Richard Dawkins Destroying his Reputation?”, *The Guardian*, 9 June 2015, accessed 3 August 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2015/jun/09/is-richard-dawkins-destroying-his-reputation>.

<sup>114</sup> Philosophical eliminativism is the theory that a person’s common-sense understanding of the mind (and the numerous mental states it seemingly contains – such as beliefs, desires, emotions, moods, perceptions, etc.) is false. Of course, there are those (such as American philosopher Paul Boghossian) who contend that such eliminativism is something of an ideological non sequitur, as it necessarily entails belief in the theory itself.

there is a mental, purposive, or intentional explanation more fundamental than the basic laws of physics, because it explains even them.<sup>115</sup>

In other words, to distinguish himself from what he perceives to be Dawkins' "world-flattening reductionism," Nagel must entertain the notion that potentially any and all heretofore unexplained phenomena could simply be the result of a purposeful but immaterial mind. This is problematic because such thinking is indicative, at least where humans are concerned, of some type of underlying commitment to property (if not substance) dualism.<sup>116</sup> When applied specifically to the God hypothesis, this commitment becomes even more worrisome because not only is Nagel arguing for the distinctiveness of mind and body, but specifically for the eternal existence of the former and the utter needlessness of the latter. This is similar to Thomas Martin's critique that

Dawkins claims God is improbable because God, to be meaningful, would be a complex intelligence. Existence must start simple and build complexity via cosmic evolution. Fair enough, but he seems incapable of comprehending, or has simply not done enough research to understand that theology responds by saying that God is utterly simple, by virtue of having no parts. Dawkins insists that intelligence requires parts, (154) confusing the requirements for our intelligence with those for a divinity. What he demonstrates is that *brains* require an evolved complexity of parts. He does not demonstrate that brains are a requirement for any and all intelligence.<sup>117</sup>

Or as William Lane Craig has argued:

Dawkins thinks that in the case of a divine designer of the universe, the designer is just as complex as the thing to be explained, so that no

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<sup>115</sup> Nagel, "The Fear of Religion," 26.

<sup>116</sup> Nagel would likely attempt to refute my charge of dualism by insisting that his perspective is instead panpsychist (or simply panexperientialist): in essence positing that mentality (or at least experience) is both fundamental to and ubiquitous throughout nature and all its constituent particles, and thus neither separable nor ultimately emergent from it. But this self-professed monism cannot be likewise applied to Nagel's conception of god as "a mind without a body," since such a perspective definitionally requires that god be a nonphysical entity. Consequently, I would argue that the existence of said mind and the means of interaction between it and the material universe remains as much a problem for Nagel as the so-called "mind-body problem" ever was for Descartes.

<sup>117</sup> Thomas W. Martin, "Review: *The God Delusion*," *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* Vol. 48, No. 2 (June 2009): 210.

explanatory advance is made. This objection raises all sorts of questions about the role played by simplicity in assessing competing explanations; for example, how simplicity is to be weighted in comparison with other criteria like explanatory power, explanatory scope, and so forth. But leave those questions aside. Dawkins' fundamental mistake lies in his assumption that a divine designer is an entity comparable in complexity to the universe. As an unembodied mind, God is a remarkably simple entity. As a non-physical entity, a mind is not composed of parts, and its salient properties, like self-consciousness, rationality, and volition, are essential to it. In contrast to the contingent and variegated universe with all its inexplicable quantities and constants, a divine mind is startlingly simple. Certainly such a mind may have complex ideas – it may be thinking, for example, of the infinitesimal calculus –, but the mind itself is a remarkably simple entity. Dawkins has evidently confused a mind's ideas, which may, indeed, be complex, with a mind itself, which is an incredibly simple entity. Therefore, postulating a divine mind behind the universe most definitely does represent an advance in simplicity, for whatever that is worth.<sup>118</sup>

Of course, when forced to concede that such an arrangement (mind existing without body) exists absolutely nowhere else in nature, Nagel, Martin, and Craig can simply argue that God is the supernatural exception which proves the natural rule. This Nagel as much admits when he suggests that even should the laws of physics eventually provide an overarching explanation of the cosmos, God could still be evoked to explain the fundamental nature and existence of the physical laws themselves. Thus, I would argue that if anyone is a reductionist in this scenario it is Nagel. For at least Dawkins' commitment to science and scientific materialism is itself a testable and falsifiable

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<sup>118</sup> William Lane Craig, "Richard Dawkins' Argument for Atheism in The God Delusion," ReasonableFaith.com, 23 April 2007, accessed 3 August 2016, <http://www.reasonablefaith.org/richard-dawkins-argument-for-atheism-in-the-god-delusion>.

hypothesis that must be evidentially confirmed in order to be reasonably adopted. Nagel's commitment to deistic reductionism requires no such strenuous methodology.<sup>119</sup>

Nevertheless, Nagel attempts to bolster support for his deistic/dualistic/design claims by arguing that

Dawkins is not a chemist or a physicist. Neither an I, but general expositions of research on the origin of life indicate that no one has a theory that would support anything remotely near such a high probability as one in a billion billion. Naturally there is speculation about possible non-biological chemical precursors of DNA or RNA. But at this point the origin of life remains, in light of what is known about the huge size, the extreme specificity, and the exquisite functional precision of the genetic material, a mystery – an event that could not have occurred by chance and to which no significant probability can be assigned on the basis of what we know of the laws of physics and chemistry. Yet we know that it happened. That is why the argument from design is still alive, and why scientists who find the conclusion of that argument unacceptable feel there must be a purely physical explanation of why the origin of life is not as physically improbable as it seems.<sup>120</sup>

When Nagel states that “no one has a theory that would support anything remotely near such a high probability as one in a billion billion,” he is apparently suggesting that Dawkins' reliance upon statistical luck as an explanation for the origins of life is unsupported because the (comparatively) low number of planets in the universe simply does not lend credence to such an unlikely hypothesis. Unfortunately, this passage calls into question both Nagel's reasoning and mathematical skills. As Dawkins himself said:

It has been estimated that there are between 1 billion and 30 billion planets in our galaxy, and about 100 billion galaxies in the universe. Knocking a few noughts off for reasons of ordinary prudence, a billion billion is a conservative estimate of the number of available planets in the universe.

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<sup>119</sup> That is to say that Nagel's notion of a divine mind hinges entirely on the *a priori* supposition that such an entity necessarily exists, and he requires no further “evidence” for its adoption. But to subsequently suggest, as Nagel does, that this mind is likely responsible for the design of the universe and for the emergence and evolution of life within it is to invite a *Deus ex Machina* back into the explanatory mix that is both unwarranted and unwelcome, as I will presently contend. Talk of probability and chance might make Nagel uncomfortable, but intellectual discomfort does not justify equating unlikeliness with impossibility, which was Dawkins' point in the first place.

<sup>120</sup> Nagel, “The Fear of Religion,” 28.

Now, suppose the origin of life, the spontaneous arising of something equivalent to DNA, really was a quite staggeringly improbable event. Suppose it was so improbable as to occur on only one in a billion planets. A grant-giving body would laugh at any chemist who admitted that the chance of his proposed research succeeding was only one in a hundred. But here we are talking about odds of one in a billion. And yet... even with such absurdly long odds, life will still have arisen on a billion planets – of which Earth, of course, is one.<sup>121</sup>

Thus, a billion billion (or quintillion) is, by all accounts, an incredibly conservative estimate of the number of planets in the universe. In fact, current estimates place the number of planets in our galaxy at 100 billion (at least), and the number of galaxies in our universe at 100 – 200 billion.<sup>122</sup> And as Eric Mack notes:

Should these calculations hold up – and the researchers behind them encourage astronomers to check to see whether the planets they predict are actually there to help bolster their case – it means that the chances of our planet being the universe’s only potentially habitable rock that actually hosts life would be not one in a million, one in a billion or even one in a trillion – but one in a sextillion. (In case this is your first time seeing that word, a sextillion is a one with 21 zeroes behind it.)

Actually, if the estimates of 40 billion Earth-sized planets in habitable zones of sun-like or red dwarf stars in the Milky Way and the estimate of the 100 billion to 200 billion galaxies in the universe are accurate – and if the average galaxy has roughly the same number of Earth cousins as the Milky Way, then the chances that we are the only planet with life are more like one in 6 sextillion.<sup>123</sup>

Thus, it seems that Nagel’s arguments against chance and for design are, in fact, those least supported by the numbers. As a result, one could reasonably argue that a proliferation of unintended life seems both a more likely and more mathematically-sound hypothesis.

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<sup>121</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 137-8.

<sup>122</sup> Fraser Cain, “How Many Galaxies in the Universe,” UniverseToday.com, 24 December 2014, accessed 3 August 2016, <http://www.universetoday.com/30305/how-many-galaxies-in-the-universe/>.

<sup>123</sup> Eric Mack, “There May be More Earth-like Planets than Grains of Sand on all our Beaches.” CNet.com, 19 March 2015, accessed 3 August 2016, <http://www.cnet.com/news/the-milky-way-is-flush-with-habitable-planets-study-says/>.

Nagel, however, goes on to conclude that

a religious worldview is only one response to the conviction that the physical description of the world is incomplete. Dawkins says with some justice that the will of God provides a too easy explanation of anything we cannot otherwise understand, and therefore brings inquiry to a stop. Religion need not have this effect, but it can. It would be more reasonable, in my estimation, to admit that we do not now have the understanding or the knowledge on which to base a comprehensive theory of reality. Dawkins seems to believe that if people could be persuaded to give up the God Hypothesis on scientific grounds, the world would be a better place – not just intellectually, but also morally and politically. He is horrified – as who cannot be? – by the dreadful things that continue to be done in the name of religion, and he argues that the sort of religious conviction that includes a built-in resistance to reason is the true motive behind many of them. But there is no connection between the fascinating philosophical and scientific questions posed by the argument from design and the attacks of September 11. Blind faith and the authority of dogma are dangerous; the view that we can make ultimate sense of the world only by understanding it as the expression of mind or purpose is not. It is unreasonable to think that one must refute the second in order to resist the first.<sup>124</sup>

Pay special attention to those last two sentences. “Blind faith and the authority of dogma are dangerous.” With this, Dawkins would undoubtedly agree. Unfortunately, “the view that we can make ultimate sense of the world *only* by understanding it as the expression of mind or purpose is not,” is self-contradictory, as the statement itself represents a rather rigid approach to reality. As for Nagel’s claims that “it is unreasonable to think that one must refute the second in order to resist the first,” I would argue that it would be more accurate to say that it is unreasonable to believe one can defend the second, all the while attempting to distinguish it from the first. His earlier statement that “there is no connection between the fascinating philosophical and scientific questions posed by the argument from design and the attacks of September 11,” is even more puzzling and problematic. This is because it is often the disregard, derision, and/or outright dismissal

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<sup>124</sup> Nagel, “The Fear of Religion,” 29.

of the evidential and logical limitations of these teleological claims that allows the fundamentalism and/or fanaticism of so many faiths to continue unchecked and unchallenged in the first place, often with the tacit approval (if not the explicit support) of educated and enlightened individuals such as Nagel. He and others like him must be made to understand the real-world consequences of their intellectual equivocations. Therefore, I submit that even without Dawkins' countermanding viewpoint, Nagel's attempts to balance between open-minded agnosticism and irreducible deism are, by definition, mutually exclusive, and thus his argument is destined to collapse under the weight of its own self-imposed contradictions.

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In response to Dawkins' critique of his thought in *The God Delusion*, Richard Swinburne retorts:

On p.65 Dawkins quotes my remark that 'too much evidence [for the existence of God] might not be good for us', and then understandably dismisses it as (in effect) absurd. Here the fault is mine – I should have given a reference to some place where I point out the advantages of having to rely on a balance of probability, and not total certainty, with respect to the existence of God. (The reason why I did not do so is that the journal in which my comments appeared, *Science and Theology News*, wanted their articles to be self-standing, and not to include references to other writing. I should have insisted on a reference to a place where I defend the view in question.) For my defence of the advantages of a lack of total certainty, see pp. 267-72 of the second edition (2004) of my book *The Existence of God*. The basic point is that a good God (like a good parent) would surely want humans (by their own free choice) to form a naturally good character, and so – for example – to become naturally inclined to help the poor and starving out of love for them because they are poor and starving. But if God made it totally certain that he exists and will give a wonderful everlasting life to those who have formed a naturally good character, then inevitably humans will find themselves strongly inclined to try to form such a character and so to help the poor and starving, not out of love for the poor and starving but in order to please God and to gain everlasting life. This latter is a good motive for any action, but not always the best motive. It will be easier for humans to form a natural inclination to help



the poor and starving out of love, if the existence of God and the prospect of everlasting life are not (at least for a considerable period of our earthly lives) totally certain.<sup>125</sup>

Swinburne presumably means that absolute certainty of God's existence would undermine one's otherwise moral actions and intentions. While this is quite likely true, I would argue that even relegating such beliefs from the absolute to the probable (or merely to the possible) still renders such actions as inherently *less moral* than those based upon the Socratic notion that "virtue is its own reward, and vice its own punishment." One is consequently left to wonder whether or not the converse of Swinburne's argument would hold true as well. In other words, would knowledge of God's *inexistence* render man's moral obligations to his fellow beings as less binding, enforceable, and/or of immediate/eternal consequence? For the religiously minded and/or motivated, it seems difficult to imagine otherwise.<sup>126</sup> Thus, I would submit that any character developmentally dependent upon the possibility (either real or imagined) of obtaining eternal life (or avoiding everlasting damnation) is, by definition, not the "*naturally* good character" Swinburne seemingly intends to instill. It is, instead, the *supernaturally* hopeful character that religion universally requires.

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In his article, "Voltaire This Ain't," Jonathan Marks argues:

Science, it hardly needs to be pointed out, has been spectacularly successful at its

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<sup>125</sup> Richard Swinburne, "A Response to Dawkins' *The God Delusion*," BiblicalCatholic.com, 20 February 2016, accessed 5 August 2016, <http://www.biblicalcatholic.com/apologetics/DawkinsGodDelusionSwinburneResponse.pdf>.

<sup>126</sup> Swinburne's argument is in many ways an ethical manifestation (if not also a direct consequence) of Pascal's wager, with which both Dawkins and I dealt in the first half of the chapter. To reiterate, ulterior motives for one's actions and/or professed beliefs (particularly those involving one's own self-interest) render one's convictions and overall content of character as considerably less moral than their presumed altruism and generosity of heart would initially seem to suggest. It is only when self-interest is removed as a consequence of one's actions that said actions can ever truly be considered ethical.

program of producing reliable knowledge about Nature. Of course there have been skeptics since the very beginning. Christopher Marlowe's Dr. Faustus (ca. 1600) sought ultimate knowledge: His first questions of Mephistopheles were about astronomy. But only slightly farther down the list, it became clear that he really just wanted to smooch with Helen of Troy and see if she was as hot as all that. However revolutionary these ambitious new-fangled knowledge-seekers may seem, Marlowe seems to warn us, they are still just a bunch of over-educated, horny old geezers.... Richard Dawkins, of course, doesn't believe in Mephistopheles or Wotan or Baal. He does believe, however, that "God almost certainly does not exist" (p. 189), which helps to articulate the first paradox: How do you establish degrees of certainty in the domain of the Supernatural? Are you more likely to have telepathy or future vision? Neither, obviously; there are no applicable degrees of certainty here. It's like taking a probabilistic approach to history. Napoleon didn't "almost certainly" lose the Battle of Waterloo: According to the standards of knowledge production we can apply to the subject, Napoleon lost the battle of Waterloo. To qualify it as if it were a scientific statement, subject to the laws of probability, is an inappropriate invocation of statistical inference. If we know that the methods of science work for Nature – and in large measure because Nature was deliberately circumscribed in order to be subject to the methods of science – then how can we apply its methods to Supernature and expect reliable knowledge in return (Barzun 1964)?<sup>127</sup>

Notice the semantical game that Marks is attempting to play. But in equating belief in God with belief in telepathy or "future vision," and then suggesting that such an action is akin to "taking a probabilistic approach to history," I would argue that Marks is inadvertently demonstrating the merits of Dawkins' approach, all the while discrediting his own. For example, by suggesting that "according to the standards of knowledge production we can apply to the subject, Napoleon lost the battle of Waterloo," Marks is suggesting that the probabilistic approach to history is, at best, superfluous to the issue at hand. Factual, historical evidence can answer this question, without the need to introduce degrees of probability into the mix. Fair enough. But Marks then goes on to argue that "Supernature" falls outside the observable and quantifiable realm of nature and is thus not evaluable by means of either science or history. This is already worrisome because of

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<sup>127</sup> Jonathan Marks, "Voltaire This Ain't," *Dialect Anthropol* 34 (14 February 2010): 340.

the implied evidential immunity such a notion entails but becomes especially problematic when one recalls Marks' earlier remark that, where the supernatural is concerned, "there are no applicable degrees of certainty." In other words, for Marks, probability is often useless in the natural realm and absolutely impossible in the supernatural. And if historical fact, scientific methodology, and mathematical probability have all been ruled out as effective means of considering the supernatural, one wonders what possible avenues of thought might be left open to those who wish to question Marks' hypothesis. At the very least, Dawkins' arguments leave open the possibility of considered criticism and refutation. One simply cannot say the same for Marks and his unassailable reliance upon belief.<sup>128</sup>

Marks, however, goes on to offer a pseudo-intellectual defense of his position, by attacking Dawkins' admitted hostility and impatience with cultural relativism. He writes:

Dawkins... has little use for modern relativistic anthropology, which he tends to see as an anti-science ally of the creationists in the Science Wars. Some modes of thought are simply superior to others, and the yardstick of superiority is accuracy. The realer, the better – and science provides the realest story of all. That is why everyone should be a scientist. But what a boring and tragic universe to inhabit!<sup>129</sup>

Marks attributes this hostility not to Dawkins' personal affinity for the scientific method, but instead to the process of equating truth and accuracy with methodological superiority. One consequently supposes that, in Marks' world, the blatantly false and/or the evidentially/logically unsupported must be afforded the same reverence and respect as the authentic and precise in order to avoid offending those less knowledgeable and informed

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<sup>128</sup> For evidence of this, one need only consider Marks' description of nature as "deliberately circumscribed in order to be subject to the methods of science." When one asks the inevitable question "By whom?", one is left with only one possible answer and no means whatsoever to check or challenge it.

<sup>129</sup> Marks, "Voltaire This Ain't," 341.

among us. But hyperbole aside, this extreme position is apparently the one Marks most wishes to defend. As he subsequently explains:

The point is that the same can be said of the general non-scientific mode of human thinking that Dawkins decries. It was very valuable to the process of becoming human, and is very valuable to the enterprise of being human. We can take as an illustration the most simple, and the most quintessentially symbolic act: pointing. Chimps never do it, but humans are doing it within their first year. It is simply an imaginary extension of the second manual phalanx, but that analysis conceals the important aspect of pointing: there isn't anything there, just a mental association between the fingertip and the object. It exists only in the mind of the pointer and of those with similarly built brains, and is the purest symbolic act: the arbitrary and meaningful conjunction of two things that have no necessary connection to one another. The association just doesn't exist to a chimpanzee, because there isn't anything there. Symbolic thought is fundamentally non-rational and unscientific; it is metaphoric. It is pointing writ large; there is never anything there, just thoughts. Those thoughts are what make the evocativeness of art, dance, story, and music as diagnostic of a human condition as chromosome 2 is of a human cell. And yet the former commonly stands in contrast to the latter, in contrast to science – the rational, problem-solving, technological aspect of modern life – as humanities. The very name bespeaks their evolutionary significance: they confer humanity upon us. Without them, we would be Neanderthals (albeit with chins and foreheads) at best, but not human. To Dawkins, though, it seems that any such irrationalism is better left back in the Pleistocene, a holdover of earlier, primitive anthropoid sensibilities.<sup>130</sup>

Of course, I cannot recall any instance of Dawkins (or any other scientist) decrying humanity's ability to point as an irrationalism "better left back in the Pleistocene, a holdover of earlier, primitive anthropoid sensibilities" (nor do I see how, even if true, such claims are in any way relevant to his current hypothesis), but perhaps this claim sheds some light on Marks' own worldview. For instance, in an article entitled, "Understanding the Point of Chimpanzee Pointing," David A. Leavens, William D. Hopkins, and Kim A. Bard explain how and why Marks' claim that "chimps never do it" is simply false. They write:

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 342-343.

Developmental psychologists have long claimed that pointing, like speech, is a human species-specific adaptation for reference. One line of argument in support of this hypothesis has been the widespread but incorrect claim that apes do not point (Povinelli, Bering, & Giambrone, 2003).

Experimental work in our laboratory (Leavens & Hopkins, 1998; Leavens, Hopkins, & Bard, 1996; Leavens, Hopkins, & Thomas, 2004; reviewed by Leavens, Russell, & Hopkins, 2005) demonstrates that chimpanzees in captivity commonly point to unreachable food. Between 41% and 71% of chimpanzees in our studies point to unreachable food, with sample sizes ranging from 29 to 115 subjects. Sometimes they point with their index fingers, though more usually chimpanzees in this population point with all fingers extended (pointing with the whole hand). Some researchers refer to this latter kind of pointing as “reaching,” but we know that these are communicative signals because chimpanzees will not reach towards obviously unreachable food if there is nobody around to see them do it.<sup>131</sup>

This digression is undoubtedly as irrelevant as Marks’ original argument, though I suppose he could rationalize dismissing it on the grounds that its conclusions are entirely scientific and thus not applicable to the inherently unscientific enterprise of pointing, but what would ultimately be the *point* of that? In the end, perhaps Marks’ lack of appreciation and comprehension of science does make for a universe “less boring” than Dawkins’, but given his inability (or unwillingness) to discern simple fact from fiction, one fears it is likely a far more dangerous and tragic place to inhabit.

But regardless, Marks concludes:

The fact is that science must answer to cultural standards, as any other instrument of social power must. I don’t know how he could have invented anatomy any other way, but Vesalius was plagued by accusations of grave robbing for most of his life. Physical anthropologists still commonly have difficulty with the proposition that ordinary citizens find their interest in other people’s bones and blood somewhat distastefully morbid.... But nobody is really anti-science. We all make decisions about what science to accept, what science to reject, and what science to ignore, and we have complex criteria for doing so. Indeed, only an utter ignoramus would take all scientific pronouncements at face value. Some are, at very least, much more interesting than others. Personally, I would

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<sup>131</sup> David A. Leavens, William D. Hopkins, and Kim A. Bard, “Understanding the Point of Chimpanzee Pointing,” *Curr Dir Psychol Sci.* 14(4) (August 2005) accessed 3 August 2016, <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2151757/>.

rather read last week's TV Guide than superstring theory, even if superstring theory will indeed lead to a Theory of Everything. For unless the Theory of Everything is going to include a Theory of Achieving Universal Peace and Prosperity – which I somehow doubt – I can happily slog through the rest of my life without it. I consider it science that I (and any other reasonable person) don't need to bother with.<sup>132</sup>

Here again, Marks fails to frame his argument. The fact that Vesalius had to deal with accusations of grave-robbing or that anthropologists sometimes have to explain their interest in human remains speaks volumes about their respective cultures, but is virtually silent about the scientific endeavors with which they were then engaged. Marks' inability to distinguish this fact makes me wish that he had taken his own advice and stuck to last week's *TV Guide*. As for his efforts in "Voltaire This Ain't," all I can say is "reasonable, they aren't."

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Speaking of pointing, Peter S. Williams, in his article, "The Emperor's Incoherent New Clothes – Pointing the Finger at Dawkins' Atheism," writes:

When we ask how the new atheism conceives of our intellectual obligations, we discover a theory of knowledge so narrow as to be self-contradictory: Next time somebody tells you something that sounds important, think to yourself:

'Is this the kind of thing that people probably know because of evidence? Or is it the kind of thing that people only believe because of tradition, authority or revelation?' And next time somebody tells you that something is true, why not say to them: 'What kind of evidence is there for that?' And if they can't give you a good answer, I hope you'll think very carefully before you believe a word they say.

Dawkins limits what counts as evidence so tightly (conflating evidence with empirical evidence) that his encouragement is self-defeating, because it can't be justified with anything that he'd count as evidence. The assertion that all beliefs must be justified on the basis of other beliefs before they count as rational entails an infinite regress of justifications that

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<sup>132</sup> Marks, "Voltaire This Ain't," 344-345.

can never be accumulated. Dawkins' own statement implores us not to believe a word he says – a fine example of sawing through the branch upon which one is seated.<sup>133</sup>

I would argue, however, that Dawkins is on a far firmer foundation than Williams' critique implies. For while accusing Dawkins of “conflating evidence with empirical evidence,” Williams simultaneously conflates evidence with belief. Thus, as far as religion is concerned, Williams is undoubtedly right: “The assertion that all beliefs must be justified on the basis of other beliefs before they count as rational entails an infinite regress of justifications that can never be accumulated.” Science, however, does not rest upon any belief that is itself separable from the ascertainable (i.e. empirical) evidence for that belief. Thus, in practice, Williams' accusation of an infinite regress is certainly not infinite and in fact, barely a regress at all.

Williams eventually betrays his conflation of evidence with belief, when he argues:

How can anyone (e.g. a religious believer) be responsible for not living up to their intellectual obligations if they aren't free to be responsible for anything in the first place? If everything about a person is ‘governed by the laws of physics’, blaming them for their intellectual failings would make as much sense as Newton blaming gravity for giving him an apple-sized bump on the head. Indeed, if all beliefs are caused by nothing but the laws of physics, how can we rationally privilege one effect of these laws (e.g. belief in atheism) over another (e.g. belief in theism)?<sup>134</sup>

As for Williams' attempt to blame the New Atheists for the emperor's unfortunate nakedness, he writes:

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<sup>133</sup> Peter S. Williams, “The Emperor's Incoherent New Clothes – Pointing the Finger at Dawkins' Atheism,” *Think* Vol. 9, Issue 24 (Spring 2010): 30-31, accessed 5 August 2016, DOI:10.1017/S1477175609990194.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid*, 31. The laws of physics provide knowledge and insight into the origins and inner workings of our universe on both the macroscopic and quantum levels, and though far from complete, to suggest that the evidence heretofore collected makes atheism and theism *equally likely* is a false equivalency of the first order.

The Emperor's rhetorically fine new clothes are logically incoherent; which is as much as to say that they have no substance in the land of truth. Despite appearances, the Emperor is naked. Agnostic John Humphrys is ready to take up the call of Hans Christian Andersen's innocent child in the crowd:

The atheists... must prove, rather than merely assert, that mainstream religion is a malign force in the world [but how can they do this whilst denying any objective reality to moral malignancy?]. They cannot rely on a small minority of religious extremists to do that for them or hark back to the brutality of earlier centuries. And they must offer an alternative to the millions who rely on their beliefs to make sense of their lives [but how can they do this whilst denying any objective reality to our intellectual obligations?]. Unlike the militant atheists I do not think people are stupid if they believe in God. For vast numbers of ordinary, thoughtful people it is impossible not to. Of course, this may be the result of indoctrination at a very early age – but it may also be a considered reluctance to accept that the material world is all there is.<sup>135</sup>

In attempting to drive the final nail into Dawkins' arguments, Williams has swung his hammer too wildly and unintentionally struck his own Achilles' heel in the process. The child in Hans Christian Andersen's tale had nothing to prove. All he or she had to do was utter the truth: *the emperor is naked*. The obviousness of that statement became immediately apparent. The impetus to dispute it then fell to the emperor (who believed he was clothed), to the tailors who had supposedly clothed him in the first place (and in so doing, promoted that belief), or to the multitude (who had heretofore complied in this charade). The desire to shift the burden of proof away from the faithful is, of course, understandable, given that none of the available evidence accrued thus far rests in their corner, but indoctrination and/or considered reluctance aside, this does not excuse Williams, or the religious more generally, of having to mount any sort of defensible rebuttal to the New Atheists' arguments.

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid, 32.



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In his article, “Taking the Dawkins Challenge, or the Dark Side of the Meme,”

Gregory Schrempp argues that

meme theory, [when] confronting the problem of evil, is drawn toward, if not into, traditional religious paradigms for dealing with the problem of evil. Judeo-Christian moralizing, for example, shows a tendency to align the material and the biological with the imperfect or evil, as if matter is inherently morally compromised. The antidote must be found in some realm that transcends matter, its limitations, and its mechanics. Memes are not material things, and yet they are defined through robust biological analogy and materialistic mechanics. They are encumbered with an aura of scientific materiality. Dawkins has been criticized repeatedly for biological reductionism. But I find his most interesting characteristic to lie in the opposite direction; namely, that despite the biologizing, he appears to hold out for a realm of moral reflection that transcends not only genes but memes – a realm that he does not attempt to elaborate in relation to either. Dawkins concludes his announcement of the concept of the meme, “We are built as gene machines and cultured as meme machines, but we have the power to turn against our creators. We, alone on earth, can rebel against the tyranny of the selfish replicators” (1989:201). This comment and others suggest a phenomenology of moral reason that has no clear relation to the scheme of influence and causation he sets up in his concept of the meme nor to the processes of Darwinian evolution to which he is committed.<sup>136</sup>

Although a refreshingly original and intriguing notion, the logic of Schrempp’s account breaks down in two basic ways. First, it fails to grasp the inherent “behavioral” similarities between genes and memes. Rather than resembling the religious dichotomy between (immaterial) good and (material) evil, genes and memes actually represent two distinct, complementary, and yet sometimes conflicting processes, which collectively serve to shape both biological and cultural human evolution. By understanding both the genetic and memetic underpinnings of our biological and cultural drives, Dawkins argues that we can “turn against our creators,” (i.e. overcome our baser natures). Schrempp

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<sup>136</sup> Gregory Schrempp, “Taking the Dawkins Challenge, or, the Dark Side of the Meme,” *Journal of Folklore Research* Vol. 46, No. 1 (Jan. – Apr., 2009): 96.

seems to believe that Dawkins has no logical or moral basis upon which to make such an assumption. This is Schrempp's second misconception. Rather than requiring a transcendent realm or extraneous explanation, all that is needed is insight into the inner workings of one's own being and environment. This might be considered somewhat akin to examining one's behavioral predilections (or lack thereof) via both physiological and psychological methods. While the answers one seeks are most likely to be found to have origins in both one's body and one's conscious experience, no additional explanatory scaffolding is necessary in order to grasp the reality of one's complex, yet still completely natural, situation. In other words, natural selection, whether considered on a biological or cultural level, remains a self-contained system.

Admirably, Schrempp himself eventually admits of this possibility. He writes:

So, what do we have when meme theory meets the problem of evil? One possible answer is that we have a new mythology, one that, like all mythologies, plays on the real as envisioned in a particular time and place – whether that means invasive demons or genes and their power to shape us – in order to conceptualize and dramatize the problem of evil. *The other possible answer is that what we have here is finally science: memes as the demythologized, real entities behind our archaic religious illusions.* My own sympathies are with the former view, although if I am wrong on this, but right that memes in the context of the problem of evil are drawn towards pre-existing religious paradigms (or memplexes, if you will), the situation is even more interesting: it would illustrate the power of religious forms over even their detractors.<sup>137</sup>

And though his own sympathies may lie with the mythological or transcendent explanation he offered earlier, Schrempp's final point about "the power of religious forms over even their detractors" is certainly something we should all be willing to consider. But again, even if he is correct, Dawkins would surely maintain that simple

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<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 97, emphasis mine.

insight into this condition is sufficient to remedy its potential pitfalls. No mythologizing is necessary.

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In his article, “Dawkins’ god-less delusion,” J. Angelo Corlett boldly claims that

In studying Richard Dawkins’ *The God Delusion*, one is left with the impression that he is on an evangelistic mission to “go into all the world and preach the gospel” of scientific atheism so that his readers might be delivered from the delusional tenets of theism. However, it is unclear that Dawkins’ self-described brand of atheism is genuinely atheistic in the first place. But even if it is atheistic, it is implausible. At most, what Dawkins’ argument supports is an atheology relative to orthodox Christian theism. But this is atheism only for those who are parochially Western in their thinking about God, a problem (ironically) with which Dawkins saddles orthodox Christian theism. So while it might be true that orthodox Christian theism is delusional, for all Dawkins argues, he himself suffers from the Godless delusion of wrongly reasoning that the defeat of orthodox Christian theism justifies atheism, properly construed. Indeed, I shall argue that agnosticism is a more intellectually responsible and respectable position to adopt than Dawkins’ atheism. Thus I shall turn Dawkins’ reasoning on its head, exposing his Godless delusion.<sup>138</sup>

In the preceding paragraph, Corlett makes two basic claims about Dawkins. First, Corlett argues that disproving the tenets of any one specific form of theism (in this case, orthodox Christian theism) does not logically result in one’s automatic adoption of atheism, but should rather result in agnosticism. Second, Corlett claims that this is, in fact, precisely what has occurred, and that (the actually agnostic) Dawkins has simply misrepresented the results of his *deconversion*.

Corlett elaborates:

Evidence of Dawkins’ poor reasoning is found in his dealing with agnosticism by conveniently distinguishing what he declares are two forms of it: “... the legitimate fence-sitting where there really is a definite answer, one way or another, but so far we lack the evidence to reach it” from a more permanent kind of position of this sort of fence-sitting. One

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<sup>138</sup> J. Angelo Corlett, “Dawkins’ god-less delusion,” *Int J Philos Relig* 65 (2009):125-126, accessed 5 August 2016, DOI 10.1007/s11153-008-9187-4.

might concur with Dawkins that the former position is more acceptable than the latter, as the latter leaves no room for the future discovery of the fact of the matter about God's existence one way or the other. But why Dawkins' reasoning does not lead him to adopt the former view instead of the one he does adopt is mysterious in light of the evidence and his own arguments. One wonders, then, whether the title of that section of his book ("The Poverty of Agnosticism") ought rather to read: "The Plausibility of Agnosticism." Moreover, he deliberately, or perhaps out of ignorance of alternative theisms developed by certain philosophers and theologians in recent decades, focuses his attention on one of the weakest or most easily refutable of Christian theisms. While this tactic sells books among those unaware of the fallacies underlying such rhetorical shenanigans, it does nothing to advance serious discussion of the important issues at hand.<sup>139</sup>

Unfortunately, such a statement fails to recognize that Dawkins does precisely what Corlett implores him to do. One will recall Dawkins' notion of a spectrum of belief, ranging from 1 (Strong Theist) to 7 (Strong Atheist), as well as Dawkins' related remarks that "I count myself in category 6, but leaning towards 7 – I am agnostic only to the extent that I am agnostic about fairies at the bottom of the garden."<sup>140</sup> Thus, it would seem that the furthest Dawkins could have gone in renaming this particular section of the book is "The Possibility of Agnosticism." But that is not what Corlett suggests. He instead offers the word "plausibility," which incidentally means "having an appearance of truth or reason; seemingly worthy of approval or acceptance; credible; believable."<sup>141</sup> This is hardly a neutral position either, and Corlett is wrong to present it as such. As for Corlett's criticism that Dawkins doesn't seem to consider (at least seriously) the "alternative theisms developed by certain philosophers and theologians in recent decades," I can only agree. But I would argue that this is for reasons which Corlett himself suggests when

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<sup>139</sup> Ibid, 126.

<sup>140</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 73-4.

<sup>141</sup> "Plausibility," Dictionary.com, 2016, accessed 5 August 2016.

<http://www.dictionary.com/browse/plausibility>.

attempting to describe Dawkins' omission and subsequent focus on more mainstream, traditional faiths. He writes that "the fallacies underlying such rhetorical shenanigans... [do] nothing to advance serious discussion of the important issues at hand." As I will demonstrate presently, these criticisms could and should apply more so to these recent theologies than to Dawkins' decision to dismiss them.

Nevertheless, Corlett attempts to qualify his previous statement. He submits that Dawkins:

is guilty of refuting a theology that is so outmoded and implausible that few competent, non-fideistic scholars would endorse it. Indeed, even Thomas Aquinas, hardly a radical Christian theologian, doubted some of the hyperbolic (yet orthodox) divine attributes. Perhaps Dawkins is unaware that entire schools of Christian (or quasi-Christian) theism have been developed over the past half-century or so that attempt to address precisely many of his concerns – and then some! Undoubtedly, his reason for addressing orthodox Christian theism is because of its popularity in the West, and as a public scholar he is diligently attempting to raise consciousness about natural selection and its power to explain various phenomena. This much is understandable. However, for Dawkins to draw the conclusions he draws without at least delving somewhat into such alternative theologies is misleading, if not irresponsible.... When carefully combined, certain process and liberation theologies can go a long way toward addressing many of Dawkins' concerns with theism, making theism a more live option than Dawkins ever considers it to be.<sup>142</sup>

And herein lies the problem with Corlett's critique. Dawkins sees no need to reconcile scientific reality with the Iron Age beliefs of a desert-dwelling, tribalistic society, with the medieval scholasticism of Thomas Aquinas, or with the more present-day Quasi-Christian, process, and/or liberation theologies. This is simply because all of these perspectives start from the supposition that (at least some version of) God exists and that such a belief can be made to fit with naturally observable phenomena as well as (at least some elements of) traditional Christian theology. Science need not hold any such

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<sup>142</sup> Corlett, "Dawkins' god-less delusion," 132.

preconceived notions, and thus has neither the time nor the inclination to examine or “carefully combine” any methodologies that do. This, incidentally, serves to reinforce my prior criticism, which is that Corlett’s agnosticism isn’t any more neutral than Dawkins’. If the latter rates himself a six on the scale, I would argue that Corlett can be ranked no higher than two. The only difference is, Dawkins can admit it.

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In his article, “Affirmations After God: Friedrich Nietzsche and Richard Dawkins on Atheism,” J. Thomas Howe argues that

Nietzsche’s celebration of the death of God is infused with notes of tragedy. By this, I mean that the life we awaken to in the godless universe contains real and profound possibilities for significant joys and beauties. But they come only with great effort and unavoidable cost. Living well after God requires an honest awareness and affirmation of reality’s costly and destructive ways. There are workable strategies for minimizing the risks of living in such a world. One can play it “safe” by means of renunciation, certain forms of asceticism, and resignation. But these devices, argues Nietzsche, are decadent and weaken one’s capacities for joy, strength, abundance, and beauty. Nietzsche’s way of affirmation is a life of willing and wanting, of full engagement, all the while knowing and affirming that one does so with unavoidable exposure to the risks of destruction and suffering. Throughout Dawkins’s writings one finds little sense of these serious consequences of life without God. Here we see that life without God is essentially unproblematic, with very little difficulties in terms of how to go on with things. In fact, life without God is presented as something airier, roomier, and altogether more wonderful. Dawkins partakes in what Charles Taylor calls a “subtraction story” (Taylor 2007, 22). This is not to suggest that Dawkins is entirely oblivious to the consequences of his views. Clearly, he attempts to make his atheism intellectually honest. But in Dawkins’s presentation of the value of life without God, there is a naïve optimism that purports that human beings, educated in science and purged of religion, will find lives of peace and astonishing wonder.<sup>143</sup>

Consequently, it seems that Howe’s main criticism of Dawkins’ particular brand of atheism is that it is too “naively optimistic.” According to Howe, Nietzsche understood

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<sup>143</sup> J. Thomas Howe, “Affirmations After God: Friedrich Nietzsche and Richard Dawkins on Atheism,” *Zygon* Vol. 47, No. 1 (March 2012): 142.

that, if one is to inhabit a truly godless universe, both the death throes of God and the subsequent birth pangs of atheism must be accompanied by “unavoidable exposure to the risks of destruction and suffering.” This, of course, implies that it is we who are now *suddenly* responsible for providing the sense of comfort and meaning in our lives that our former belief in God once afforded us. Dawkins simply disagrees. He writes:

There is something infantile in the presumption that somebody else (parents in the case of children, God in the case of adults) has a responsibility to give your life meaning and point. It is all of a piece with the infantilism of those who, the moment they twist their ankle, look around for someone to sue. Somebody else must be responsible for my well-being, and somebody else must be to blame if I am hurt. Is it a similar infantilism that really lies behind the ‘need’ for a God?... The truly adult view, by contrast, is that our life is as meaningful, as full and as wonderful as we choose to make it. And we can make it very wonderful indeed.<sup>144</sup>

In other words, there is nothing naively optimistic about Dawkins’ understanding of atheism. By contrast, I would consider it a far more mature rendering of the atheist’s personal responsibilities. But as in Nietzsche’s own account, nothing is ever certain. Maybe those who subscribe to Dawkins’ views will indeed find “lives of peace and astonishing wonder.” Perhaps they won’t (as Howe and Nietzsche believe). Dawkins’ point is simply that the choice (and the responsibility) has been solely theirs all along.<sup>145</sup>

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Understood in this light, James McBain’s arguments in his review of *The God Delusion* can now be taken with the appropriate grain(s) of salt. He claims:

To raise the closet-atheists’ consciousness requires giving a morality we can sink our teeth in to. We need to account for all the normative factors of one’s moral life, not just the description of the origins. Morality, in part, gives our lives meaning. It is this meaning that would motivate the closet-atheist off the couch and to the window ready to scream. I must be clear. I

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<sup>144</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 403-4.

<sup>145</sup> As the title of his treatise suggests, that is, in fact, the crux of Dawkins’ entire argument.

am not maintaining this can't be done; rather that Dawkins doesn't do it! There are a host of others who are tackling this issue (evolution and morality) and attempting to provide a robust account of morality, not just the descriptive claim about the origins of our sense of right and wrong. This is the problem. Dawkins simply doesn't come through and that makes me mad as hell.<sup>146</sup>

However, as Dawkins has just explained, both our sense of meaning and our understanding of morality are concepts we must all continually work out for ourselves. To expect God or one's society to unburden us of this most precious responsibility is to miss out on the most prized joys and most pressing obligations of being human.<sup>147</sup>

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Nicholas Lash, in his article, "Where Does the God Delusion Come From?" offers a far more semantic criticism of Dawkins' arguments. He writes:

Where the grammar of the word "God" is concerned, Dawkins, ignorant of centuries of Jewish, Christian and Islamic reflection on the "naming" of the holy and utterly transcendent mystery on which the world depends, persists in taking for granted that "God" is the name of a non-existent thing, a particular, specifiable, fictitious entity. His understanding of the notion of "belief in God" (to which I now turn) is as crass and ill-informed as his understanding of what the word "God" means. He takes it for granted that "believing in God" is a matter of being of the opinion that God exists. However, as Saint Augustine pointed out sixteen centuries ago, even the devils know that God exists! One may know quite well that God exists and yet be entirely lacking in the virtue of faith. Dawkins defines faith as "belief without evidence". Christianity does not. To believe in God, to have faith in God, as Christianity understands these things, is (to quote Augustine again) "in believing to love, in believing to delight, in believing to walk towards him, and be incorporated amongst the limbs and members of his body". To be a Jew, or a Christian, or a Muslim, is to be a member of a particular people: a people whose identity is specified by particular habits of memory and ritual, of understanding

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<sup>146</sup> James McBain, "Review: *The God Delusion*," *Midwest Quarterly* Vol. 48, Issue 4 (Summer 2007): 614.

<sup>147</sup> The distinction between evolving ethics and unmalleable morality is of particular interest here. Despite McBain's claims that Dawkins "simply doesn't come through," I would counter that the responsibility lies with each of us and therefore cannot rest on Dawkins' shoulders alone. Ethics must be collectively arrived at and agreed upon via communal conversation and continually revisited and revised thereafter. They quite simply cannot be dictated and then subsequently inscribed in stone by God, Moses, Dawkins, or anyone else.



and relationship and hope. Dawkins tells the story of a young Afghan who was “sentenced to death for converting to Christianity”. The story is a tragic commentary on the extent to which the relationships between two traditions, two “peoples”, which should (and sometimes have) understood each other to be “cousins”, have sometimes deteriorated into bitter conflict. Dawkins, however, sees things differently. “All [the young Afghan] did”, he remarks, “was change his mind. Internally and privately, he changed his mind. He entertained certain thoughts.” Not so. He publicly changed his allegiance from one people to another.<sup>148</sup>

Thus, according to Lash’s interpretation, Dawkins’ error is in attempting to define “God” at all. If Dawkins would only accept that God is “an utterly transcendent mystery upon which the world depends,” then, and only then, will he have earned the right to consider the notion itself. Of course, in so doing, he would be required to admit that no further inquiry into the matter would now be possible. Lash, however, goes one step further in relegating God to the periphery of religion. When he writes that “to be a Jew, or a Christian, or a Muslim, is to be a member of a particular people: a people whose identity is specified by particular habits of memory and ritual, of understanding and relationship and hope,” he is arguing for an almost exclusively sociological understanding of religion. According to this interpretation, the young Afghan’s crime was not that of apostasy (which might come as a shock to those who sought to execute him for it) but rather a public renunciation of his citizenship! But I suppose if God is a mystery and religion merely a membership, then such equally specious conclusions about the implications of the former and the all-too-real consequences of the latter are also possible.

Take for example, the following passage, wherein Lash attempts to describe Dawkins’ misunderstanding of the use(s) of scripture. He writes:

“Of course,” says Dawkins at one point, “irritated theologians will protest that we don’t take the book of Genesis literally any more. But that is my

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<sup>148</sup> Nicholas Lash, “Where Does the God Delusion Come From?” *New Blackfriars* Vol. 88, Issue 1017 (September 2007): 511.

whole point! We pick and choose which bits of scripture to believe, which bits to write off as allegories”. Notice that “any more”. Dawkins takes it for granted that Christians have traditionally been fundamentalists, but that as the plausibility of fundamentalist readings of the text has been eroded by the march of reason, “irritated theologians” protest that they no longer take biblical texts literally. Paradoxically, he has the story almost completely upside down. Patristic and medieval theology worked with a rich, at times almost uncontrollable diversity of “senses of scripture”. Passages of Scripture gave up their sense only by being read in many different ways. Fundamentalism – in the sense of the privileging of the meaning which a passage, taken out of any context, appears *a priori*, on the surface, to possess – is, as the Old Testament scholar James Barr demonstrated thirty years ago, a byproduct of modern rationalism: of the privileging of timeless and direct description, of mathematics over metaphor, prose over poetry. What I earlier described as Richard Dawkins’ “fundamentalism in reverse” comes through clearly in his curious insistence that the only way to take a biblical text seriously is to “believe it” literally. To take it allegorically (for example) is to “write it off”. Somewhere at the back of all this is the myth (the roots of which lie back in ancient Greece) that truth can only be expressed through prosaically direct description, and that all other literary forms are forms of fiction, incapable of expressing truth.<sup>149</sup>

Did you catch that? “Patristic and medieval theology worked with a rich, at times almost uncontrollable diversity of ‘senses of scripture’. Passages of Scripture gave up their sense only by being read in many different ways.” In other words, how dare Dawkins attempt to interpret any passage of scripture (and subsequently pass judgment upon it) without realizing that it necessarily permits of various (and sometimes conflicting) understandings. To Lash, I would simply reiterate the warning as he continues summarily passing judgment upon Dawkins’ words without exercising the careful consideration he insists upon for scripture. But the fundamentalism of which Dawkins speaks is not that which Lash chastises. It is simply that, whether they consider it to be literal or metaphorical (or both), all Christians believe and understand the Bible to be the greatest (if not sole) source of Truth in the world. Were they ever to entertain the possibility that

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<sup>149</sup> Ibid, 513.

such a conviction might be wrong, then, and only then, would they transcend the label of fundamentalist.

Unfortunately, Lash doesn't believe Dawkins understands the word "science" either. He explains:

When C. P. Snow gave the Rede Lecture in Cambridge in 1959, on "The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution", he was expressing an anxiety in British culture concerning what many perceived to be "a profound mutual suspicion and incomprehension" between those he called "the literary intellectuals" and the natural scientists. Although the roots of this division can be traced back to the development, in the seventeenth-century, of new standards of empirical investigation of the natural world, it is worth bearing in mind that "the Enlightenment's great intellectual monument", Diderot's Encyclopedia, no more represents human knowledge as structured around a division corresponding to what we would now call "the sciences" and "the humanities" than had Francis Bacon's Advancement of Learning a century earlier (on which the design of the Encyclopedia was based). The construction of this division was a nineteenth-century achievement, and the "anglophone heresy" seems to have made its first appearance in 1867, in the Dublin Review. "We shall", said W. G. Ward, "use the word 'science' in the sense which Englishmen so commonly give to it; as expressing physical and experimental science, to the exclusion of theological and metaphysical". The point is this. Whenever one comes across the concept of "science", in the singular, being used (as Dawkins does) to support sweeping assertions to the effect that here, and here alone, is truth to be obtained, then one is in the presence neither of science, nor of history, but ideology.<sup>150</sup>

Essentially, Lash is arguing that, by omitting the theological and metaphysical from his scientific deliberations, Dawkins is committing the "anglophone heresy." Consequently, his affinity for evidential and experimental science is not actually science, but merely an ideological preference.<sup>151</sup> So, to sum up, Lash maintains that god is a mystery, religion a

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<sup>150</sup> Ibid, 517.

<sup>151</sup> How then, one wonders, would Lash recommend Dawkins proceed? Of what standards and practices would theological and/or metaphysical science permit? What methodologies might they disallow or disregard? I do not see how such enterprises could themselves ever arrive at anything more than the "sweeping assertions" charge Lash unsuccessfully attempted to level at what he erroneously described as "anglophone" science. Unlike the disparate peculiarities of theology and metaphysics, there is simply no such thing as culturally-dependent science, anglophone or otherwise. Science is science all the world over, regardless of whether it is known, accepted, or applied in any one region in particular.

social club (whose membership cannot be revoked), and that Christianity has never subscribed to a fundamentalist understanding of scripture. Consequently, I would argue that it is Lash, not Dawkins, who “is in the presence neither of science, nor of history, but ideology.” As Joan Bakewell explains:

Believers wrongly accuse Dawkins of being himself a fundamentalist, a fundamentalist atheist. He argues the difference: that given proof he was wrong he would at once change his opinions, whereas the true fundamentalist clings to his faith whatever the challenge. What he doesn't satisfactorily answer is the sense that people of faith have of the divine, a true experience for them that encompasses love and joy and celebration - all the things Dawkins finds in the physical world. He doesn't comprehend that for many people reasoned argument is not the final arbiter of how they choose to live their lives. They are swayed by feelings, moved by loyalties, willing to set logic aside for the sake of psychic comfort. Tell them that all this is the product of chemical and electrical activity in the brain and they will at best assert that God made it thus. For decades now we have been willing to let such diversity of unverifiable beliefs exist among a democratic tolerance of ideas. But this, the assumption of the secular outlook, can no longer be taken for granted. The clouds are darkening around tolerance.<sup>152</sup>

But against Bakewell, I would suggest that Dawkins does in fact comprehend that “for many people reasoned argument is not the final arbiter of how they choose to live their lives.” He simply wants the religious to reconsider that position and has dedicated a considerable amount of time and energy toward compiling and communicating a veritable laundry list of reasons for doing so. In fact, I would say it was this purpose, above all others, which prompted him to publish *The God Delusion* in the first place.

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In his review, Stephen Bullivant argues that Dawkins' central mistake was in not taking his own advice from years earlier. He writes:

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<sup>152</sup> Joan Bakewell, “Judgment Day,” *The Guardian*, 23 September 2006, accessed 6 August 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2006/sep/23/scienceandnature.richarddawkins>.

Dawkins made his name as a brilliant popularizer of complex biological science – a subject upon which he is amply qualified to comment. Here too, when writing on the virtues and plausibility of a humanistic worldview, and when demolishing creationism and the Paleian teleological argument, Dawkins is at the top of his game. The same cannot, however, be said for his more general forays into philosophy and theology – subjects in which he has neither expertise nor interest. Indeed, as the celebrated zoologist himself once put it in a footnote to *The Selfish Gene*: ‘Publishers should correct the misapprehension that a scholar’s distinction in one field implies authority in another. And as long as the misapprehension exists, distinguished scholars should resist the temptation to abuse it.’<sup>153</sup>

In other words, if Dawkins wants to talk about biology, fine. But he is simply not qualified to venture off into the more nuanced philosophical and theological arguments for God. These, he should have left to the experts. Bullivant elaborates:

Dawkins does not seem... to have checked whether theistic philosophers have formulated any adequate response. Here, as throughout the book, a lack of real engagement with (as opposed to the odd quotation from) serious theology and religious philosophy is glaring. As conspicuous, but more puzzling, is the absence of serious atheist philosophy also. Thus the powerful and closely-reasoned critiques of religious belief by Michael Martin, Nicholas Everitt and Kai Nielsen, incomparably stronger allies to Dawkins’s cause than the popular and superficial works littering his bibliography, all go unmentioned. A passing acquaintance with Martin’s *Atheism, Morality and Meaning* (2002), in particular, would vastly have strengthened Dawkins’s two chapters on the relationship of religion to morality which, as they stand, already contain some of the volume’s highlights.<sup>154</sup>

In addition to chastising Dawkins for not checking to see whether theistic philosophers have managed to concoct any plausible rebuttals to his criticisms, Bullivant argues that Dawkins is guilty of the same superficial tendencies where his own side is concerned as well. Odd then that Bullivant would single out Michael Martin’s recent book, rebuke

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<sup>153</sup> Stephen Bullivant, “Review: *The God Delusion*,” *New Blackfriars* Vol. 88, Issue 1014 (September 2007): 229.

<sup>154</sup> Bullivant, “Review: *The God Delusion*,” 229.

Dawkins' for his apparent lack of familiarity with it, and then admit that *The God Delusion* nevertheless seems to have captured "some of the volume's highlights."<sup>155</sup>

But as for the claim that Dawkins misrepresents those rebuttals against his positions, Bullivant offers a particularly telling example. He states:

As it happens, Dawkins avoids contradiction by presenting even the strongest arguments so superficially that, to the philosophically innocent bystander, it appears they really are so 'spectacularly weak' (p. 2) as to be impossible for any sincere, half-way intelligent person to accept. This strategy, however, leads Dawkins into some interesting dead-ends, as with the young Bertrand Russell's fleeting assent to the 'ontological proof'. Unable to admit that this 'infantile' piece of 'logomachist trickery' (pp. 80, 81) might possess even a shred of plausibility, he wildly suggests that Russell was 'an exaggeratedly fair-minded atheist', and gently berates him for being, as a philosopher, 'over-eager' to base his beliefs on logic (p. 81)!<sup>156</sup>

This, of course, omits the fact that, in his essay, "Why I Am Not a Christian," Bertrand Russell writes:

To come to this question of the existence of God, it is a large and serious question, and if I were to attempt to deal with it in any adequate manner I should have to keep you here until Kingdom Come, so that *you will have to excuse me if I deal with it in a somewhat summary fashion.*<sup>157</sup>

As confirmation of this tendency, I present Russell's treatments of both the ontological argument as well as the argument from design. (The first of these excerpts is taken not

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<sup>155</sup> The reasons for these so-called glaring omissions are two-fold. With regard to Dawkins' supposed failure to engage with "serious theology and religious philosophy," I am reminded of Pierre Laplace who, after having presented Napoleon with a treatise he'd written on the motions and shapes of the planets, was asked by the Emperor why in his book on the nature of the universe he had failed to mention the author of that universe. Laplace's infamous and immortal (albeit potentially apocryphal) reply – "Sire, I had no need of that hypothesis," – works equally well in this context. In other words, regardless of their personal beliefs (or lack thereof), no *deus ex machina* is necessary to power the processes that either Laplace's or Darwin's theories describe. As for Dawkins' disregard for so-called serious atheist philosophy, I would conclude that the similarity of sentiment between Dawkins' and Martin's tomes (of which even Bullivant admits) demonstrates the repeatability of result that so often comes from the atheistic tendency to rely on the Enlightenment principle of reason and the numerous successes of the scientific method.

<sup>156</sup> Bullivant, "Review: *The God Delusion*," 228.

<sup>157</sup> Bertrand Russell, "Why I Am Not a Christian," The Bertrand Russell Society, 2016, accessed 6 August 2016, <https://users.drew.edu/~jlenz/whynot.html>. Emphasis mine.

from “Why I Am Not a Christian,” but rather from Russell’s 1905 article, “On Denoting.”)

The most perfect Being has all perfections; existence is a perfection; therefore the most perfect Being exists” becomes:- “There is one and only one entity  $x$  which is most perfect; that one has all perfections; existence is a perfection; therefore that one exists”. As a proof, this fails for want of a proof of the premise “there is one and only one entity  $x$  which is most perfect”.<sup>158</sup>

You all know the argument from design: everything in the world is made just so that we can manage to live in the world, and if the world was ever so little different we could not manage to live in it. That is the argument from design. It sometimes takes a rather curious form; for instance, it is argued that rabbits have white tails in order to be easy to shoot. I do not know how rabbits would view that application. It is an easy argument to parody. You all know Voltaire’s remark, that obviously the nose was designed to be such as to fit spectacles. That sort of parody has turned out to be not nearly so wide of the mark as it might have seemed in the eighteenth century, because since the time of Darwin we understand much better why living creatures are adapted to their environment. It is not that their environment was made to be suitable to them, but that they grew to be suitable to it, and that is the basis of adaptation. There is no evidence of design about it.<sup>159</sup>

Thus, it seems that even Russell was eventually obliged to treat both the ontological and teleological arguments (among others) with the same requisite terseness as Dawkins. This is undoubtedly because, as Graham Oppy observes:

One general criticism of ontological arguments which have appeared hitherto is this: none of them is *persuasive*, i.e., none of them provides those who do not already accept the conclusion that God exists – and who are reasonable, reflective, well-informed, etc. – with either *a pro tanto* reason or an all-things-considered reason to accept that conclusion. Any reading of any ontological argument which has been produced so far which is sufficiently clearly stated to admit of evaluation yields a result which is invalid, or possesses a set of premises which it is clear in advance that no reasonable, reflective, well-informed, etc. non-theists will accept,

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<sup>158</sup> Bertrand Russell, “On Denoting,” *Mind*, New Series, Vol 14, No. 56 (Oct., 1905): 491.

<sup>159</sup> Russell, “Why I Am Not a Christian.”

or has a benign conclusion which has no religious significance, or else falls prey to more than one of the above failings.<sup>160</sup>

Hence, if the best example Bullivant can muster in his critique of Dawkins' summary treatment of supposedly superior instances of philosophical and/or theological argument can so easily be contextualized and/or explained, it seems only logical to conclude that it may well be the case that more unanswerable accounts simply do not exist (at least as far as he is aware).

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Conversely, Michael Ruse writes in his review of *The God Delusion* that Dawkins' problem is not that he pays too little attention to traditional arguments for the existence of God, but rather that he affords them too much. Ruse writes:

Saint Augustine, one of the greatest thinkers of Western civilization, devoted but one paragraph in the *City of God* to the proofs. Saint Thomas was categorical that the proofs are second to faith. John Henry Newman, the greatest theologian that Britain has ever produced, was unambiguous. In 1870 (twenty-five years after he converted to Catholicism from the Anglican Church of his youth), in correspondence about his seminal philosophical work, *A Grammar of Assent*, Newman wrote: "I have not insisted on the argument from design, because I am writing for the 19th century, by which, as represented by its philosophers, design is not admitted as proved. And to tell the truth, though I should not wish to preach on the subject, for 40 years I have been unable to see the logical force of the argument myself. I believe in design because I believe in God; not in a God because I see design." He continued: "Design teaches me power, skill and goodness – not sanctity, not mercy, not a future judgment, which three are of the essence of religion" (*The Letters and Diaries of John Henry Newman*, Vol. 21, ed. C. S. Dessain and T. Gornall [Nelson, 1971], p. 97)... Dawkins misunderstands the place of the proofs, but this is nothing to his treatment of the proofs themselves. This is a man truly out of his depth. Does he honestly think that no philosopher or theologian has ever thought of or worried about the infinite regress of the

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<sup>160</sup> Graham Oppy, "Ontological Arguments," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2016 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, 12 February 2016, accessed 6 August 2016. <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2016/entries/ontological-arguments>.



cosmological argument? If God caused the world, what caused God? The standard reply is that God needs no cause because he is a necessary being, eternal, outside time. Read Saint Augustine's *Confessions*. Just as  $2+2=4$  is uncaused and always true, so is God's existence. Now, you might want to worry about the notion of necessary existence. But at least you should know that it is something to worry about.<sup>161</sup>

Thus, Dawkins problem is that he simultaneously dedicates too much and too little time to the traditional proofs for God's existence, and that he likewise affords them both too little and too much respect. Consequently, one wonders whether further action on Dawkins' part would remedy or exacerbate the problem.<sup>162</sup>

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Nevertheless, echoing Bullivant's criticisms, Peter Milward writes:

I have to confess I have been reading the latest best-seller, Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion*, with a mixture of fascination and frustration – with fascination, as the author writes so refreshingly well for an academic biologist, yet with frustration, as the most interesting parts of his book are those on which, as a biologist, he has no qualification to write. It all reminds me of the proverb that the cobbler should stick to his last. So if Dawkins is a biologist, he should stick to his biology and not meddle with theology, about which he is so patently ignorant.<sup>163</sup>

Milward goes on to provide an example of Dawkins' supposed ignorance. He explains:

Take, for instance, what he ventures to say about the God of the Old Testament, that he is 'arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction, jealous and proud of it, a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak, a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic-cleanser,' and so on. (p. 31) (I hope I may be forgiven for declining to set forth his full string of blasphemies!) Certainly, he must shock the majority of his readers, and he evidently intends to shock them. No doubt, too, he can produce chapter and verse from the Bible for each of his blasphemous assertions. Yet what they all

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<sup>161</sup> Michael Ruse, "Review: *The God Delusion*," *Isis* Vol. 98, No. 4 (December 2007): 814-5.

<sup>162</sup> Given Ruse's comments about the primacy of faith over reason in both the creation and defense of these so-called proofs, one sees no cause for summarily dismissing the validity of Dawkins' admittedly opposing and skeptical perspective. The shallowness of his faith does not automatically imply that he is out of his depth in considering the conclusions and implications of the proofs from outside the realm of *a priori* belief any more than said belief would render any person of faith an unimpeachable source able to immediately attest to their inherent truth.

<sup>163</sup> Peter Milward, "Review: *The God Delusion*," *The Heythrop Journal*, Vol. 49, Issue 4 (July 2008): 696–697.

add up to isn't truth but falsehood. What Dawkins, perhaps from his meticulous scientific viewpoint, fails to realize is that the assertion of the truth frequently contains an implication of falsehood, or that, as Shakespeare might have reminded him, it is 'the equivocation of the fiend' to lie like truth. There must be thousands of Bible readers, who know almost every book of the Bible by heart, yet who might well be astonished, at the parade of Biblical epithets this professed atheist trots out from his select anthology to prove the godlessness of God. The fact is that most believers who read the Bible for spiritual sustenance find what appeals to them in what St. Jerome calls the forest of the Scriptures. There is something in it for everyone, and Dawkins has evidently found in it what appeals to him, like a dog in search of savory smells.<sup>164</sup>

Notice how this is in no way a rebuttal of any of Dawkins' criticisms. For if, as Milward maintains, "he can produce chapter and verse from the Bible for each of his blasphemous assertions," how can they be blasphemous? His Shakespearean quotes notwithstanding, the fact that Dawkins' dog-like search for savory smells has so quickly led him to some of the more unsavory biblical passages is a problem for Milward (and other believers) to explain, not Dawkins.

But when Dawkins turns his attentions to actual religious history, Milward is even more dismissive in his critique. He argues that

far more than in the pages of the Bible, whether the Old or the New Testament, Dawkins finds a happy hunting ground – like his predecessors in this field, the Protestant Centuriators of Magdeburg – in the centuries of Christian history, including the pages of that other respected source of divine revelation known as Tradition. Roaming over these pages of often scandalous gossip, spreading as they do over so many places and times, and viewing them with what I can only call his 'evil eye' of atheism, Dawkins characterizes them in terms of such aberrations as the Catholic treatment of Jews, heretics and witches, with special attention reserved for the crusades and the inquisition, as if the majority of Christians in so many places and times were gloatingly engaged in such behavior most of the time. He seems to be oblivious to the generally attested truth that 'No news is good news', and that what seems to us most scandalous and sensational in an age isn't necessarily the most typical or representative of people living in that age. He fails to realize that in the background to what he can only see as sensational in the pages of history Christian people

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<sup>164</sup> Ibid., 697.

were living their ordinary Christian lives, trying to put into daily practice the ideal of charity proposed to them by Christ, an ideal that, so far from being restricted to their fellow-Christians, goes out to human beings all over the world, as all are called to be children of our heavenly Father.<sup>165</sup>

In other words, if only Dawkins would focus on the passages of the Bible that aren't horrific, or on the actions of the faithful that aren't inhumane (to the exclusion of all others, I might add), then he would certainly come away with a more charitable view of Christianity. While this is undoubtedly true, such arguments say very little for a tradition that is required to adopt them in the face of deserved criticism. But if you're still not convinced of Milward's arguments, do not fret. He has one final gem to offer for your consideration. He writes:

By a strange accident of Fate, which he might well attribute to Natural Selection, Dawkins boasts of a name that is weirdly close to that of his hero – I almost said 'god' – Darwin. It is close enough in all conscience, but it falls short in two important respects. First, one has to take the r from Darwin's name, the r (as I take it) that stands for 'reason', and then one has to replace it with Dawkins' own k and s, which taken together may stand for either 'kiss' or (in reverse order) 'sick'. The 'kiss' may in turn stand for a Judas kiss, such as Judas gave to Christ in the moment of betraying his Master, while it may also be seen in terms of Dawkins' own betrayal of his Master, Darwin, in the way he falsifies the rational pretensions of biological science with a 'sick' fanaticism of his own for atheistic propaganda.)... In his proselytizing affirmation of atheism Dawkins writes more interestingly than the majority of his colleagues – though I can't claim to have read them all in proof of my affirmation. I might also have said 'more sensationally', or 'more scandalously', or even 'more blasphemously'. He puts into his own words, if in a more extreme manner, what most of his scientific colleagues may be thinking to themselves, and at the same time he makes himself the spokesman for his academic profession, with the result that, in so far as they fail to repudiate him and his writings, he had made himself the best known – and the bestselling – scientist of modern times, even to the extent of putting Einstein himself into the shade. In this, too, he has the advantage, on which I have already touched, of echoing the sacred name of Darwin in his own name.<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>165</sup> Ibid., 698.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid., 698, 700.

Here I cannot help but be reminded of an old episode of the 90s sitcom *Friends*, entitled, “The One With All the Poker.” Milward’s arguments have all the profundity of the following exchange between two of the show’s principle characters.

Phoebe: You guys, you know what I just realized? ‘Joker’ is ‘poker’ with a ‘J.’ Coincidence?

Chandler: Hey, that’s... that’s ‘joincidence’ with a ‘C’!<sup>167</sup>

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Echoing Milward’s “no news is good news” argument, Peter Heinegg writes:

On the whole, Dawkins makes all sorts of interesting points and scores any number of eye-catching hits, but he does seem rather blind to the social functions of religion. Falling back on his beloved notion of memes, he runs down some of these cultural genes (belief in immortality, hatred of heretics, exaltation of blind faith, etc.) making up the “memeplex” of religion. Now, whatever else he can say about religion, Dawkins has to admit that it has shown a spectacular ability to survive and reproduce itself despite all the odds (including the efforts of critics like him). But his list of memes is such a casual, scattershot affair, ignoring religion’s mighty community-building, life-enhancing, paradigm-shaping, sense-infusing, joy-inducing, brain-transforming features – and concentrating instead on superficial, obvious targets like the Qur’an’s visions of houris.... The religion that Dawkins demolishes, like the God he imagines as enthroned in its midst, deserves (and staggers under) practically all the blows he launches at it; but there’s a whole other world that he scarcely lays a glove on. That world isn’t necessarily immune to reason’s assaults, but they’ll have to be orchestrated more subtly and sensitively than they are here.<sup>168</sup>

Although it could be quite reasonably argued that Heinegg’s comments hardly constitute a criticism, his suggestion that Dawkins focus more so on the subtly and nuanced manifestations of religion is to essentially argue that he ignore (or at the very least downplay) the more mainstream historical and current understandings of the phenomenon. As for Heinegg’s suggestion that Dawkins’ list of memes is “a scattershot

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<sup>167</sup> James Burrows, dir. *Friends*. Season 1, Episode 18 “The One With All The Poker,” March 2, 1995, on NBC, accessed 6 August 2016, <http://uncutfriendsepisodes.tripod.com/season1/118uncut.htm>.

<sup>168</sup> Peter Heinegg, “Atheists’ Hotline,” *CrossCurrents* Vol. 56, No. 4, The Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited and Re-Imagined: Reflections on the Work of John Howard Yoder (Winter 2007): 129.

affair,” I would simply suggest that such is the best practice for hitting as broad a target as possible. To claim otherwise is to imply that a more precise aim might yield more ideologically-appealing results (all the while avoiding potential pitfalls along the way), but such is not Dawkins’ intention. As in most forms of analysis, the bad (i.e. weak) arguments can, indeed must, be considered alongside the good and/or strong ones. To accuse him of omitting many of the latter while simultaneously suggesting he eliminate almost all of the former seems a most unproductive approach.<sup>169</sup>

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In his review of *The God Delusion*, Thomas Martin argues that

the book’s most serious weakness is Dawkins’ inability to adopt a suspension of belief and practice what Ninian Smart called ‘sympathetic understanding.’... Dawkins seems to be completely incapable of garnering even an inkling of how religion might work as an explanation of reality.... The failure to acknowledge known weaknesses in the philosophical underpinnings of his argument, and the inability to suspend belief and enter sympathetically into foreign intellectual territory causes Dawkins’ argument to go wrong more often than not. I finished the book with this dictum in mind: no theist who has never agonized over the inadequacies of faith and held serious doubts about God’s existence should be allowed to write a book attacking atheism. No atheist who has never seriously wondered if there might be more to the show than materialism is capable of imagining should be allowed to write a book attacking God.<sup>170</sup>

Martin’s admittedly reasonable last dictum aside, I fail to see how Dawkins’ adopting a more “sympathetic understanding” of the religious mindset will make for a more compelling or complete analysis. To this charge of insensitivity, I will allow Dawkins himself to respond. In a 2012 interview with *Al Jazeera*, Richard Dawkins was asked

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<sup>169</sup> If anything, Heinegg seems to have betrayed his own incomprehension of Dawkins’ remarks concerning group selection theory, the by-product hypothesis, or the gene-centered view of evolution, any of which might be construed as more extensive considerations of (and possible explanations for) the peripheral benefits of religion and/or its undeniable ability to survive and thrive under myriad conditions.

<sup>170</sup> Thomas W. Martin, “Review: *The God Delusion*,” *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* Vol. 48, No. 2 (June 2009): 211. Given Dawkins’ Anglican upbringing and current identification as a 6 of 7 (De facto Atheist) on the scale that bears his name, he would seem to qualify as one such individual.

why his book “didn’t include some of the good things that religion has done?” What follows is his response and the subsequent exchange:

Dawkins: My passion is for scientific truth. I don’t much care about what’s good and evil, actually. I care about what’s true. Do you actually believe, in your Muslim faith, do you believe that Muhammad split the moon in two? Do you believe that Muhammad flew to heaven on a winged horse, for example? I pay you the compliment of assuming that you don’t.

Mehdi Hasan: No, I do. I believe in Miracles.

Dawkins: You believe that?

Hasan: Yes.

Dawkins: You believe that Muhammad went to heaven on a winged horse?

Hasan: Yes. I believe in God. I believe in miracles. I believe in revelation. I mean, the point here is that let’s assume I’m wrong, Richard. I’m wrong.

Dawkins: Yeah, let’s.

Hasan: Let’s assume I’m wrong. I’m wrong. I’m happy to concede that, Richard. I’m happy to concede it. I’m wrong. All religions are wrong. God does not exist. We’re all mad. The issue is: we exist. We’ve existed for a while, and I think even Christopher Hitchens said, and you’ve said in your writings, we’re not going anywhere. So my question to you is: “Why not acknowledge, for example, the good things that religion has done? Do you accept that religion has done good things, despite all of our mad beliefs and our miracles?”<sup>171</sup>

Given Dawkins’ comments on the prominence of truth in his intellectual and scientific pursuits, one immediately sees why Hasan’s question, and indeed Martin’s concern about emotional empathy, is completely irrelevant: science simply does not require it.

Sympathetic understanding may be a requisite of religious belief, just as its reciprocity undoubtedly aids in interfaith conversation, but science (and Dawkins) cares only about

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<sup>171</sup> “Is Religion Good or Evil?” *Aljazeera.com*, 20 July 2013, accessed 17 July 2016 <http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/general/2012/12/2012121791038231381.html>.

what is true. It requires neither belief nor sympathy in order to function. In fact, science works equally well in their absence. The same simply cannot be said of faith.

Consequently, were Martin's dictum to ever actually be implemented, one imagines the number of atheistic and scientific tomes would be largely unchanged, while space on the shelves of more religious archives would likely no longer come at quite such a premium.

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But concurring with Martin, Michael Fuller, in "Reticence, Reason and Rhetoric: Some Responses to Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion*," writes that

a side-effect of Dawkins' approach... is the likelihood that his intemperate rubbishing of those whom he perceives to be his opponents is doing great damage to the reputation of the sciences. At a time when public suspicion of science and technology is running rampant, over issues such as nuclear and biological weaponry, GM crops, drug company profits, and the ever-present threat of ecological catastrophe, anyone with the (grossly mistaken) idea that scientists are intolerant, megalomaniacal bigots would have that view strikingly confirmed by *The God Delusion*.<sup>172</sup>

In other words, if Dawkins isn't careful, his intemperance toward religion will lend credence to the public's current misconceptions about the "intolerant, megalomaniacal bigotry" of science. Of course, Fuller goes on to argue, via the writings of Christian Smith, that Dawkins' greatest failure is his inability to recognize that science is itself little more than an alternative faith-based system, and therefore just as vulnerable to intolerance, megalomania, and bigotry as any other so-called (meta)narrative. He writes:

Christian Smith has commented, 'our convictions and disagreements... are based precisely on larger systems of beliefs grounded in deeper suppositional beliefs' – something which applies to theists and atheists alike. Smith draws attention to the narratives which people tell in order to give shape and meaning to experience: the 'Christian narrative' is one such, and another is the 'scientific enlightenment narrative'. It is the latter, of course, which Dawkins reiterates so clearly. Smith comments, 'what is

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<sup>172</sup> Michael Fuller, "Reticence, Reason and Rhetoric: Some Responses to Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion*," *The Expository Times* 121(10) (2010): 494. DOI: 10.1177/0014524610370765.

evidence is itself largely made significant, if not constituted for us, by our narratives'. If this is so, it is doubtful whether debates around *The God Delusion* are capable of resolution, since participants coming from different perspectives will weigh and judge evidence differently depending on the narrative which has generated it for them.<sup>173</sup>

In essence, Fuller is arguing that if Dawkins doesn't adjust both his attitude and his approach, he runs the very real risk of confirming the public's "grossly mistaken" misconceptions about science, which incidentally and paradoxically happen to be quite plausible, if not ultimately true. Such an "argument" is so circular and self-defeating that I am even loathe to consider it as such.<sup>174</sup>

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Nonetheless, this notion of science as simply an alternative explanatory narrative is apparently an approach that Klaus Klostermaier wishes to adopt as well. In his article, "Reflections Prompted By Richard Dawkins's *The God Delusion*," he writes:

Virtually all terms used by modern sciences have a poetical and/or philosophical antecedent and are intentionally reduced versions of larger concepts. Time, for instance, has been reduced by science to the mechanically measurable clicks of a chronometer (whether the old-fashioned clock-work or the newest atomic oscillation type). For the ancient Greeks, to mention just one instance, Chronos was a mighty power ruling over all living beings: He ate his own children. Time deeply affects us personally; as we grow up and age, our lifetime is much more than the sum-total of clock ticks during a specific period, and the same clock-ticks signify very different events to different people. The awareness of the transience of everything through the passing of time became the trigger for

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<sup>173</sup> Ibid.

<sup>174</sup> Here, it appears Fuller and Smith are simply conflating methodology with ideology. Despite the attempts of Lynda Walsh (author of 2013's *Scientists as Prophets: A Rhetorical Genealogy*) and others like her, neither Dawkins nor any other scientists should be considered prophets (scientific or otherwise)... harbingers perhaps, but not prophets. For Darwin's theory of evolution was not intrinsically dependent upon his elucidation of it nor upon the public's reception to it. The same could be said of Newton's laws of motion or Copernicus' heliocentric model of the solar system. As empirical hypotheses, they were (and can again be) subjected to the same methodologies of science as any other proposition, eventually resulting in their being evidentially confirmed, categorically refuted, or revised and resubmitted for further testing. The ideologies of the individuals examining these theses are as irrelevant as the ideologies of those who first advanced them. Even were Darwin or Dawkins personally intolerant, megalomaniacal, and/or bigoted, the scientific veracity (or lack therein) of their work would be unaffected.



Gautama Buddha's search for enlightenment and eventually for the birth of Buddhism, reaching out for a condition of timelessness. According to the great physicist Erwin Schrödinger (Nobel Prize, 1933), "physical theory in its present stage strongly suggests the indestructibility of Mind by Time."<sup>175</sup>

That said, one wonders how this expanded, metaphorical, and personified notion of time could possibly lend itself to a greater understanding or applicability of the concept itself.

Klostermaier simply seems to be echoing Nagel's criticism that Dawkins' worldview entails a "world-flattening reductionism." Fortunately, science was able to correct (or at the very least contextualize) that misleading intuition centuries ago without any help from poetical or philosophical antecedents.<sup>176</sup>

Thankfully, where theological explanations are concerned, Klostermaier seems a bit more reasonable. He writes:

I agree that many of the arguments that have been used by theologians and pious scientists to prove the existence of a Creator God from natural evidence can no longer be upheld and that the attributes given to the Creator ought to be revised on the basis of more recent science. Here, too, a great new "simple" idea may replace the complexities of past theologies. The intimation of a reality beyond the world of the senses and the awe and wonder beyond the available explanations of natural phenomena take place in every age according to the level of education of the beholder. There is a transcendent element even in the most naïve wonder of an ordinary person, although the "facts" behind it may have a scientific explanation.<sup>177</sup>

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<sup>175</sup> Klaus K. Klostermaier, "Reflections Prompted By Richard Dawkins's *The God Delusion*." *Journal Of Ecumenical Studies* 43.4 (2008): 607-615.

<http://echo.louisville.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=36024411&site=ehost-live>.

<sup>176</sup> I would ask that my responses to Nagel on pages 34-40 be considered with regard to Klostermaier's claims here as well. To them, I would add only this: our modern-day scientific, quantifiable, and universally applicable understanding of time still permits of individual nuances of perception, purpose, and even presence (i.e. when time seems to stand still). Understanding that the nature and inherent subjectivity of these various (and oftentimes contradictory) experiences are themselves still traceable to equally quantifiable phenomena (brain states, chemical reactions, etc.) in no way cheapens or eliminates them from our respective and/or collective senses of what is real. The magic of reality is that learning the methods behind these disparate *illusions* does not, in and of itself, serve to *disillusion* us. If anything, such understanding can deepen our appreciation and respect for such phenomena as well as for the different ways in which we individually experience them.

<sup>177</sup> Klostermaier, "Reflections Prompted By Richard Dawkins's *The God Delusion*."

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Though possibly misunderstanding Klostermaier's point, Douglas Groothuis offers two such "simple" ideas in his article, "Who Designed the Designer?". He writes:

First, God is understood in monotheism as self-existent. God does not depend on anything outside of himself for divine existence. That is, God is the ultimate explanation for the universe and its form, but to ask where God came from or who designed God from this perspective is a nonsense question, something like: 'What is north of the North Pole?' or 'What word do you use when no words will do?' So, Dawkins... to the contrary, this is a perfectly good concept. There is no infinite regress such that nothing gets explained. There is, rather, a finite regress to an infinite being; that is, a self-existence being. The technical term for self-existence is aseity. The Apostle Paul spoke of this when he said to the philosophers of Athens in Acts, chapter seventeen: 'The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else.'... Second, there is a significant tradition in Christian theology that claims that God's existence is simple. That is, God has no parts. So, while God is the ultimate being in existence, God is not composed of discrete sections or aspects, so to speak. If that view is correct, then God would not be complex at all, but perfectly simple. On Dawkins's reasoning, therefore, what is perfectly simple is supposed to be the end of the line in terms of explanation. Thus, Dawkins couldn't complain that an absolutely simple being needs to be explained on the basis of something simpler than itself.<sup>178</sup>

One supposes that were Dawkins willing to accept Groothuis' two hypotheses – that God is an infinite, self-existent being who is all the while simple – Dawkins could have his Darwinian cake and eat it too, for chance and complexity would be effectively removed as the sole remaining obstacles to his account. Unfortunately, an assertion from the apostle Paul cannot substitute for actual argument or ascertainable evidence. Much more would be required in order to support such a non(sensical) theory, and pending its discovery, one assumes that Dawkins would prefer to deal with the ramifications of those

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<sup>178</sup> Douglas Groothuis, "Who Designed the Designer?: A Dialogue on Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion*," *Think* Vol. 8, Issue 21 (March 2009): 78, DOI: 10.1017/S1477175608000407.

two remaining obstacles than to simply sweep them aside in order to tidy the ideological corners of his own scientific house. Observe Groothuis' concluding thoughts on the subject not as evidence of self-existence (as he posits), but of the sort of circular reasoning from which it is well-nigh impossible to escape. "You don't have to buy into simplicity necessarily, since *self-existence* is the main argument I want to present.... [Those] such as Saint Anselm (and me) take God's existence to be logically necessary.... Thus, God's existence would be self-explanatory, and not a brute fact that might have been otherwise. But God, of course, still ends up explaining the existence and design of the universe...."<sup>179</sup> Linguistic sleight-of-hand might work as a theistic solution to the problem of God's existence, but science demands more than semantics.

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Unfortunately, this does not stop Stephen Ames from suggesting the following in his review:

The issue is whether there is any reason to think that God creates and uses such blind processes in bringing life into existence. Thomas Aquinas provides the basis for an answer. Aquinas argues that to give the glory due to God we must think of God as creating things with their own real powers, with "the dignity of also being causes" of good in other things. On my view we should therefore think that the living God would maximize this aspect of the creation, so that created things are co-creators in a life-producing universe. Interestingly, Aquinas' view was later rejected by Luther and Calvin as robbing God of His glory. Their views were resumed by Boyle and Newton, teaching that matter was passive and only moved by God, which ensured a place for God in the new scientific account of the universe. Ironically it was then overturned by the eighteenth century atheists, Diderot and d'Holbach, who taught that things had their own powers. Dawkins is so sure that the universe appears not to be created and designed by God. Is it that he lacks an adequate theology?<sup>180</sup>

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<sup>179</sup> Ibid., 79-80.

<sup>180</sup> Stephen Ames, "Review: *The God Delusion*," *Pacifica* 20 (October 2007): 335.

Given everything that has been considered thus far, I believe a simple “no” should suffice to answer Ames’ question. Ames no doubt disagrees, but in explaining his reasons for doing so, the explanatory poverty of his claims becomes ever more transparent. He states:

In *Deeper than Darwin* (Westview, 2003), Haught says we are drawn by our pure desire to know to go deeper in our inquiries into the matters before us. According to Haught it is God who draws us by this desire and calls us on, no matter our stumbling. Dawkins has been drawn to inquire beneath the mere appearances of design in living things, to a deeper level of understanding. While holding fast to what he has attained scientifically, is he prepared to go deeper still, and recognise in the pure desire to know and its cognitive imperatives, an experience of God incognito, the God who is no delusion?<sup>181</sup>

Here, one cannot help but compare Ames’ plea for Dawkins to delve deeper and recognize “the God who is no delusion,” to Alice’s fateful decision to plunge headlong into the rabbit-hole without ever considering how she might climb back out again. But where Alice proved unable to resist the temptation, Dawkins managed to keep both his sense and his sensibilities about him.<sup>182</sup>

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In his article, “Lunging, Flailing, Mispunching,” Terry Eagleton writes that

Dawkins holds that the existence or non-existence of God is a scientific hypothesis which is open to rational demonstration. Christianity teaches that to claim that there is a God must be reasonable, but that this is not at all the same thing as faith. Believing in God, whatever Dawkins might think, is not like concluding that aliens or the tooth fairy exist. God is not a celestial super-object or divine UFO, about whose existence we must remain agnostic until all the evidence is in. Theologians do not believe that he is either inside or outside the universe, as Dawkins thinks they do.

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<sup>181</sup> Ibid, 337.

<sup>182</sup> Ames’ plea could be read as little more than an appeal to the “God-of-the-Gaps” hypothesis, though an admittedly dexterous one at that. Prior to the mid nineteenth century, the traditional teleological argument still held considerable sway amongst even the most ardent of religious skeptics. But once effectively derailed by Darwin, Ames suggests that rather than demonstrating the inessentiality of divine design, evolutionary theory actually proves just how cleverly hidden that design truly is. By employing such a duplicitous tactic, Ames must certainly realize that he can never truly lose his argument. The further scientific advances continue to shed light on the inner workings of nature, the more said advances can be said to demonstrate the inexhaustible brilliance of nature’s ultimately unfathomable creator.

His transcendence and invisibility are part of what he is, which is not the case with the Loch Ness monster. This is not to say that religious people believe in a black hole, because they also consider that God has revealed himself: not, as Dawkins thinks, in the guise of a cosmic manufacturer even smarter than Dawkins himself (the New Testament has next to nothing to say about God as Creator), but for Christians at least, in the form of a reviled and murdered political criminal. The Jews of the so-called Old Testament had faith in God, but this does not mean that after debating the matter at a number of international conferences they decided to endorse the scientific hypothesis that there existed a supreme architect of the universe – even though, as Genesis reveals, they were of this opinion. They had faith in God in the sense that I have faith in you. They may well have been mistaken in their view; but they were not mistaken because their scientific hypothesis was unsound.<sup>183</sup>

Believing he has satisfactorily repudiated Dawkins' understanding of God, Eagleton proceeds to offer his own. He explains:

Dawkins speaks scoffingly of a personal God, as though it were entirely obvious exactly what this might mean. He seems to imagine God, if not exactly with a white beard, then at least as some kind of chap, however supersized. He asks how this chap can speak to billions of people simultaneously, which is rather like wondering why, if Tony Blair is an octopus, he has only two arms. For Judeo-Christianity, God is not a person in the sense that Al Gore arguably is. Nor is he a principle, an entity, or 'existent': in one sense of that word it would be perfectly coherent for religious types to claim that God does not in fact exist. He is, rather, the condition of possibility of any entity whatsoever, including ourselves. He is the answer to why there is something rather than nothing. God and the universe do not add up to two, any more than my envy and my left foot constitute a pair of objects. This, not some super-manufacturing, is what is traditionally meant by the claim that God is Creator. He is what sustains all things in being by his love; and this would still be the case even if the universe had no beginning. To say that he brought it into being *ex nihilo* is not a measure of how very clever he is, but to suggest that he did it out of love rather than need. The world was not the consequence of an inexorable chain of cause and effect. Like a Modernist work of art, there is no necessity about it at all, and God might well have come to regret his handiwork some aeons ago. The Creation is the original *acte gratuit*. God is an artist who did it for the sheer love or hell of it, not a scientist at work

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<sup>183</sup> Terry Eagleton, "Lunging, Flailing, Mispunching," *The London Review of Books* Vol. 28, No. 20 (19 October 2006): 32-34, accessed 11 August 2016, <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v28/n20/terry-eagleton/lunging-flailing-mispunching>.

on a magnificently rational design that will impress his research grant body no end.<sup>184</sup>

Thus, according to Eagleton, God is neither person nor principle, but instead “the condition of possibility.” Against both traditional and existentialist philosophy, Eagleton argues that God’s essence is neither synonymous with his existence, nor subsequently derived from it, but is rather entirely separable from and unrelated to it. But in spite of God’s perpetual state of essential/existential limbo, Eagleton maintains that God is love, all the while likening him to an apparently frustrated artist (whose Creation was impulsive and unnecessary, and which he may have since come to regret). Not only is such an explanation of God completely incoherent, it is not even truly an explanation of anything at all. Eagleton himself seems to realize this, as he closes with the following caveat:

Now it may well be that all this is no more plausible than the tooth fairy. Most reasoning people these days will see excellent grounds to reject it. But critics of the richest, most enduring form of popular culture in human history have a moral obligation to confront that case at its most persuasive, rather than grabbing themselves a victory on the cheap by savaging it as so much garbage and gobbledygook. The mainstream theology I have just outlined may well not be true; but anyone who holds it is in my view to be respected, whereas Dawkins considers that no religious belief, anytime or anywhere, is worthy of any respect whatsoever. This, one might note, is the opinion of a man deeply averse to dogmatism. Even moderate religious views, he insists, are to be ferociously contested, since they can always lead to fanaticism.<sup>185</sup>

In his reply to Eagleton’s article, A.C. Grayling explains how the former’s arguments rest on a single, faulty premise. He writes:

Terry Eagleton charges Richard Dawkins with failing to read theology in formulating his objection to religious belief, and thereby misses the point that when one rejects the premises of a set of views, it is a waste of one’s time to address what is built on those premises.... For example, if one

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<sup>184</sup> Ibid.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid.

concludes on the basis of rational investigation that one's character and fate are not determined by the arrangement of the planets, stars and galaxies that can be seen from Earth, then one does not waste time comparing classic tropical astrology with sidereal astrology, or either with the Sarjatak system, or any of the three with any other construction placed on the ancient ignorances of our forefathers about the real nature of the heavenly bodies. Religion is exactly the same thing: it is the pre-scientific, rudimentary metaphysics of our forefathers, which (mainly through the natural gullibility of proselytised children, and tragically for the world) survives into the age in which I can send this letter by electronic means.

Eagleton's touching foray into theology shows, if proof were needed, that he is no philosopher: God does not have to exist, he informs us, to be the 'condition of possibility' for anything else to exist. There follow several paragraphs in the same fanciful and increasingly emetic vein, which indirectly explain why he once thought Derrida should have been awarded an honorary degree at Cambridge.<sup>186</sup>

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This fact notwithstanding, in his article, "Beyond Belief," Jim Holt employs a more conciliatory approach, no doubt intended to appeal to both Dawkins and Eagleton.

He writes:

It is doubtful that many people come to believe in God because of logical arguments, as opposed to their upbringing or having "heard a call." But such arguments, even when they fail to be conclusive, can at least give religious belief an aura of reasonableness, especially when combined with certain scientific findings. We now know that our universe burst into being some 13 billion years ago (the theory of the Big Bang, as it happens, was worked out by a Belgian priest), and that its initial conditions seem to have been "fine-tuned" so that life would eventually arise. If you are not religiously inclined, you might take these as brute facts and be done with the matter. But if you think that there must be some ultimate explanation for the improbable leaping-into-existence of the harmonious, biofriendly cosmos we find ourselves in, then the God hypothesis is at least rational to adhere to, isn't it?<sup>187</sup>

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<sup>186</sup> A.C. Grayling, "Response to Terry Eagleton's 'Lunging, Flailing, Mispunching'," *The London Review of Books, Letters* Vol. 28, No. 21 (2 November 2006), accessed 11 August 2016, <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v28/n20/terry-eagleton/lunging-flailing-mispunching>.

<sup>187</sup> Jim Holt, "Beyond Belief," *NY Times*, 22 October 2006, accessed 12 August 2016, [http://www.nytimes.com/2006/10/22/books/review/Holt.t.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2006/10/22/books/review/Holt.t.html?_r=1).

Though a noble sentiment, Holt's comments on traditional arguments for the existence of God ultimately illustrate why neither Dawkins nor Grayling feels the need to engage with them. In fact, it is arguably the source of their contempt that "even when they fail to be conclusive," such theological and philosophical constructs "can at least give [otherwise unreasonable] religious belief an aura of reasonableness." In his review of *The God Delusion*, Richard Weiner captures the Dawkins' perspective perfectly when he states:

Dawkins tosses down the gauntlet to scientists and challenges them not to retreat from the fundamentalist onslaught against science.

Clearly, most scientists would have no difficulty stating flatly that Greek mythology is completely improbable as an explanation of natural phenomena. Yet many scientists are loath to challenge the prevailing Judeo-Christian mythologies prevalent in western societies, and instead treat superstitions dating back millennia as deserving of solemn respect.

Scientists are able to recognize the intentional silliness of the mock religion Pastafarianism, which postulates a giant flying spaghetti monster as the creator of the Universe. Scientists know, as well as any empirical statement can be known, that mass murderers aren't rewarded with 72 virgins after they die. Yet how many scientists in Judeo-Christian countries are willing to speak out publicly and flatly state Judeo-Christian creationism is irrational nonsense?<sup>188</sup>

Weiner's point is well-worth considering.

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In his article, "How Richard Dawkins Lost His Battle with God," Deepak Chopra offers the following criticism of Dawkins' methodology:

Let's say that thousands of people claim to have seen a ghost. Their experience isn't disproved by arguing that the universe is made of atoms and molecules, rendering non-physical entities impossible. The actual experience of seeing a ghost must be met on its own terms. The same holds true for the millions of people across the centuries who claim to have an experience of God, heaven, the soul, the afterlife, and so on.

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<sup>188</sup> Richard Wiener, "Review: *The God Delusion*," *The American Physical Society*, Vol. 36, No. 4. (October 2007) accessed 12 August 2016, <https://www.aps.org/units/fps/newsletters/2007/october/wiener.html>.



Telling them that life evolved from one-celled microorganisms doesn't say anything about their experience, which is why Dawkins, a canny propagandist, resorts to disdain and ridicule to demolish religious belief, adding a healthy dose of accusations against the evils produced by organized religion (which are undeniable but again don't address people's genuine spiritual experiences).<sup>189</sup>

One problem with Chopra's assessment is the naturalist's response to the report that "thousands of people claim to have seen a ghost," would not be to tell them "that life evolved from one-celled microorganisms." It would instead be to inform those people of the psychological and/or sociological phenomenon known as mass hysteria and to discuss with them the several dozen historical examples of its manifestation. As John Waller explains:

Supernaturalism has fueled most flamboyant cases of mass hysteria. Nuns living in austere convents between the 1500s and 1700s were especially prone. Convinced that they had been possessed by demons, unhappy nuns would enter a trance, and proceed to writhe, convulse, laugh, speak in strange tongues, smash crucifixes, thrust out their hips, and make other lewd gestures and propositions. The sociologist Robert E Bartholomew tells of one episode in which several nuns, who presumably saw cats as Satanic familiars, "meowed together every day at a certain time for several hours together". In 1749, a contagion of squirming, screaming and trance spread through a German convent; locals inferred the work of a witch, seized a nun as a likely candidate and beheaded her in the marketplace.... It takes only the right kind of fear, suggestion and false belief to trigger epidemic hysteria or mass delusions. So as our fears change, so do expressions of mass hysteria.<sup>190</sup>

In other words, how and wherever such collective hysteria presents, it tends to manifest itself only in ways that are psychologically plausible to the populations who suffer. Just as nuns became convinced they had been possessed by demons, the people of Salem village became convinced that many of their neighbors had succumbed to the temptation

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<sup>189</sup> Deepak Chopra, "How Richard Dawkins Lost His Battle with God," The Huffington Post, 26 November 2014, accessed 12 August 2016, <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/deepak-chopra/how-richard-dawkins-lost-b6172040.html>.

<sup>190</sup> John Waller, "Falling Down," *The Guardian*, 18 September 2008, accessed 12 August 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2008/sep/18/psychology>.

of witchcraft. Similarly, one can reasonably assert that, were a thousand people to claim to have seen a ghost, they must reside in a culture that considers such events (at least) possible, if not altogether likely. Thus, rather than requiring supernaturalism to explain them, as Chopra suggest, such phenomena can be readily explained by the strictly naturalistic means of science.

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James Hannon, however, remains unconvinced. He writes:

For me, the most significant argument for the existence of God is personal experience. Here, Dawkins' treatment is grossly inaccurate. When he talks about the visions afforded to pilgrims by Our Lady of Fatima in 1917, when the sun was seen to dance, he says this didn't happen because the rest of the world didn't shake too. Given that the dancing sun was a vision, Dawkins' counter is ridiculous. A vision shared by thousands of people must have an external cause and cannot be a trick of the mind. The sun doesn't actually have to move in space for the vision to be divine. Of course, it could be a trick of the atmosphere but I do not know if the phenomenon has been observed elsewhere. As for common religious experience, Dawkins doesn't address this at all except to say that the brain can be tricked. So it can, but I fail to see why we should believe that it is being tricked in this case.<sup>191</sup>

That, Dawkins would argue, is precisely the point. Nevertheless, Hannon goes on to offer:

one final example of how Dawkins always fails to see the other side of the argument even when it is breathing down his neck. In his penultimate chapter he equates bringing up children within a religious tradition as child abuse. I'll ignore the libel but for one point. We learn about a psychologist who helps people who have been mentally scarred by the terror of hell. Most of us Christians don't share this fear because we are confident in Christ's saving work. But some, probably vulnerable to all sorts of worries, are damaged by it. It is one of the reasons that many churches no longer try to exaggerate what hell means. The trouble that Dawkins refuses to recognise is that atheists are as guilty in this department as the most fire-breathing preacher. I have a friend who was brought up by atheist parents. When she asked him what happens when

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<sup>191</sup> James Hannon, "The God Delusion, by Richard Dawkins," Bede's Library, 8 December 2009, accessed 10 August 2016, <http://www.bede.org.uk/goddelusion.htm>.

you die, her father admitted that you are worm food. Annihilation was all that he could offer her. This caused her such distress that many years later she admitted that she was afraid of having children in case they suffered as she had. Even today, she suffers panic attacks over death. Worse, her atheistic upbringing means that she has never been able to find her home in the church despite desperately wanting to.

You could argue that hellfire is worse than annihilation. You'd be right although I'm a believer in hell as annihilation anyway. But the atheist has no alternative. There is no escape, nothing you can do. Like it or not, you are doomed. That many atheists can treat this matter with equanimity is fortunate for them. But others, like Dylan Thomas and my friend, rage against the dying of the light and will not go quietly into the night. As for my friend, Dawkins would have to admit that by his lights her parents' atheism led to her mental abuse and that she would be much better off brought up as a Christian. His "consciousness raising" over the religious upbringing of children is really just willful blindness to reality on his part.<sup>192</sup>

Hannon's personal views aside (for which, incidentally, he has no evidence), this seems to represent a false equivalency between the fears of ego annihilation and those of eternal, merciless torment. What's more, despite Hannon's implications, Dawkins' perspective does permit of a more consoling, though still intellectually honest, view of death, one which he shares with, and via passages from, Mark Twain and Bertrand Russell. I reproduce them both below.

Twain: 'I do not fear death. I had been dead for billions and billions of years before I was born, and had not suffered the slightest inconvenience from it.'

Russell: 'I believe that when I die I shall rot, and nothing of my ego will survive. I am not young and I love life. But I should scorn to shiver with terror at the thought of annihilation. Happiness is nonetheless true happiness because it must come to an end, nor do thought and love lose their value because they are not everlasting. Many a man has borne himself proudly on the scaffold; surely the same pride should teach us to think truly about man's place in the world. Even if the open windows of science at first make us shiver after the cosy indoor warmth of traditional

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<sup>192</sup> Ibid.

humanizing myths, in the end the fresh air brings vigour, and the great spaces have a splendour of their own.<sup>193</sup>

Thus, Hannon's mistake is presuming that hope and fear are one's only options for emotionally dealing with death. But Dawkins, Twain, and Russell offer a more logical approach which, while not promising anything beyond its evidential purview, can nevertheless add meaning to the here and now by redirecting one's focus more fully toward it.

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In his article, "On a Mission to Convert," H. Allen Orr writes:

The most disappointing feature of *The God Delusion* is Dawkins's failure to engage religious thought in any serious way. This is, obviously, an odd thing to say about a book-length investigation into God. But the problem reflects Dawkins's cavalier attitude about the quality of religious thinking. Dawkins tends to dismiss simple expressions of belief as base superstition. Having no patience with the faith of fundamentalists, he also tends to dismiss more sophisticated expressions of belief as sophistry (he cannot, for instance, tolerate the meticulous reasoning of theologians). But if simple religion is barbaric (and thus unworthy of serious thought) and sophisticated religion is logic-chopping (and thus equally unworthy of serious thought), the ineluctable conclusion is that all religion is unworthy of serious thought.<sup>194</sup>

Though undoubtedly convinced that he has just debunked Dawkins' approach to religion, I would argue that he has inadvertently confirmed it. Neither simple (i.e. traditional) religion nor its more recent, sophistic(ated) qualifications are worthy of serious, rational study because both approaches to argumentation are themselves based on the equally unwarranted *a priori* assumption that God necessarily exists and one's individual and/or communal understanding of his essence and divine will is intrinsically true and thus inherently superior to all other such notions. After all, one never sees a confessing

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<sup>193</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 396-7.

<sup>194</sup> H. Allen Orr, "A Mission to Convert," *The New York Review of Books*, 11 January 2007, accessed 12 August 2016, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2007/01/11/a-mission-to-convert/>.

Christian reason his way to Brahma or Buddha. Such expansive arguments are only ever proffered in service of an already held belief.

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For an example of this phenomenon, observe what Phillip Bell writes in his article, “Atheist with a Mission”:

To Dawkins, much of the Bible is ‘weird’ and strange so perhaps his theological illiteracy is partly accounted for. Yet, for a man who has clearly studied the Bible – after a fashion – his (mis)use of it in these pages smacks more of calculated deceit. Almost gleefully, he describes immoral actions (such as Lot’s incest with his daughters in Genesis 19 and the Levite’s behaviour concerning his concubine in Judges 19) and concludes that this shows the Bible is not our source for morality (ignoring that not everything reported in the Bible is endorsed by the Bible). But he also willfully twists the actions of the heroes of faith – so Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice Isaac is ripped out of all context to make him a child abuser! Moses and Joshua also receive a bashing by this self-appointed theological expert, but his animosity is always at its fiercest when he is persecuting the God that these biblical figures worshipped and served:

‘What makes my jaw drop is that people today should base their lives on such an appalling role model as Yahweh...’ (p. 248).<sup>195</sup>

However, I would argue that Bell’s claim that “not everything reported in the Bible is endorsed by the Bible” is the one that smacks of calculated deceit. I will illustrate via Bell’s first example. Before God destroys the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, he ensures that Lot and his daughters have safely absconded. The fact that God did not likewise choose to smite Lot, nor subsequently his daughters (or their incestuous descendants), all the while condemning entire cities to utter destruction for the “crime” of sodomy, does seem to suggest (at least tacit) divine approval for their unnatural relations. In this light, Dawkins’ point seems eminently clear that anyone who would act today as Lot with his

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<sup>195</sup> Phillip Bell, “Atheist with a Mission,” Creation Ministries International, 7 February 2007, accessed 12 August 2016, <http://creation.com/atheist-with-a-mission-critique-of-dawkins-god-delusion>.

daughters, or Abraham with his son, could certainly be described in a variety of ways; excessively moral, however, would most assuredly not be among them.

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In his “Response to *The God Delusion*,” Yesuto Shaw writes:

In “A Proof for the Existence of God,” Peter Blair offers a response to the very point Dawkins raises. As Blair writes, Dawkins errs in assuming that God is overly complex, when classical Christian philosophy actually considers God to be truly simple. This may sound preposterous with all of the attributes and characteristics of God that are often discussed, but, Blair writes, “Aquinas also argues that though we can distinguish in thought between God’s goodness, his truth, his power, his intellect, his will, his existence, etc., in God himself there actually is no distinction between these things. God’s goodness is his truth, which is his will, which is his power, and so on. God is a simple unity.” It could also be argued that the immaterial and the intellectual are inherently more simple than the material and the physical. “For instance, the idea of something such as a cathedral is much simpler than the thing itself, the physical cathedral. An idea has no direction, size, shape, weight, or any spatiotemporal characteristics. It has no parts and no constituent material. In all these ways, it is simpler than that which it represents.”<sup>196</sup>

Although yet another example of the intellectual high wire upon which modern-day theologians are required to balance, Shaw nevertheless goes on to chastise Dawkins for not providing sufficient evidence to support his own claims. Shaw writes:

Overall, Richard Dawkins is clearly an intelligent, educated, and, yes, witty man. But in *The God Delusion*, he shows that his strong atheist stance is based on simplistic and misinformed assumptions. For some of what would be his strongest points he uses faulty data without providing sources to back them up, and he often makes stronger claims than his evidence warrants. Therefore, the probability that God doesn’t exist is not nearly as easily concluded as Dawkins claims it is, and it would seem that the probability may even point in the other direction. Perhaps the delusion here is not so much with those who believe in God as those who believe in Dawkins.<sup>197</sup>

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<sup>196</sup> Yesuto Shaw, “A Response to Richard Dawkins’ *The God Delusion*,” AugustineCollective.org, Fall 2012, accessed 11 August 2016, <http://augustinecollective.org/god-delusion-response/>.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid.

Unfortunately, Shaw's entire critique of Dawkins is rendered hypocritical (if not entirely moot) in light of his own shoddily-supported assertions. After all, the scientific method, and any theory it yields, permits (in both principle and in practice) counterargument, evidential challenge, qualification, and most importantly, falsification. Shaw's (and presumably Blair's) theological construct of "God" does not. Thus, I would conclude that it is theology, not science, that is most vulnerable to "simplistic and misinformed assumptions."

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For an even more obvious example of baseless assertion, observe Martin Cohen's arguments concerning the possible existence of unicorns. He writes:

Dawkins bravely asserts that he considers unicorns not to exist, even if the philosophers say it is impossible to be [sic] prove it. Again, however, the point for philosophers about unicorns is not whether or not they exist, but whether or not their properties exist - for example, whether or not they have 'one or two horns' on their horsey foreheads. Unicorns are recognised, indeed defined, to be imaginary creatures: the philosophical debate concerns is [sic] the status of statements about such imaginary things. Dawkins is pleased however, having 'disproved' the existence of unicorns to extend his method to the question of God. "The point of all these way out examples is that they are undisprovable, yet nobody thinks the hypothesis of their existence is on an even footing with the hypothesis of their non-existence" he adds.<sup>198</sup>

Such philosophical musings, when taken together with A.C. Grayling's comments on theology, surely demonstrates why Dawkins, in his concern about what is true, has so little time for either.

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<sup>198</sup> Martin Cohen, "The Delusions of Richard Dawkins, Prophet of Science," *The Journal of the Philosophical Society of England*. Accessed 12 August 2016., <http://www.the-philosopher.co.uk/reviews/dawkins.htm>.

In his review, Douglas Groothuis argues that the problem with Dawkins' understanding of the Bible is that

on his view, the Bible can be little more than a collection of pious fictions, since its principle character – God – does not exist. Dawkins's approach is that any biblical text with a historical problem must be a palpable falsehood. Any miracle story, moreover, is false, since there is no God to perform such feats. In other words, the Bible is guilty until proven innocent; but it is never proven innocent, since God does not exist. This is a neat and convenient system of dismissal, but one lacking in academic integrity.

A good study Bible and sources by conservative biblical scholars can easily answer most of Dawkins's overheated objections. For example, he dismisses the historicity of the Gospel accounts of Jesus' early life because they differ in various ways, such as in their genealogies. Rather than realizing that they were written by different authors with different audiences to emphasize different aspects, he infers that they are contradictory and are the result of theological agendas that invented pious fictions. Christian thinkers have noted these kinds of issues for centuries, and the plausible solutions they discovered are readily available, if one is concerned to study the issue carefully.<sup>199</sup>

But let's examine Groothuis' own example, the differing genealogies of Jesus, as well as his claim that they were simply "written by different authors with different audiences to emphasize different aspects." Could one plausibly say this about any other figure in history and still claim that both accounts represent true history? Of course not. There exist only two possible explanations. Either one is right, and the other is wrong. Or perhaps they are simply both wrong. Either way, it seems that the religious' claim to biblical inerrancy has been called into question. But as for those "plausible solutions" of which Groothuis speaks, allow me to present just a few. Matt Slick, writing for the *Christian Apologetics and Research Ministry* explains:

There are differences of opinion with two main options being offered. The first is that one genealogy is for Mary and the other is for Joseph. It

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<sup>199</sup> Douglas Groothuis, "Review: *The God Delusion*," Christian Research Institute, 10 June 2009, accessed 10 August 2016, <http://www.equip.org/article/the-god-delusion/>.



was customary to mention the genealogy through the father even though it was clearly known that it was through Mary.... Breaking up genealogies into male and female representations was acceptable in the ancient Near East culture since it was often impolite to speak of women without proper conditions being met: male presence, etc. Therefore, one genealogy might be of Mary and the other of Joseph – even though both mention Joseph. In other words, the Mary genealogy was counted “in” Joseph and under his headship.... Luke starts with Mary and goes backwards to Adam. Matthew starts with Abraham and goes forward to Joseph. The intents of the genealogies were obviously different which is clearly seen in their styles. Luke was not written to the Jews, Matthew was. Therefore, Matthew would carry the legal line (from Abraham through David) and Luke the biological one (from Adam through David). Also, notice that Luke’s first three chapters mention Mary eleven times; hence, the genealogy from her. Fourth, notice Luke 3:23, “And when He began His ministry, Jesus Himself was about thirty years of age, being supposedly the son of Joseph, the son of Eli,” This designation “supposedly” seems to signify the Marian genealogy since it seems to indicate that Jesus is not the biological son of Joseph. Finally, in the Joseph genealogy is a man named Jeconiah. God cursed Jeconiah (also called Coniah), stating that no descendant of his would ever sit on the throne of David, “For no man of his descendants will prosper sitting on the throne of David or ruling again in Judah,” (Jer. 22:30). But Jesus, of course, will sit on the throne in the heavenly kingdom. The point is that Jesus is not a biological descendant of Jeconiah, but through the other lineage – that of Mary. Hence, the prophetic curse upon Jeconiah stands inviolate. But, the legal adoption of Jesus by Joseph reckoned the legal rights of Joseph to Jesus as a son, not the biological curse. This is why we need two genealogies: one of Mary (the actually biological line according to prophecy), and the legal line through Joseph.<sup>200</sup>

One wonders if, à la Martin Cohen, this metaphorical unicorn has but one horn or two.

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In his article, “The academic who read *The God Delusion* then turned to God,”

Francis Phillips writes:

Indeed, Babarsky found Dawkins’ arguments so unsatisfactory, coupled with his own atheistic and fundamentalist stance, that they prompted her to examine for the first time what Christianity was all about. Her examination was to lead to her conversion to Catholicism. “In reading to

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<sup>200</sup> Matt Slick, “Why are There Different Genealogies for Jesus in Matthew 1 and Luke 3?” Christian Apologetics and Research Ministry, accessed 12 August 2016, <https://carm.org/bible-difficulties/matthew-mark/why-are-there-different-genealogies-jesus-matthew-1-and-luke-3>.

refute Dawkins as well as educate myself... I discovered the God-man Jesus Christ. Not only did the Catholic view resonate with me emotionally but... it was intellectually honest.”

She read Benedict XVI’s Jesus of Nazareth and came to realise the inadequacy of the scientific method that demanded laboratory-type proof of the existence of God. She concludes, “I choose to believe in a supernatural God... I believe in miracles. I believe that, while science has many valuable insights to offer us, it is not the final word. I believe that some things are beyond our understanding, certainly now and perhaps forever. I believe that God is great and that man, created in His image and with free will, has made wonderful discoveries about the natural world that we inhabit. I choose to believe in God and that he is no delusion, nor am I delusional.”<sup>201</sup>

To this I will once again allow Dawkins himself to respond. Following a lecture at the Eden Court Theater, Dawkins was asked by a Christian gentleman in the audience to once again defend his atheistic arguments, since he himself could not afford to base his life on a delusion. What follows is Dawkins’ response:

If you had been born in India, I daresay you would be saying the same thing about Lord Krishna and Lord Shiva. If you had been born in Afghanistan, I daresay you would be saying the same thing about Allah. If you had been born in Viking Norway, you would be saying the same thing about Wotan. If you’d been born in Olympian Greece, you’d be saying the same thing about Zeus and Apollo. The human mind is extremely susceptible to hallucination... You are obviously sincere, but obviously I do not share your beliefs. And I think you are hallucinating. That’s all I can say. I don’t doubt your sincerity.<sup>202</sup>

I think the reply works equally well here.

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In his article, “What Should Christians Know about *The God Delusion*?”, R.

Douglas Geivett writes:

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<sup>201</sup> Francis Phillips, “The Academic who Read *The God Delusion* then Turned to God,” *The Catholic Herald*, 9 April 2014, accessed 10 August 2016, <http://www.catholicherald.co.uk/commentandblogs/2014/04/09/the-academic-who-read-the-god-delusion-then-turned-to-god/>.

<sup>202</sup> Stephan Meister, “Richard Dawkins Cruelly Answers Audience Question,” *YouTube* Video, 1:46. 7 September 2008, accessed 5 August 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JKGtcVoBhBQ>.

Dawkins is a scientist, not a philosopher – and it shows in his reckless forays into philosophy. He ridicules one argument for the existence of God without naming a single individual who actually endorses that argument – or even stating the argument clearly. He simply says it’s a “popular strand of argument” that links “the existence of great art to the existence of God” (pages 86-87). Dawkins doesn’t understand Pascal’s wager, which doesn’t seek to convince people of God’s existence, but simply invites reasonable agnostics to “bet on God” by living their lives as if God exists. And Dawkins miscasts C. S. Lewis’ “Liar, Lord or Lunatic” trilemma as an argument from Scripture for God’s existence. Lewis’s famous argument doesn’t come from Scripture, and it doesn’t seek to prove God’s existence. It’s an argument for the deity of Jesus Christ – an argument that presupposes reasonable belief in God.<sup>203</sup>

But rather than subject you, dear reader, to another rebuttal against the same sort of theological (non)argument, I’d like to close, instead with a few of fellow New Atheist Daniel Dennett’s comments on *The God Delusion*, taken from his own review of the book. He writes:

Both Dawkins and I have to deal with the frustrating problem of the game of intellectual hide-and-seek that “moderate” believers play to avoid being pinned down to the underlying absurdities of their traditions. “Don’t be so literal-minded!” they chortle, marveling at the philistinism of anyone who would attempt to take them at their word and ask them for their grounds for asserting that, for instance, God actually answers prayers (here, now, in the real world, by performing miracles). But then as soon you start playing the metaphor game with them, they abuse the poetic license you have granted them, and delight in dancing around the truth, getting away with all sorts of nonsense because they are indeed playing intellectual tennis without a net. Dawkins’ solution is to adopt a rather less patient attitude than I have done. As a philosopher, I cannot comfortably adopt this policy, since I was trained to hunt for treasure in the confused and confusing gropings of brilliant explorers, and am always encouraging my students to go out of their way to find charitable interpretations. I must say, however, that I’m warming to the rhetorical leverage it provides.<sup>204</sup>

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<sup>203</sup> R. Douglas Geivett, “What Should Christians Know About ‘*The God Delusion*’?”, *Biola Magazine*, Spring 2007, accessed 10 August 2016, <http://magazine.biola.edu/article/07-spring/what-should-christians-know-about-the-god-delusion/>.

<sup>204</sup> Daniel Dennett, “Review of Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*.” *Free Inquiry* (10 October 2006): 3.

As to why Dennett is himself leaning toward adopting Dawkins' "less patient" attitude, he explains:

The social psychologist and game theorist Anatol Rapoport (creator of the winning Tit-for-Tat strategy in Robert Axelrod's legendary prisoner's dilemma tournament) once promulgated a list of rules for how to write a successful critical commentary on an opponent's work. First, he said, you must attempt to re-express your opponent's position so clearly, vividly and fairly that your opponent says "Thanks, I wish I'd thought of putting it that way." Then, you should list any points of agreement (especially if they are not matters of general or widespread agreement), and third, you should mention anything you have learned from your opponent. Only then are you permitted to say so much as a word of rebuttal or criticism. I have found this a salutary discipline to follow – or, since it is challenging, to attempt to follow. When it succeeds, the results are gratifying: your opponent is in a mood to be enlightened and eagerly attentive. But this is well-nigh impossible when the arguments you wish to rebut are too flimsy. For one thing, you fear that hyper-patience will appear patronizing and simply drive other, swifter readers away. For another, we are dealing here with arguments that in most instances no longer have identifiable living exponents. Who stands by the Ontological Argument today? There are historians of philosophy and theology aplenty who will lovingly teach the argument (and its variants and rebuttals and the rebuttals of the rebuttals) but with few exceptions they don't defend it. It is treated as an interesting historical example, a Worthy Attempt, a jewel in the treasure-house of religion and philosophy, but not as a consideration that demands a response in today's arena of argument. That being so, giving the argument the Full Rapoport Treatment would be misplaced effort, comically earnest.... Perhaps it is all for the best that some readers will probably come away from the book more impressed by Dawkins' disrespect than persuaded by his arguments. Dawkins might even add that when ideas are contemptible, to conceal one's contempt is dishonest – and since he is so very good at expressing and defending the scientific ideas for which he has respect, this very contrast may, in the end, be a more potent consciousness-raiser than any argument. Perhaps some claims should just be laughed out of court.<sup>205</sup>

With this, I (and presumably Dawkins) wholeheartedly concur.

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<sup>205</sup> Ibid., 5.

## CHAPTER TWO: *BREAKING THE SPELL*: DENNETT AND HIS DISCONTENTS

### Introduction

As a philosopher predominantly concerned with explaining the nature of consciousness, Daniel Dennett's pathway to becoming a preeminent critic of religion may seem far more circuitous (and strewn with thorns) than those of his fellow Horsemen. After all, it wasn't until his publication of *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*, in 1995, that Dennett ostensibly took up the study of evolution in earnest, and thereby laid the groundwork for his 2006 *Breaking the Spell* with which this chapter is primarily concerned. Upon closer examination, however, one quickly discovers that, like fellow atheist Richard Dawkins, every step of Dennett's intellectual journey has in some way prepared him to safely and productively traverse it.

From his first book in 1969 (*Content and Consciousness*) to his fifth in 1991 (*Consciousness Explained*), Dennett primarily dedicates himself to explaining and espousing the so-called "multiple drafts theory" of consciousness. Though superficially complex, as Joshua Rothman explains in his 2017 profile of Dennett for *The New Yorker*, this concept can be effectively distilled into the following idea: "Picture the brain... as a collection of subsystems that 'sort of' know, think, decide, and feel. These layers build up, incrementally, to the real thing. Animals have fewer mental layers than people do – in particular, they lack [syntactic] language, which Dennett believes endows human mental

life with its complexity and texture – but this doesn't make them zombies.”<sup>206</sup> In other words, possession of consciousness is not a dichotomous either/or proposition. It is instead a broad spectrum of potential experience, one likely possessed by many disparate species... if only to differing degrees, according to the environmentally-specific, evolutionarily-acquired attributes of each.

While such a naturalist hypothesis rebukes the traditional mind-body dualism of Rene Descartes (and others) and places Dennett firmly within the physicalist camp on consciousness, it also provides him with uncommon insight and opportunity with which to consider this age-old philosophical problem anew. If consciousness is itself an evolved (and still evolving) phenomenon, then perhaps its contents have likewise evolved and continue to do so in a presumably advantageous, similarly discernible fashion. Although the connection to religious belief may not yet be obvious, it is precisely this facet of human conscious experience that Dennett places under the microscope in *Breaking the Spell*. Conceived as a case study of sorts, his intention herein is to examine the emergence, evolution, and continued existence of religious belief in humans within the confines and scientific context of Darwin's theory of natural selection. In essence, Dennett is asking his reader to consider whether religious belief (as an emergent, rather than divinely bestowed, property of consciousness) might have historically provided a competitive advantage to humans not altogether unlike upright posture or the opposable thumb. Answering in the affirmative, Dennett then wonders whether such belief continues to benefit the species as a whole or if its persistent presence should instead now

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<sup>206</sup> Joshua Rothman, “Daniel Dennett’s Science of the Soul,” *The New Yorker*, March 27, 2017, accessed 9 May 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/03/27/daniel-dennetts-science-of-the-soul>.

be viewed as largely vestigial, having outlived its original purpose, and thus destined to disappear as humanity continues to imperceptibly, yet inexorably evolve.

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*There is no evidence that man was aboriginally endowed with the ennobling belief in the existence of an Omnipotent God. On the contrary there is ample evidence, derived not from hasty travellers, but from men who have long resided with savages, that numerous races have existed, and still exist, who have no idea of one or more gods, and who have no words in their languages to express such an idea.... If, however, we include under the term "religion" the belief in unseen or spiritual agencies, the case is wholly different; for this belief seems to be universal with the less civilised races. Nor is it difficult to comprehend how it arose. As soon as the important faculties of the imagination, wonder, and curiosity, together with some power of reasoning, had become partially developed, man would naturally crave to understand what was passing around him, and would have vaguely speculated on his own existence.<sup>207</sup>*

### Part I: *Breaking the Spell*

In the preface to *Breaking the Spell*, Daniel Dennett identifies both the central concern of and the target audience for his treatise on religion.

America is strikingly different from other First World nations in its attitudes to religion, and this book is, among other things, a sounding device intended to measure the depths of those differences. I decided I had to express the emphases found here if I was to have any hope of reaching my intended audience: the curious and conscientious citizens of my native land – as many as possible, not just the academics. (I saw no point in preaching to the choir.)<sup>208</sup>

That is not to say that Dennett sees no value in such strictly academic endeavors; only that it is not his intention to similarly limit his own focus and readership with this

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<sup>207</sup> Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1889), 96. While the cultural chauvinism inherent within Darwin's remarks is (I trust) disturbing to 21<sup>st</sup> century readers, it is worth remembering that it was Darwin's and Mendel's groundbreaking work in biology and genetics, respectively, that eventually came to demonstrate the speciousness of such pseudoscientific suppositions. For instance, mapping the human genome has confirmed that there is only one human race extant in the world today, and all so-called "racial features" that ostensibly serve to distinguish between various populations are themselves the result of natural selection on either the macro (biological) or micro (genetic) levels. Thus the shortsightedness and/or chauvinism of the scientist is effectively checked by the sagacity of the scientific method to which he or she adheres.

<sup>208</sup> Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell* (London: Penguin Books, 2006), xiii.

particular project. As he subsequently explains in the opening chapter: “other authors have recently written excellent books and articles on the scientific analysis of religion that are directed primarily to their fellow academics. My goal here is to play the role of ambassador, introducing (and distinguishing, criticizing, and defending) the main ideas of that literature.”<sup>209</sup>

Of course, before one can subject religion to any sort of serious scientific scrutiny, several terms must be clearly defined and/or distinguished. In Chapter One, “Breaking Which Spell?” Dennett attempts to do so. He defines religion as a social system “*whose participants avow belief in a supernatural agent or agents whose approval is to be sought.*”<sup>210</sup> This is an important distinction because it immediately excludes those of a more deistic or simply spiritual persuasion from those who profess to believe in an anthropomorphic, intervening entity or entities. Dennett elaborates: “If what they call God is really not an agent in their eyes, a being that can *answer* prayers, *approve* and *disapprove*, *receive* sacrifices, and *mete out* punishment or forgiveness, then, although they may call this Being God, and stand in awe of it (not *Him*), their creed, whatever it is, is not really a religion according to my definition.”<sup>211</sup>

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<sup>209</sup> Ibid., 24. My intentions for this book in some respects mirror and in others parallel his own.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid., 10. For both clarity’s and concision’s sake, I would submit that, while diverse in their respective critical approaches to religion, all four of the New Atheists’ are committed to the notion of *metaphysical naturalism*, defined by philosopher Keith Augustine as a type of “nonreductive physicalism [which] maintains that everything that exists within nature is either physical or supervenient upon the physical and solely influenced by physical causes or causes which are supervenient upon physical causes” (Keith Augustine, “A Defense of Naturalism,” Master’s Thesis (University of Maryland, College Park, 2001), The Secular Web, accessed 3 October 2018, [https://infidels.org/library/modern/keith\\_augustine/thesis.html](https://infidels.org/library/modern/keith_augustine/thesis.html).) Therefore, any action, belief, doctrine, prohibition, punishment, ritual, or presumed reward considered to be in violation of this principle (i.e. any appeals to immaterial and/or supernatural agents, causes, or theories of knowledge) could reasonably be considered a fair target for their criticism without violating the frequent (and often exasperated) requests for specificity and focus from their ideological opponents.



With religion now clearly demarcated, Dennett explains precisely how and why he considers it to be a distinctly natural (not *supernatural*) enterprise. “[It] is a human phenomenon composed of events, organisms, structures, patterns, and the like that all obey the laws of physics or biology, and hence do not involve miracles.”<sup>212</sup> This is not to say that the notion of miracles or the presumed existence of a supernatural agent or agents must be abandoned by his readers before continuing with Dennett’s analysis; only that such beliefs must be separated from the individuals and communities who hold them and the way(s) in which they do so. As he explains, “it could be true that God exists, that God is indeed the intelligent, conscious, loving creator of us all, and yet *still* religion itself, as a complex set of phenomena, is a perfectly natural phenomenon.”<sup>213</sup>

For clarification on this point, Dennett references two common subjects, sports and medicine, whose individual manifestations routinely have the term *miraculous* attached to them, though only in a colloquial or hyperbolic sense; his examples include the Immaculate Reception and the seemingly improbable cancer cure.<sup>214</sup> Though both of these phenomena are commonly referred to as miraculous, Dennett argues that “sports and cancer are the subjects of intense scientific scrutiny by researchers working in many disciplines and holding many different religious views. They all assume, tentatively and for the sake of science, that the phenomena they are studying are natural phenomena.”<sup>215</sup> Though he acknowledges that there are likely those who would take exception with his rather dismissive stance toward miracles, Dennett reminds us that “the only hope of ever

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<sup>212</sup> Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, 25.

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>214</sup> *Ibid.*, 26. The so-called Immaculate Reception took place during an AFC divisional playoff game of the National Football League (NFL), between the Pittsburgh Steelers and the Oakland Raiders at Three Rivers Stadium in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, on December 23, 1972.

<sup>215</sup> Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, 26.

demonstrating this [that miracles do occur] to a doubting world would be by adopting the scientific method, with its assumption of no miracles, and showing that science was utterly unable to account for the phenomena... a point long recognized by the Roman Catholic Church, which at least goes through the motions of subjecting the claims of miracles made on behalf of candidates for sainthood to objective scientific investigation.”<sup>216</sup> In other words, even should one wish to disprove Dennett’s hypothesis, he insists that the scientific method remains the only reliable means of doing so.

With these preliminary, yet principal, concepts thus adequately defined, Dennett begins Chapter Two by asking “Some Questions About Science.” Given the evidence he was able to marshal in the previous chapter, one needn’t wonder at the answer to his (at least partially) rhetorical first question, “Can science study religion?” Obviously, he thinks it can. His second question, however, “Should science study religion?” is one that Dennett believes we must all earnestly consider before proceeding. After envisioning a variety of hypotheses about the ultimate fate of religion, none of which he believes can be considered either impossible or inevitable, Dennett ultimately concludes that “whether you want religion to flourish or perish, whether you think it should transform itself or just stay as it is, you can hardly deny that whatever happens will be of tremendous significance to the planet.”<sup>217</sup> He subsequently explains: “recent history strongly suggests that religion is going to garner more and more attention, not less, in the immediate future. If it is going to receive attention, it had better be high-quality attention, not the sort that hysterics, paranoids, and boodlers on all sides engage in.”<sup>218</sup>

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<sup>216</sup> Ibid.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid., 49.

Of course, there are those who maintain that such “high-quality attention” might ultimately unravel the shroud of religious raiments and therefore result in the disillusionment of the formerly faithful to such an extent that life might no longer be worth living. This is, after all, the spell to which Dennett’s title alludes. (To be clear, Dennett is not conceding that such fears are inherently justified, only that their existence and presumed validity have historically proven themselves sufficient in stifling and/or stopping the conversation he would very much like to have.) His rebuttal takes the shape of an extended analogy crafted between religion and music. In the section “Might music be bad for you?” Dennett asks his reader to contemplate a simple, albeit unlikely scenario, in which music has been scientifically proven to be deleterious to one’s health and societal well-being. He explains his reasons thusly:

I recognize that many people feel about religion the way I feel about music.... music may be what Marx said religion is: the opiate of the masses, keeping working people in tranquilized subjugation, but it may also be the rallying cry of revolution, closing up the ranks and giving heart to all. On this point, music and religion have quite similar profiles. In other regards, music looks far less problematic than religion... no crusades or jihads have been waged over differences in musical tradition, no pogroms have been instituted against the lovers of waltzes or ragas or tangos. Whole populations haven’t been subjected to obligatory scale-playing or kept in penury in order to furnish concert halls with the finest acoustics or instruments. No musicians have had fatwas pronounced against them by musical organizations, not even accordionists.... I’m prepared to look hard at the pros and cons of music, and if it turns out that music causes cancer, ethnic hatred, and war, then I’ll have to think seriously about how to live without music.<sup>219</sup>

So, too, he implies, must the religious. The problem, Dennett argues, is that “the first spell – the taboo – and the second spell – religion itself – are bound together in a curious embrace. *Part* of the strength of the second may be – may be – the protection it receives

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<sup>219</sup> Ibid., 42-3.

from the first.”<sup>220</sup> But he reminds us that “knowledge really is power, for good and for ill. Knowledge can have the power to disrupt ancient patterns of belief and action, the power to subvert authority, the power to change minds.... there is risk and even pain involved, but it would be irresponsible to use that as an excuse for ignorance.”<sup>221</sup>

To those unconvinced that the potential rewards for such intellectual courage are worth the acknowledged risks that must necessarily accompany them, Dennett offers the following example:

More recently, another taboo was broken, with even greater outcry. Alfred C. Kinsey, in the 1940s and 1950s, began the scientific investigation of human sexual practices in America that led to the notorious Kinsey Reports.... There were substantial flaws in Kinsey’s studies.... Kinsey’s research tools were interviews and questionnaires, but soon William H. Masters and Virginia Johnson got up the nerve to subject human sexual arousal to scientific investigation in the laboratory, recording the physiological responses of volunteers engaged in sexual acts.... By shining the bright light of science on what had heretofore been conducted in the dark (with a huge measure of secrecy and shame), they dispelled a host of myths, revised the medical understanding of some kinds of sexual dysfunction, liberated untold numbers of anxious people whose tastes and practices had been under a cloud of socially inculcated disapproval, and – wonder of wonders – improved the sex lives of millions. It turns out that in this case, at least, you can break the spell and yet not break the spell at the same time. You can violate the taboo against dispassionate study of a phenomenon – there’s one spell broken – and not destroy it in the process – there’s a spell one can still blissfully fall under.<sup>222</sup>

Chapter Three, “Why Good Things Happen,” is primarily concerned with establishing the modus operandi of evolution by natural selection and the ways in which it manifests itself on both the biological and cultural levels. As Dennett explains “whatever else religion is as a human phenomenon, it is a hugely costly endeavor, and evolutionary biology shows that nothing so costly just happens.... evolution is

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<sup>220</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid., 48, 53.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid., 46-7.

remarkably efficient at sweeping pointless accidents off the scene, so if we find a *persistent pattern* of expensive equipment or activity, we can be quite sure that something benefits from it in the only stocktaking that evolution honors: differential reproduction.”<sup>223</sup> But what does this mean exactly? Who or what benefits? In order to understand the implications of such questions, a few more terms must be introduced and clearly defined.

The first is a term that Dennett himself coined in 1983: *free-floating rationale*. As is his custom, Dennett proceeds by way of an example.

People generally say that we like some things because they are sweet, but this really puts it backwards: it is more accurate to say that some things are sweet (to us) because we like them! (And *we* like them because our ancestors who were wired up to like them had more energy for reproduction than their less fortunately wired-up peers.)... both parties – animals and plants – benefitted, and the system improved itself over the eons. What paid for all the design was the differential reproduction of frugivorous and omnivorous animals and edible-fruit-bearing plants.... it all made perfectly good sense, economically; it was a *rational* transaction, conducted at a slower-than-glacial pace... and of course no plant or animal had to understand any of this in order for the system to flourish. This is... what I call a *free-floating rationale*.<sup>224</sup>

Dennett maintains that such coevolutionary processes can occur on a strictly biological level, as in the previous case, or in tandem with more cultural developments. He explains by way of another (this time, briefer) example. “Lactose tolerance is concentrated in human populations that have descended from dairying cultures, whereas lactose intolerance is common in those whose ancestors were never herders of dairy animals, such as the Chinese and Japanese. Lactose intolerance is genetically transmitted, but

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<sup>223</sup> Ibid., 69, 62.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid., 59. In other words, the symbiosis is naturally occurring, and all parties can participate in this mutually-beneficial relationship without either knowing how or caring why said reciprocity exists. Far from suggesting design or requiring divine intervention, Dennett’s notion of free-floating rationales actually demonstrates the existence in nature of “good ideas” without having to subsequently imagine a mind capable of conceiving them.

pastoralism, the disposition to tend herds of animals, on which the genetic trait depends, is culturally transmitted.”<sup>225</sup> This cultural transmission Dennett identifies as a *meme*, a term originally introduced by fellow New Atheist, Richard Dawkins, in his groundbreaking 1976 work, *The Selfish Gene*.

As Dawkins would subsequently expound in his 1998 book, *Unweaving the Rainbow*, “memes can be good ideas, good tunes, good poems, as well as driveling mantras. Anything that spreads by imitation, as genes spread by bodily reproduction or by viral infection, is a meme. The chief interest of them is that there is at least the theoretical possibility of a true Darwinian selection of memes, to parallel the familiar selection of genes. Those memes that spread do so because they are good at spreading.”<sup>226</sup> Note that this in no way implies universal or permanent benefits to those all involved, a point Dennett, himself, is quite keen to make. “A good bargain can lapse,” he says. “Our sweet tooth is a good example... our ancestors lived on very tight energy budgets... a practically insatiable appetite for sweets made good sense then... now that we have developed methods for creating a superabundance of sugar, that insatiability has become a serious design flaw.”<sup>227</sup>

In order to determine whether the religion meme remains (or ever was) a good bargain from the standpoint of humanity, Dennett explores several of the more prominent theories about how such a complex relationship might conceivably have evolved. Among these are *symbiont theories*, in which religion is considered somewhat akin to bacteria present in the human body, *sexual selection theories*, in which religious propensities are seen as sexually attractive characteristics (in much the same way a male peacock’s

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<sup>225</sup> Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, 89-90.

<sup>226</sup> Dawkins, *Unweaving the Rainbow*, 304.

<sup>227</sup> Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, 63.

dazzling tale distinguishes it from its less spectacular competition and thus wins the reproductive attentions of the female), or *pearl theories*, in which “religion is simply a beautiful by-product... [that] doesn’t benefit any gene, or individual, or group, or cultural symbiont... [it is merely] something that just happens to captivate us human agents, who have an indefinitely expandable capacity for delighting in novelties and curiosities.”<sup>228</sup>

In the case of symbionts, Dennett argues that some religions (like bacteria) may be *mutualists*: “enhancing human fitness and even making human life possible,” others may be commensals: “neither good nor bad for us, but along for the ride,” and still others may be parasites: “deleterious replicators that we would be better off without.”<sup>229</sup> But regardless of which theory one seems most inclined to, Dennett recognizes the natural aversion one would likely have to contemplating the parasitic scenario. He, nevertheless, cautions, that such considerations are necessary in order to achieve as exhaustive and unbiased a study as possible.

Your religion probably seems obviously benign to you, and other religions may well seem to you to be just as obviously toxic to those infected by them, but appearances can deceive. Perhaps *their* religion is providing them with benefits that you just don't understand yet, and perhaps *your* religion is poisoning you in ways that you have never suspected. You really can't tell from the inside. That's how parasites work: quietly, unobtrusively, without disturbing their hosts any more than is absolutely necessary. *If (some) religions are culturally evolved parasites, we can expect them to be insidiously well designed to conceal their true nature from their hosts, since this is an adaptation that would further their own spread.*<sup>230</sup>

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<sup>228</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>229</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>230</sup> Ibid., 85.

Though he subsequently admits that “these hypotheses do not all pull in the same direction,” he still insists that “the truth about religion might well be an amalgam of several of them (plus others).”<sup>231</sup>

With his logistical framework in place, Dennett outlines, in the following five chapters, what he considers to be a (one presumes the most) plausible evolutionary history of religion. Chapter Four, “The Roots of Religion,” introduces the reader to one final concept, which in many ways serves as the lynchpin of Dennett’s entire argument: the *intentional stance*. Dennett describes this as certain animals’ inherent ability to “treat some other things in the world as *agents* with limited *beliefs* about the world, specific *desires*, and enough common sense to do the *rational* thing given those beliefs and desires.”<sup>232</sup> Despite the (human) intuition that such an ability must be conscious and deliberate, Dennett reminds us:

The utility of the intentional stance in describing and predicting animal behavior is undeniable, but that doesn't mean that the animals themselves are clued in about what they are doing. When a low-nesting bird leads the predator away from her nestlings by doing a distraction display, she is making a convincing sham of a broken wing, creating the tempting illusion of an easy supper for the observing predator, but she need not understand this clever ruse. She does need to understand the conditions of likely success, so that she can adjust her behavior the better to fit the variations encountered, but she no more needs to be aware of the deeper rationale for her actions than does the fledgling cuckoo when it pushes the rival eggs out of the nest in order to maximize the food it will get from its foster parents.<sup>233</sup>

Although undoubtedly a useful tool for navigating the uncertainties of a mysterious and often perilous world, the problem for humans is that our particular inclination to adopting the intentional stance is so strong that it becomes difficult to know

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<sup>231</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>232</sup> Ibid., 110.

<sup>233</sup> Ibid.



when it is not (or at the very least, when it is no longer) appropriate to employ it. To illustrate this, Dennett discusses our species' tendency to continue to ascribe agency to someone we knew even after they have died, and the ways in which we evolved to do this culturally without impeding our biological imperative to survive and reproduce.

What keeps many habits in place is the pleasure we take from indulging in them. And so we dwell on them, drawn to them like a moth to a candle. We preserve relics and other reminders of the deceased persons, and make images of them, and tell stories about them, to prolong these habits of mind even as they start to fade. But there is a problem: a corpse is a potent source of disease, and we have evolved a strong compensatory innate disgust mechanism to make us keep our distance.... What seems to have evolved everywhere, a Good Trick for dealing with a desperate situation, is an elaborate ceremony that removes the dangerous body from the daily environment either by burial or burning, combined with the interpretation of the persistent firing of the intentional-stance habits shared by all who knew the deceased as the unseen presence of the agent as a spirit, a sort of virtual person created by the survivors' troubled mind-sets, and almost as vivid and robust as a live person.<sup>234</sup>

Though one could hardly call this phenomenon religion, when coupled with humanity's historical propensity for likewise ascribing agency to such (mindless) events as natural disasters and disease, one can begin to see just how this undoubtedly useful predisposition could eventually evolve to outstrip its efficacy in the governance of some aspects of our daily lives.

In Chapter Five, "Religion, the Early Days," Dennett explains just how this process might sensibly unfold. "Clouds certainly don't look like agents with beliefs and desires, so it is no doubt natural to suppose that they are indeed inert and passive things

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<sup>234</sup> Ibid., 112-13. Mummification cults could be considered as yet another inventive way of ascribing post-mortem powers (i.e. autonomous agency) to a deceased person all the while circumventing the biological dangers attached to bodily decomposition. What's more, the persistent presence of these cults may in fact serve as evidence of an intermediary step (or missing link) between the so-called roots of religion and its earliest perceptible flowering (i.e. from general assumption to specific belief) to which Dennett turns in the following two chapters.

being manipulated by hidden agents that do look like agents: rain gods and cloud gods and the like – if only we could see them.”<sup>235</sup> He continues:

The memorable nymphs and fairies and goblins and demons that crowd the mythologies of every people are the imaginative offspring of a hyperactive habit of finding agency wherever anything puzzles or frightens us. This mindlessly generates a vast overpopulation of agent-ideas, most of which are too stupid to hold our attention for an instant; only a well-designed few make it through the rehearsal tournament, mutating and improving as they go. The ones that get shared and remembered are the souped-up winners of billions of competitions for rehearsal time in the brains of our ancestors.<sup>236</sup>

And though Dennett acknowledges that, while this accounts for the advent and sustainment of superstition, “Hunting for elves in the garden or the bogeyman under your bed is not (yet) having a religion.”<sup>237</sup> For this, stewardship [i.e. mindful maintenance] is required, and that is the concern of Chapter Six.

Both folk and organized religion require some degree of conscientious stewardship in order to survive and thrive in the highly competitive struggle for the hearts and minds of their would-be adherents.<sup>238</sup> Dennett argues that “Like every conscientious worker, shamans can be expected to notice or suspect shortcomings in their own performance and then experiment with alternative methods: ‘I’m losing customers to that other shaman; what is he doing that I’m not doing? Is there a better way to do the healing rituals?’”<sup>239</sup> What is different between the two is the role that faith (i.e. belief) must play in order for them to ultimately triumph over their rivals. “In a tribal society in which ‘everyone knows’ that you need to sacrifice a goat in order to have a healthy baby, you

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<sup>235</sup> Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, 118.

<sup>236</sup> *Ibid.*, 123-4.

<sup>237</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>238</sup> Here, it might be useful to think of folk religion as beliefs communally held or actions communally performed and/or sanctioned without said beliefs ever being formally named, delineated, or defended. These are, of course, separable from the more official doctrines and institutional practices more rigidly enconced and consciously-justified within organized religion.

<sup>239</sup> Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, 165.

make sure that you sacrifice a goat. Better safe than sorry. This feature marks a profound difference between folk religion and organized religion: those who practice a folk religion *don't think of themselves as practicing a religion at all*.... where there is no ambient doubt to speak of, there is no need to speak of faith.”<sup>240</sup> In other words, in order to transition (or evolve) from folk to organized religion, this conscientious stewardship must be expanded beyond the confines of the shaman or priest and into the minds of the faithful.<sup>241</sup> Chapter Seven, “The Invention of Team Spirit,” addresses this topic.

As Dennett explains:

What is good all things considered may not coincide with what is good for the institution, which may not be what makes life easiest for the institution's leader, but these different benchmarks have a way of being substituted for one another under the pressure of real-time reflective control. When this happens, the free-floating rationales that are blindly sculpted by earlier competitions can come to be augmented or even replaced by represented rationales, rationales that are not just anchored in individual minds, in diagrams and plans, and in conversations but *used* – argued over, reasoned about, agreed upon. People thus become conscious stewards of their memes, no longer taking their survival for granted the way we take our language for granted, but taking on the goal of fostering, protecting, enhancing, spreading the Word.<sup>242</sup>

In terms of how this might realistically be accomplished, he offers the following hypothesis: “memes that foster human group solidarity are particularly fit (as memes) in circumstances in which host survival (and hence host fitness) most directly depends on hosts' joining forces in groups. The success of such meme-infested groups is itself a

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<sup>240</sup> Ibid., 160-1.

<sup>241</sup> An historical example of this phenomenon might be the respective enticements to employment extended to the ancient inventor Heron of Alexandria (ca. 10 – 70 CE) by the city's numerous (and highly competitive) pagan priests. His inventions for them include a vending machine that dispenses holy water, automatic temple doors, a thunder machine, and a magnetically elevating chariot for the sun-cult of Serapis. Thus, powers formerly assumed had to now be demonstrated via “miracles” in order to confirm one's choice of religion and guarantee the preservation of the individuals and institutions responsible for maintaining it. (For more, see the History Channel's 2007 Ancient Discoveries documentary episode *Machines of the Gods*. Mike Zibert, “Machines of the Gods,” *YouTube Video*, 44:44. 12 January 2017, accessed 23 October 2018, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QTI\\_ldhPYjw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QTI_ldhPYjw).)

<sup>242</sup> Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, 177.

potent broadcasting device, enhancing outgroup curiosity (and envy) and thus permitting linguistic, ethnic, and geographic boundaries to be more readily penetrated.”<sup>243</sup> This describes not only the way in which individual adherents can aspire to more meaningful and inclusive relationships with their fellow members, but also the way in which these advocates might ultimately transcend the traditional boundaries of folk religion and usher in more universal alternatives. However, such proselytizing trends are not without their own pitfalls and presumptions. One of the least perceptible yet most pervasive, the belief in belief, is the subject of Chapter Eight.

Early in the chapter, Dennett states that “once our ancestors became reflective (and hyperreflective) about their own beliefs, and thus appointed themselves stewards of the beliefs they thought most important, the phenomenon of *believing in belief* became a salient social force in its own right, sometimes eclipsing the lower-order phenomena that were its object.”<sup>244</sup> Under the auspices of traditional folk religion, this trend is somewhat difficult to discern, but once organized religion takes root, the shift from *belief* to *belief in belief* becomes much more noticeable in the acts of the faithful (which are, after all, the only things to which we as individuals are ultimately privileged with regard to our fellow human beings).

The transition from folk religion to organized religion is marked by a shift in beliefs from those with very clear, concrete consequences to those with systematically elusive consequences – paying lip service is just about the only way you can act on them. If you really believe that the rain god won't provide rain unless you sacrifice an ox, you sacrifice an ox if you want it to rain. If you really believe that your tribe's god has made you

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<sup>243</sup> Ibid., 185.

<sup>244</sup> Ibid., 200. Because folk religion does not typically compete in the same marketplace of ideas as organized religion, discrepancies of belief must be more firmly established in the latter in order to make the process of in-group/out-group designations more expedient and more formal than in the former. That is to say that policing behaviors ostensibly evincive of belief (or its lack) frequently supersedes the perpetuation of the beliefs themselves.

invulnerable to arrows, you readily run headlong into a swarm of deadly arrows to get at your enemy.... If you really believe that your God is watching you and doesn't want you to masturbate, you don't masturbate. (You wouldn't masturbate with your mother watching you! How on earth could you masturbate with God watching you? Do you really believe God is watching you? Perhaps not.) But what could you do to show that you really believe that the wine in the chalice has been transformed into the blood of Christ?... There is really only one action you can take to demonstrate this belief: you can say that you believe it, over and over, as fervently as the occasion demands.<sup>245</sup>

In other words, organized religion is (and indeed must be) more preoccupied with the public professions of faith and/or mere observations of ritual and tradition than with privately and sincerely held convictions or doubts. There remain more tangible ways in which to express one's bona fides within the confines of folk religion, while the inconsequential issue of belief lingers harmlessly in the recesses of society's collective consciousness as little more than an assumed reality. This is a fact that even some organized religions have reluctantly been forced to concede, as Dennett relates. "Recognizing that the very idea of commanding someone to believe something is incoherent on its face, an invitation to insincerity or self-deception, many Jewish congregations reject the demand for *orthodoxy*, right *belief*, and settle for *orthopraxy*, right *behavior*."<sup>246</sup> Ostensibly, this would seem to be a rather serious flaw in the overall design of organized religion. After all, how can *belief in belief* possibly be considered of greater importance in an area of one's life where faith itself is traditionally considered to be both presumed and paramount?<sup>247</sup> From a moral, historical, or even sociological

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<sup>245</sup> Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, 227-8.

<sup>246</sup> *Ibid.*, 224.

<sup>247</sup> For instance, were a Jew (or Hindu, etc.) to publically adhere to the standards and practices of his or her religion, all the while privately eschewing the underlying beliefs presumably motivating them, the duplicity would remain largely undetectable to even the most zealous of one's fellow members. Public renunciation of said beliefs would, however, nevertheless unequivocally serve to distinguish one from (and possibly to sever one's connection to) the wider religious community. In other words, beliefs are still paramount, but organized religion has yet to devise any method for satisfactorily policing them.

perspective, it must be admitted that this is at least somewhat problematic,<sup>248</sup> but from an evolutionary standpoint, Dennett reminds us, “*as long as the formulas get transmitted down through the ages, the memes will survive and flourish.*”<sup>249</sup>

The final three chapters Dennett dedicates to examining religion in today’s social, political, and intellectual climate(s). In Chapter Nine, “Toward a Buyer’s Guide in Religion,” Dennett outlines and then attempts to refute some of the most common contemporary arguments against placing religion under the scientific microscope. These, he identifies as “the love barrier, the academic-territoriality barrier, and the loyalty-to-God barrier.”<sup>250</sup> The love barrier, as it relates to religion, he compares to the all-encompassing, undeniable adoration and loyalty that most of us feel toward another human being at some point in our personal lives. “I am suggesting... that their unquestioning loyalty, their unwillingness even to consider the virtues versus the vices, is a type of love, and more like romantic love than brotherly love or intellectual love.”<sup>251</sup> In other words, to doubt one’s love would be to betray a sacred trust and risk potentially severing a bond that one would never wish to break. And though this impulse can be strong, Dennett reminds us that it is nevertheless fraught with potential difficulties. “Even if it is true that nothing could matter more than love, it wouldn't follow from this that we don't have reason to question the things that we, and others, love. Love is blind, as they

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<sup>248</sup> Imagine, if you will, the United States comprised entirely of a citizenry who (whether out of habit or simple societal pressure) uniformly stand for the anthem, recite the pledge of allegiance, vote their party in every election, and pay their taxes on time and without exception, all the while remaining privately unconvinced of the inclusiveness of democracy, the expansiveness of capitalism, the value of federalism, or any of the humanitarian tenets espoused in the United States Constitution. Would the phrase “proud to be an American” still have precisely the same connotation(s) it does now? Would it have ever entered our lexicon in the first place? The United States would likely endure such a circumstance, but without ever truly embodying the values it supposedly espouses. That said, this discrepancy between outward appearance and inner conviction is what Dennett’s concept of a “free-floating rationale” is all about, particularly as it applies to the survival of the religious meme.

<sup>249</sup> Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, 224-5.

<sup>250</sup> *Ibid.*, 277.

<sup>251</sup> *Ibid.*, 251.

say, and because love is blind, it often leads to tragedy: to conflicts in which one love is pitted against another love, and something has to give, with suffering guaranteed in any resolution.”<sup>252</sup> But, Dennett argues, we must not shy away from this potential suffering, out of fear (or even certainty) that our love would not survive the inquest. Instead, he is asking us to consider whether a love so fragile and fickle as to be unable to withstand even rudimentary criticism or doubt is worthy of such adoration in the first place. If the answer is no, then the course of action seems obvious, but if the answer is yes, then the logical result would simply be a more secure and steadfast a foundation upon which that love can grow. He substitutes his own love of evolution in the hopes of making his point that a reasonable love needn’t be a lesser love, but in fact, quite the contrary.

We who love evolution do not honor those whose love of evolution prevents them from thinking clearly and rationally about it! On the contrary, we are particularly critical of those whose misunderstandings and romantic misstatements of these great ideas mislead themselves and others. In our view, there is no safe haven for mystery or incomprehensibility. Yes, there is humility, and awe, and sheer delight, at the glory of the evolutionary landscape, but it is not accompanied by, or in the service of, a willing (let alone thrilling) abandonment of reason.<sup>253</sup>

The second obstacle to the scientific study of religion, Dennett calls the academic-territoriality barrier. This he ascribes to the “scholarly friends of religion, many of whom are atheistic or agnostic connoisseurs, not champions of any creed.”<sup>254</sup> Referencing passages from Emil Durkheim and Mircea Eliade, both of whom argued that only the

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<sup>252</sup> Ibid., 254.

<sup>253</sup> Ibid., 268.

<sup>254</sup> Ibid., 259.

religious should undertake studies in religion,<sup>255</sup> Dennett then sums up the position thusly:

Only women are qualified to do research on women (according to some radical feminists), because only they can overcome the phallogentrism that renders males obtuse and biased in ways they can never acknowledge and counteract. Some multiculturalists insist that Europeans (including Americans) can never really cancel out their disabling Eurocentrism and understand the subjectivity of Third World people. It takes one to know one, according to this theme in all its variations. Well, then, should we all just hunker down in our isolationist enclaves and wait for death to overtake us, since we can never understand one another?<sup>256</sup>

Though aware of the tightrope he must walk to avoid seeming either flippant or strident in his rebuttal, Dennett responds by demonstrating not only the senselessness but also the self-defeating limitations that such thinking ultimately engenders:

It would be dereliction of duty for us to let pedophiles insist that only those who appreciate a commitment to pedophilia can really understand them at all. So what we may say to those who insist that only those who believe, only those with a deep appreciation of the sacred, are to be entrusted with the investigation of religious phenomena, is that they are simply wrong, about both facts and principles. They are mistaken about the imaginative and investigative powers of those they would exclude, and they are wrong to suppose that it might be justifiable on any grounds to limit the investigation of religion to those who are religious. If we say this politely, firmly, and often, they may eventually stop playing this card and let us get on with our investigations, hampered though we may be by our lack of faith.<sup>257</sup>

The final impediment to the scientific study of religion Dennett describes as the loyalty-to-God barrier. In essence, one could view these arguments as little more than the inevitable result of the oft-repeated biblical command, “Do not put the Lord your God to

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<sup>255</sup> Durkheim: “He who does not bring to the study of religion a sort of religious sentiment cannot speak about it! He is like a blind man trying to talk about color” (*The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, 1915, p. xvii). Eliade: “A religious phenomenon will only be recognized as such if it is grasped at its own level, that is to say, if it is studied as something religious. To try to grasp the essence of such a phenomenon by means of physiology, psychology, sociology, economics, linguistics, art or any other study is false; it misses the one unique and irreducible element in it – the element of the sacred” (*Myth and Reality*, 1963, p. iii), as quoted in Dennett’s *Breaking the Spell*, 259.

<sup>256</sup> Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, 260.

<sup>257</sup> *Ibid.*, 261.



the test,” (Deut. 6:16, Matt. 4:7, Luke 4:12). This warning notwithstanding, early efforts in this regard have taken the shape of longevity and health studies, happiness surveys, and an examination of the demonstrable effects of intercessory prayer on those of a religious persuasion. Given that the preliminary results have been somewhat mixed, Dennett notes that both camps have reacted in rather surprising ways. “The early results are impressive enough to have provoked knee-jerk skeptical dismissals from some atheists who haven't stopped to consider how independent these questions are from whether or not any religious beliefs are *true*,” noting that “false belief to improve human capacities is already established.”<sup>258</sup> The religious, by contrast, have vacillated between cautious optimism and buyer’s remorse. Dennett acknowledges:

They... have a tough call here. The stakes are high, since, if the studies are performed properly *and show no positive effect*, the religions that practice intercessory prayer would be obliged by the principles of truth in advertising to renounce all claims to its efficacy.... On the other hand, a positive result would stop science in its tracks. After five hundred years of steady retreat in the face of advancing science, religion could demonstrate, in terms that the scientists would have to respect, that its claims to truth were not all vacuous.<sup>259</sup>

All Dennett is ultimately claiming is that either result would be preferable (to both parties) than the taboo-protected, maddeningly uncertain status quo that currently stands in its stead. If, for example, correlations between health, happiness, supernatural intercession *and* religious activity could be empirically demonstrated, then science would have to respect those results. If, on the other hand, no correlations could be ascertained (or other reasons for such positive results could be separately provided) the faithful would be permitted the opportunity to reexamine their convictions anew, possibly with an

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<sup>258</sup> Ibid., 272.

<sup>259</sup> Ibid., 275.

eye toward better understanding their biological and psychological selves and the deep-rooted reasons their faith has (or had) been so appealing to them in the first place.

Chapter Ten, “Morality and Religion,” examines the age-old question of whether or not the former can ultimately survive in a world stripped of the latter. To make his case for the affirmative, Dennett builds upon the work of previous chapters and reminds us that “the fact that your faith is so strong that you cannot do otherwise just shows (*if you really can't*) that you are *disabled* for moral persuasion, a sort of robotic slave to a meme that you are unable to evaluate.”<sup>260</sup> In other words, ascribing morality to any action taken or belief held where no alternative(s) existed or could even be envisioned is to misunderstand and misuse the notion entirely. Those who cannot do or think otherwise must by definition be *amoral*, and it is certainly not they who should be placed in the stewardship of morality.<sup>261</sup> As Dennett explains, “it is time for the reasonable adherents of all faiths to find the courage and stamina to reverse the tradition that honors helpless love of God – in any tradition. Far from being honorable, it is not even excusable. It is shameful.”<sup>262</sup> He goes on to caution that “those who maintain religions, and take steps to make them more attractive, must be held similarly responsible for the harms produced by some of those whom they attract and provide with a cloak of respectability.”<sup>263</sup>

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<sup>260</sup> *Ibid.*, 296.

<sup>261</sup> For if neither autonomy nor agency are contributive factors to one’s actions or beliefs, then the resultant compulsion cannot be considered as moral or immoral, but must rather be understood in categorically different terms. To use a biological analogy, one would (hopefully) never ascribe the adjectives moral or immoral to the compulsory actions or beliefs of a person suffering from schizophrenia. To do so (asserting agency where none exists) would itself constitute an unconscionable act.

<sup>262</sup> Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, 298.

<sup>263</sup> *Ibid.*, 299.

In closing the chapter, Dennett attempts to counter the notion that morality and spirituality are (and must forever be) inextricably linked; his argument is two-pronged. First, he seeks to demonstrate that many of the tenets (or trappings) of religious conviction are themselves without moral quality. “The misalignment of goodness with the denial of scientific materialism has a long history, but it is a misalignment. There is *no reason at all* why a disbelief in the immateriality or immortality of the soul should make a person less caring, less moral, less committed to the well-being of everybody on Earth than somebody who believes in ‘the spirit.’”<sup>264</sup> The second part of his argument complements the first by focusing on the ways in which spirituality can exist without morality. “Plenty of ‘deeply spiritual’ people – and everybody knows this – are cruel, arrogant, self-centered, and utterly unconcerned about the moral problems of the world.” However, Dennett maintains that even those spiritual individuals without the first three of those undesirable characteristics still cannot be considered moral unless and until they are willing to likewise dispense with the last.

Consider, for instance, those contemplative monks, primarily in Christian and Buddhist traditions, who, unlike hardworking nuns in schools and hospitals, devote most of their waking hours to the purification of their souls, and the rest to the maintenance of the contemplative lifestyle to which they have become accustomed. In what way, exactly, are they morally superior to people who devote their lives to improving their stamp collections or their golf swing? It seems to me that the best that can be said of them is that they manage to stay out of trouble.<sup>265</sup>

It seems, once again, that Dennett is at least as interested in refashioning the debate as he is in winning it. As he has demonstrated, morality simply cannot be compelled. If it is,

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<sup>264</sup> Ibid., 305.

<sup>265</sup> Ibid., 306. It should be noted that while Buddhist Bhikkhus (monks) are usually roving mendicants who depend almost entirely upon the generosity and goodwill of their communities in order to survive, they are often reciprocally tasked with disseminating the Buddha’s teachings to members of both the Sangha and Sāvaka (monastic and lay communities, respectively).

then it is not moral. Similarly, morality cannot be recognized internally.<sup>266</sup> Instead, it is only to be found in the concerted and communal interactions between living beings.

Perhaps Dennett has failed to prove that such true instances of morality cannot or do not occur within religious traditions, but he has certainly demonstrated that they are at least as likely to occur outside them.

In the concluding chapter, “Now What Do We Do?” Dennett offers a suggestion as to how we might put our newfound knowledge (rudimentary though it is) to work for our fellow man in a manner that is both serviceable to their heads and respectful to their sentiments. As such, it must appeal to both reason and individual freedom. Were it to do otherwise, then it would hardly be worthy of the status we’ve afforded it thus far. He suggests:

Maybe people everywhere can be trusted, and hence allowed to make their own informed choices. Informed choice! What an amazing and revolutionary idea! Maybe people should be trusted to make choices, not necessarily the choices *we* would recommend to them, but the choices that have the best chance of satisfying their considered goals. But what do we teach them until they are informed enough and mature enough to decide for themselves? We teach them about *all* the world's religions, in a matter-of-fact, historically and biologically informed way, the same way we teach them about geography and history and arithmetic. Let's get *more* education about religion into our schools, not less. We should teach our children creeds and customs, prohibitions and rituals, texts and music, and when we cover the history of religion, we should include both the positive – the role of the churches in the civil-rights movement of the 1960s, the flourishing of science and the arts in early Islam, and the role of the Black Muslims in bringing hope, honor, and self-respect to the otherwise shattered lives of many inmates in our prisons, for instance – and the negative – the Inquisition, anti-Semitism over the ages, the role of the Catholic Church in spreading AIDS in Africa through its opposition to condoms. No religion should be favored, and none ignored. And as we

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<sup>266</sup> Dennett’s use of the term “morality” here might be better understood as “ethics,” specifically of the variety that I discussed in the previous chapter. That said, the difference between the two is quite akin to the distinction between *belief* and *belief in belief* to which Dennett alluded earlier. The former might truly exist internally but it can only be externally realized and recognized when extended to one’s interactions with one’s fellow beings.

discover more and more about the biological and psychological bases of religious practices and attitudes, these discoveries should be added to the curriculum, the same way we update our education about science, health, and current events. This should all be part of the mandated curriculum for both public schools and home-schooling.<sup>267</sup>

In the end, a simple, yet elegant solution. Inform people of the realities of science, religion, spirituality, morality, and education, and then allow them to construct their own worldviews upon them. Those whose faiths are truly positive forces for good in the world have nothing to fear from such an act. After all, should their conviction or their religion perish under such scrutiny, then neither must have been what they thought they were, and we should no more mourn them than we do alchemy, humorism, phrenology, any other now-defunct idea or perspective that the passage of time and the light of reason have shown us to be in error. As Dennett himself concludes:

It's just an idea... but it should appeal to freedom lovers everywhere: the idea of insisting that the devout of all faiths should face the challenge of making sure their creed is worthy enough, attractive and plausible and meaningful enough, to withstand the temptations of its competitors. If you have to hoodwink – or blindfold – your children to ensure that they confirm their faith when they are adults, your faith *ought* to go extinct.<sup>268</sup>

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## Part II: Criticisms and Rebuttals

In his article, “The God Genome,” Leon Wieseltier writes:

The question of the place of science in human life is not a scientific question. It is a philosophical question. Scientism, the view that science can explain all human conditions and expressions, mental as well as physical, is a superstition, one of the dominant superstitions of our day; and it is not an insult to science to say so. For a sorry instance of present-day scientism, it would be hard to improve on Daniel C. Dennett’s book.

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<sup>267</sup> Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, 327.

<sup>268</sup> *Ibid.*, 328.

“Breaking the Spell” is a work of considerable historical interest, because it is a merry anthology of contemporary superstitions.... Dennett’s book is also a document of the intellectual havoc of our infamous polarization, with its widespread and deeply damaging assumption that the most extreme statement of an idea is its most genuine statement. Dennett lives in a world in which you must believe in the grossest biologism or in the grossest theism, in a purely naturalistic understanding of religion or in intelligent design, in the omniscience of a white man with a long beard in 19th-century England or in the omniscience of a white man with a long beard in the sky.<sup>269</sup>

One is left consequently to assume that, in his cursory reading of *Breaking the Spell*, Wieseltier must have somehow missed Dennett’s prefatory statement that “it could be true that God exists, that God is indeed the intelligent, conscious, loving creator of us all, and yet *still* religion itself, as a complex set of phenomena, is a perfectly natural phenomenon.”<sup>270</sup> For this statement alone would seem to refute not only Wieseltier’s charge of scientism, but also his dubious casting of Dennett as the dichotomizing villain in his own trenchant morality tale. For in suggesting that one’s scientific appreciation of Darwin’s theory (or one’s underlying adherence to the rigorous methodology that was/is employed in examining it) is in any way analogous to absolute and unfalsifiable belief in an omniscient deity, I would argue that it is Wieseltier who is guilty of wreaking “the intellectual havoc of our infamous polarization, with its widespread and deeply damaging assumption that the most extreme statement of an idea is its most genuine statement.”<sup>271</sup>

Nevertheless, Wieseltier proceeds in his critique by arguing that Dennett fundamentally misrepresents the writings and ideology of philosopher David Hume. He states:

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<sup>269</sup> Leon Wieseltier, “The God Genome,” *NY Times*, 19 February 2006, accessed 21 August 2016, [http://www.nytimes.com/2006/02/19/books/review/the-god-genome.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2006/02/19/books/review/the-god-genome.html?_r=1).

<sup>270</sup> Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, 25.

<sup>271</sup> Wieseltier, “The God Genome.”

Hume began “The Natural History of Religion,” a short incendiary work that was published in 1757, with this remark: “As every enquiry which regards religion is of the utmost importance, there are two questions in particular which challenge our attention, to wit, that concerning its foundation in reason, and that concerning its origin in human nature.” These words serve as the epigraph to Dennett’s introduction to his own conception of “religion as a natural phenomenon.” “Breaking the Spell” proposes to answer Hume’s second question, not least as a way of circumventing Hume’s first question. Unfortunately, Dennett gives a misleading impression of Hume’s reflections on religion. He chooses not to reproduce the words that immediately follow those in which he has just basked: “Happily, the first question, which is the most important, admits of the most obvious, at least, the clearest, solution. The whole frame of nature bespeaks an intelligent author; and no rational enquirer can, after serious reflection, suspend his belief a moment with regard to the primary principles of genuine Theism and Religion.”<sup>272</sup>

But once again, one could easily accuse Wieseltier of the same intellectual misconduct for which he would so readily indict Dennett. For instance, in the conclusion to the same paragraph from which both of the above citations are taken, Hume writes:

The first religious principles must be secondary; such as may easily be perverted by various accidents and causes, and whose operation too, in some cases, may, by an extraordinary concurrence of circumstances, be altogether prevented. What those principles are, which give rise to the original belief, and what those accidents and causes are, which direct its operation, is the subject of our present enquiry.<sup>273</sup>

In other words, Dennett is not attempting to circumvent Hume’s first question (any more than Hume is). Both are simply stating that such religious concerns/beliefs are subsequent to and dependent upon our ability to satisfactorily uncover the underlying *natural* conditions upon which they are ultimately predicated and thus made possible.

As for Wieseltier’s suggestion that Hume might have been tacitly endorsing some form of basic theism in his aforementioned remarks, I cite the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy article entitled, “Hume on Religion.” In it, Paul Russell writes:

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<sup>272</sup> Ibid.

<sup>273</sup> David Hume, “The Natural History of Religion,” SacredTexts.com, 1 May 1995, accessed 21 August 2016, <http://www.sacred-texts.com/phi/hume/natural.txt>.

Even with respect to the minimalism of thin theism, Hume goes well beyond a soft skepticism that simply “suspends belief” on these issues. His arguments are harder than this and present grounds for denying theism, both thick and thin. On this basis we may conclude that Hume’s skeptical commitments are hard and not soft with respect to the theist hypothesis in all its forms and, as such, constitute a non-dogmatic form of atheism.<sup>274</sup>

Thus, it seems that Wieseltier’s posthumous conversion attempts must remain unrequited and cannot therefore serve to put any sort of ideological distance between Hume’s original enterprise and Dennett’s current endeavor. In light of this, Wieseltier’s subsequent comments can now be taken with the appropriate grain(s) of salt.

[Hume’s] God was a very wan god. But his God was still a god; and so his theism is as true or false as any other theism. The truth of religion cannot be proved by showing that a skeptic was in his way a believer, or by any other appeal to authority. There is no intellectually honorable surrogate for rational argument. Dennett’s misrepresentation of Hume... is noteworthy, therefore, because it illustrates his complacent refusal to acknowledge the dense and vital relations between religion and reason, not only historically but also philosophically.<sup>275</sup>

It appears that someone has indeed been complacent in their claims, but I would contend that this demonstrates it is Wieseltier, not Dennett, who is guilty.

That said, I wish to include one final passage from Wieseltier’s article, one that I think sufficiently summarizes his main criticism(s) of Dennett’s argument as well as inadvertently demonstrates the logical and scientific insufficiency and oxymoronic nature of his own.

It will be plain that Dennett’s approach to religion is contrived to evade religion’s substance. He thinks that an inquiry into belief is made superfluous by an inquiry into the belief in belief. This is a very revealing mistake. You cannot disprove a belief unless you disprove its content. If you believe that you can disprove it any other way, by describing its origins or by describing its consequences, then you do not believe in

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<sup>274</sup> Paul Russell, “Hume on Religion,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Fall 2016 Edition), 11 February 2013, accessed 21 August 2016, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2016/entries/hume-religion/>.

<sup>275</sup> Wieseltier, “The God Genome.”



reason. In this profound sense, Dennett does not believe in reason. He will be outraged to hear this, since he regards himself as a giant of rationalism. But the reason he imputes to the human creatures depicted in his book is merely a creaturely reason. Dennett's natural history does not deny reason, it animalizes reason. It portrays reason in service to natural selection, and as a product of natural selection. But if reason is a product of natural selection, then how much confidence can we have in a rational argument for natural selection? The power of reason is owed to the independence of reason, and to nothing else. (In this respect, rationalism is closer to mysticism than it is to materialism.) Evolutionary biology cannot invoke the power of reason even as it destroys it.<sup>276</sup>

In essence, Wieseltier is arguing that science is inherently *less* rational than religious mysticism because science does not admit of a supernatural cause or explanation for its own existence. Of course, one might point out that this is simply the content of Wieseltier's belief, and thus (as he so fittingly explains) beyond the purview of science's "creaturely reason" to dispute. How coincidentally convenient for him.<sup>277</sup>

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In his article, "Beyond Belief," Andrew Brown writes:

If you're really trying to produce a naturalistic account of religion, "memes" distract from the worrying and frightening questions. People like Dennett and Dawkins, who pride themselves on their tough-minded, ruthless, reductionist approach to biology, never seem to apply this kind of reasoning to human society. Why should we expect religions to behave for the benefit of professors in Cambridge or Oxford, or even for the benefit of humanity?... If we are going to be atheists, and to regard religions as human constructions serving human ends, we should not shrink from the idea that these ends are likely to be sometimes inimical to other humans outside the group. For all the rhetoric about the wickedness of religious belief, I don't think Dennett takes this idea very seriously.... Religions are

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<sup>276</sup> Ibid.

<sup>277</sup> Here, Wieseltier is implying that mankind's very ability to reason cannot be the product of natural selection, and must instead be the result of some sort of supernatural intervention outside the closed-system evolutionary model. What's more, he suggests that only those individuals who realize this "mystical" reality can ever truly comprehend (and command) the abilities that reason supposedly bestows upon them. One sees, I trust, the problem with such circuitous "reasoning." Unlike any scientific hypothesis, Wieseltier's assertions can never be proven false in either principle or in practice, for anyone who disagrees with his position would be considered unable to "reasonably" refute it. And despite his suggestion otherwise, perspectives that can be neither checked nor challenged must necessarily be relegated to the realm of simple belief.

one of the ways in which humans understand and create their own societies. Thus they are essential to warlike societies as much as to peaceful ones. The urgent question isn't whether religion provokes warlike behaviour. It is whether warlike behaviour benefits those who carry it out, for if it does, religions will surely find ways to justify it.<sup>278</sup>

So according to Brown, one worrying and frightening question is “whether warlike behavior benefits those who carry it out.” But how might Dennett's (or Dawkins') discussion of memes distract from such an inquiry? If anything, I would argue that such a discussion in fact provides a rational basis for the necessarily complicated answer to Brown's question, which must be *yes and no*, depending upon any number of situationally-specific variables.

For instance, unsuccessful warlike behavior on the part of the individual and/or the society can lead to dire, perhaps even fatal, consequences for both. But even when effectively employed, warlike behavior is still very dangerous for the individual and can even occasionally lead to societal ruin as well (the notion of a pyrrhic victory comes immediately to mind). In other words, belligerence seems to frequently harm and occasionally benefit those who choose to employ it. What, then, might account for its seeming ability to consistently endure and to manifest itself in almost all societies to some degree or another, regardless of its wildly varying degrees of success between them? Perhaps warlike behavior is simply an imitable, self-perpetuating meme. If so, then its relation to each individual or society would be immaterial to its reproductive fitness. Given the prolific presence yet potentially extintual nature of war in the nuclear age, this seems a most reasonable, if unfortunate, conclusion. Consequently, I would counter that

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<sup>278</sup> Andrew Brown, “Beyond Belief,” *The Guardian*, 25 February 2006, accessed 21 August 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2006/feb/25/highereducation.news3>.

Dawkins' and Dennett's memetic theory actually adds to, rather than distracts from, such undoubtedly worthwhile conversations.

For instance, in an interview with Ronald Bailey, Dennett was once asked, "Why are people who claim to be alien abductees looked upon askance while those who see the Virgin Mary [are] not?"<sup>279</sup> He replied:

There are good reasons to believe that many who claim to be alien abductees have actually had a traumatic sexual experience at the hands of some abusing member of the family, or other sexual abuser. For them this is just the socially easiest way of "explaining" their traumatic memories, and their PTSD symptoms, and they may be entirely sincere in their hallucinated memories. (So John Mack was probably half right: these people had indeed had a terrible experience; it just wasn't with aliens.) The phenomenon should be studied with a suitably rigorous methodology (not the way Whitley Strieber "investigated" it). But that's tough, since ethical and legal problems arise immediately. That's no accident. It's an instance of Nicholas Humphrey's Argument from Unwarranted Design (in his excellent book LEAPS OF FAITH). Now why should it be that the juiciest and most contagious tales of horror and wonder always seem to involve circumstances that are systematically difficult to investigate? These myths spread because they can spread, just like the virus for the common cold.<sup>280</sup>

Nevertheless, one soon discovers the reason for Brown's digression about warlike behavior. He subsequently writes:

Few of us in this culture are in favour of fanaticism; but it is obviously possible to be a fanatical atheist, so it turns out to be fanaticism that's the problem, not religion. More profoundly, a scientific or evolutionary analysis of fanaticism might ask what use it was to fanatics and the answer is clearly that sometimes it was very useful indeed – at least to their surviving relatives and to their tribe. This may be difficult for us to see because the myth we learnt was that fanaticism was a substitute for high technology. Fanatics were the guys galloping towards the machine guns while reasoned, logical, scientific people sat behind the machine guns and calmly mowed them down.<sup>281</sup>

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<sup>279</sup> Ronald Bailey, "Philosopher Daniel Dennett On Religion, Gould and UFOs at Monsters & Critics," Reason.com, 11 July 2007, accessed 19 August 2016, <http://reason.com/blog/2007/07/11/philosopher-daniel-dennett-on>.

<sup>280</sup> Ibid.

<sup>281</sup> Brown, "Beyond Belief."

According to Brown, fanaticism, not religion, is the problem. Fair enough. But to cite the mimetic nature of fanaticism, after exerting such effort to discredit the usefulness of the theory itself, seems a bit hypocritical and self-serving. Brown is also guilty of establishing the same sort of false dichotomy with which Wieseltier accused Dennett in the previous section. Historically, religious fanaticism has been accompanied by a great deal of “warlike behavior.” Atheism (of every stripe), however, has not, and has instead been largely confined to the heretical *words* of a few intrepid souls. This is not to say that warlike behavior has strictly been the province of believers; only that belief itself can serve as motivation to such action, while absence of said belief cannot.<sup>282</sup> Therefore, I would argue that to presume a similarity of behavior between religious fanatics and atheistic rationalists is quite akin to equating Darwinian science to fundamentalist doctrine. And despite Brown’s claim, fanaticism has never been considered a substitute for high technology; historically, it has been a substitute for reason itself.

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In his article, “The Unbearable Brightness of Being Right,” Rupert Sheldrake makes a similar attempt to turn Dennett’s discussion of memes against him. He writes:

Dennett wants to reach “as wide an audience of believers as possible,” but he has an ambiguous attitude to his intended audience. Sometimes he is scornful, as when he compares religion to nicotine addiction, echoing Karl

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<sup>282</sup> Hitler, Stalin, Mao, Pol Pot, and others may indeed have been atheists; regardless, they most assuredly committed unspeakable atrocities against their fellow man. But to suggest that the latter was specifically and exclusively motivated by the former is absurd. An atheist may commit atrocities, but not in the name of atheism. An absence of belief simply cannot be equated with belief. Hitler, Stalin, Mao, and Pol Pot all subscribed to various socio-political ideologies – Nazism, Stalinism, Maoism, and communism/totalitarianism more generally. These ideologies, along with the religious elements they incorporated into them (reverence for their persons, miracles attributed to their rule, etc.), are far better explanations of their actions than a lack of faith. For instance, would anyone claim that the 9/11 hijackers attacked the United States because they didn’t believe in Christianity (or capitalism or colonialism, for that matter)? Or is it rather that they held specifically contradictory beliefs that challenged those ostensibly Western values?

Marx's dictum that religion is "the opium of the people," or when he follows Dawkins in treating religious beliefs as "memes" – defined as "cultural replicators" – that leap from brain to brain like viruses.... I ought to have been an ideal reader: I am a Christian, an Anglican, not a bright. I am a strong believer in the value of scientific enquiry. I used to be an atheist myself. But I didn't find myself being reconverted by reading *Breaking the Spell*, and I was put off by Dennett's one-sidedness and dogmatic certainty. His commitment to atheism makes him dismiss out of hand the significance of religious experiences. For example, many people have experienced a sense of the presence of God, or overwhelming love, or a feeling of unity with nature, or visions, or transformative near-death experiences. In the 1970s, the Oxford biologist Sir Alister Hardy initiated a scientific enquiry into religious experiences in Britain, and found that that they were far more common than most atheists – and even most believers – had imagined.... But Dennett rules all such evidence out of court. Powerful personal experiences "can't be used as contributions to the communal discussion that we are now conducting." He assumes that religious experiences are generated inside the brain, and that they are illusory. How can Dennett be so sure? In the end, it all comes down to his own beliefs. Bright memes have infected him and taken over his brain. Those memes are now trying to leap from his brain into yours through the medium of *Breaking the Spell*.<sup>283</sup>

In other words, according to Sheldrake, Dennett isn't wrong about memes; he is simply more right than he knows. His brain has been taken over by "bright memes" that have caused him to exhibit "an ambiguous attitude to his intended audience," not to mention scornfulness, one-sidedness, dogmatism, and dismissiveness. But despite Sheldrake's claims to the contrary, Dennett is not dismissing all such claims of religious experience "out of court." He is merely stating that "however convinced some people may be by their powerful personal experiences, such revelations don't travel well."<sup>284</sup> So, yes, Dennett does assume "that religious experiences are generated inside the brain," but this

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<sup>283</sup> Rupert Sheldrake, "The Unbearable Brightness of Being Right," Sheldrake.org, 4 February 2006, accessed 19 August 2016, <http://www.sheldrake.org/research/the-unbearable-brightness-of-being-right>.

<sup>284</sup> Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, 267. In other words, Dennett is arguing that one's convictions concerning personal experience (particularly of a religious or metaphysical nature) should never automatically be presumed true, but rather should be subjected to the same level of inquiry as, say, the testimony of would-be witnesses in a criminal trial.

in no way implies “that they are illusory.” Of this, he is “dogmatically” *uncertain*. They are simply irrelevant to his enterprise.

Sheldrake’s misunderstanding/misrepresentation becomes even more disconcerting when one considers that, in his own professed Christianity, he (presumably) sees none of the potential pitfalls he seems to have encountered in Dennett’s position. After all, in his defense of individual religious experiences as evidence of their truth, Sheldrake is in fact the only person taking such a dogmatic position in the first place, apart from Adam Kirsch, who in his review for *The New York Sun* goes even a step further. He writes:

At the heart of organized religion, whether one accepts or rejects it, is the *truth* that metaphysical experience is part of human life. Any adequate account of religion must start from this phenomenological *fact*. Because Mr. Dennett ignores it, treating religion instead as at best a pastime for dimwits, at worst a holding cell for fanatics, he never really encounters the thing he believes he is writing about.<sup>285</sup>

As a result, I would suggest that it is Sheldrake’s and Kirsch’s argument, not Dennett’s, that ultimately “comes down to [their] own beliefs.”<sup>286</sup>

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In his review of *Breaking the Spell*, Kenan Malik writes:

Much of the controversy about the book has centered on Dennett’s atheism and his attempt to deconstruct religion with the tools of science. In fact his frank disbelief is refreshing, even if his condescension towards believers (‘I wonder if any believers in the End Times will have the intellectual honesty and courage to read this book through’) can often be trying. And his project of putting religion under rational scrutiny is surely to be welcomed in an age in which faith seems to shape so much of people’s responses to political and social issues. The real problem is that

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<sup>285</sup> Adam Kirsch, “If Men are From Mars, What’s God?” *The New York Sun*, 8 February 2006, accessed 19 August 2016, <http://www.nysun.com/arts/if-men-are-from-mars-whats-god/27182/>.

<sup>286</sup> For more, please see Part II, Section I of Chapter Five, entitled “In Defense of Dennett’s Strawmen,” in which I expound more fully on Dennett’s positions with regard to qualia (i.e. conscious experience more generally) and their relation/value to scientific inquiry.

Dennett's explanation of religion is less than convincing. It may be true that humans possess certain psychological dispositions that open them to religious ideas. But uncovering such traits is not the same as explaining the origins, let alone the contemporary attractions, of religion.... What is missing from *Breaking the Spell* is any sense of religion as a social or historical, as opposed to a purely natural, phenomenon. Dennett dismisses as unscientific the long and rich history of scholarship into the social roots of religion. The result is a seriously distorted analysis and a curiously arid book. There is no sense here of any engagement with religion as it is actually lived or experienced, rather than as Dennett would like to imagine it in theory. 'Do some research!' Dennett exhorts believers. It's good advice for philosophers too.<sup>287</sup>

Perhaps Malik is right; perhaps "uncovering such traits is not the same as explaining the origins, let alone the contemporary attractions, of religion." However, one could claim that Malik is simply reviewing the book he wished Dennett had written as opposed to the one he actually did. Furthermore, I would contend that any attempt to explain either the origins or the contemporary attractions of religion that does not take such biological considerations into account is unlikely to produce a more complete and thoughtful analysis. As Aristotle once explained:

Man is by nature a political animal.... And why man is a political animal in a greater measure than any bee or any gregarious animal is clear. For nature, as we declare, does nothing without purpose; and man alone of the animals possesses speech. The mere voice, it is true, can indicate pain and pleasure, and therefore is possessed by the other animals as well (for their nature has been developed so far as to have sensations of what is painful and pleasant and to indicate those sensations to one another), but speech is designed to indicate the advantageous and the harmful, and therefore also the right and the wrong; for it is the special property of man in distinction from the other animals that he alone has perception of good and bad and right and wrong and the other moral qualities, and it is partnership in these things that makes a household and a city-state.... Therefore the impulse to form a partnership of this kind is present in all men by nature; but the man who first united people in such a partnership was the greatest of benefactors. For as man is the best of the animals when perfected, so he is the worst of all when sundered from law and justice. For unrighteousness is most pernicious when possessed of weapons, and man is born

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<sup>287</sup> Kenan Malik, "Review: *Breaking the Spell*," KenanMalik.com, 8 April 2006, accessed 19 August 2016, [http://www.kenanmalik.com/reviews/dennett\\_religion.html](http://www.kenanmalik.com/reviews/dennett_religion.html).

possessing weapons for the use of wisdom and virtue, which it is possible to employ entirely for the opposite ends. Hence when devoid of virtue man is the most unholy and savage of animals, and the worst in regard to sexual indulgence and gluttony. Justice on the other hand is an element of the state; for judicial procedure, which means the decision of what is just, is the regulation of the political partnership.<sup>288</sup>

In other words, man's ability to form political bonds and indeed just societies is predicated upon our *natural* ability to reason and to communicate with our fellow man.<sup>289</sup>

Without these intrinsic characteristics, neither development would even be conceivable, let alone possible. The same undoubtedly holds for Malik's critique. Until we identify humanity's specific traits and natural predispositions for religious ideology and behavior, any discussions on the sociological or historical origins of the phenomenon seems destined to remain secondary and incomplete.<sup>290</sup>

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In his article, "Religion from the Outside," Freeman Dyson writes:

Dennett defines scientific inquiry in a narrow way, restricting it to the collection of evidence that is reproducible and testable. He makes a sharp distinction between science on the one hand and the humanistic disciplines of history and theology on the other. He does not accept as scientific the great mass of evidence contained in historical narratives and personal experiences. Since it cannot be reproduced under controlled conditions, it does not belong to science. He quotes with approval and high praise several passages from *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, the classic description of religion from the point of view of a psychologist, published by William James in 1902. He describes James's book as "a treasure trove

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<sup>288</sup> Aristotle. Aristotle in 23 Volumes, Vol. 21, trans. H. Rackham. (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press; London, William Heinemann Ltd. 1944), Pol. 1.1253a. Perseus Digital Library, Tufts University, accessed 21 August 2016, <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:abo:tlg.0086.035:1:1253a>.

<sup>289</sup> For more on Aristotle's notions of natural law, legal law, and/or natural justice, see Max Salomon Shellens' "Aristotle's notions of Natural Law," *The American Journal of Jurisprudence* Vol. 4, Issue 1 (1 January 1959): 72–100, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ajj/4.1.72>.

<sup>290</sup> One might argue that Malik is, in many ways, echoing the concerns of Durkheim and Eliade, who likewise asserted that "any engagement with religion [must be] as it is actually lived or experienced." And while Dennett is certainly not discounting the value of inquiries into the sociological or historical origins of religion, he nevertheless maintains that without understanding the cognitive characteristics and/or biological imperatives that make such associations possible for and profitable to our species, our respective analyses must remain isolated and insufficient.



of insights and arguments, too often overlooked in recent times.” But he does not accept James’s insights and arguments as scientific.<sup>291</sup>

But as Dennett himself explained in his response to Dyson:

Freeman Dyson imposes a curious meaning on the word “prejudice” in his review of my book *Breaking the Spell* [NYR, June 22]. He has his own prejudice “from the inside” in favor of religion, he says, while I have my prejudice “from the outside” leading to “the opposite conclusion.”... Is there no possibility of a nonprejudiced approach to religion? In Dyson’s world view, religion can have only friends and enemies, no interested but uncommitted bystanders. This mindset seems to have prevented him from seeing that my book strenuously attempts to avoid both biases – and I think it succeeds – in the only way we have ever found to explore any complicated and controversial phenomenon objectively: by adhering to the methods and working assumptions of science, expanded to encompass the work of historians and other investigators in the humanities – not excluding theologians, but not granting them the deference and immunity from rational criticism to which they are accustomed.<sup>292</sup>

Thus, Dennett has no desire to reject or exclude the work of historians, philosophers, and theologians. He only wishes to subject them to the same sort of “rational criticism” to which science is currently held accountable. As he goes on to explain:

Contrary to what Dyson says, I not only don’t dismiss the work of nonscientific explorers of religion as nonscientific; I go to elaborate – some would say tedious – lengths to show how to incorporate it into a unified and ideology-free (and mutually respectful) investigation. How could such a brilliant thinker as Dyson misunderstand this? I suspect it is because he, like some other religious readers, are so accustomed to the hyper-respect their “faith” is normally vouchsafed that when somebody treats it with deliberate matter-of-fact curiosity, they take offense, and cease to think and read carefully.<sup>293</sup>

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Echoing Malik’s and Dyson’s social sciences critiques, socialist James Brookfield argues:

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<sup>291</sup> Freeman Dyson, “Religion from the Outside,” *The New York Review of Books*, 22 June 2006, accessed 21 August 2016, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2006/06/22/religion-from-the-outside/>.

<sup>292</sup> Daniel Dennett, “Response to ‘Religion from the Outside,’” *The New York Review of Books*, 10 August 2006, accessed 21 August 2016, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2006/08/10/breaking-the-spell/>.

<sup>293</sup> *Ibid.*

Dennett's decision to ignore the Marxist critique of religion is the most severe handicap in the direction that he has adopted in *Breaking the Spell* and amounts to a type of intellectual dereliction of duty. Dennett defines himself as a philosopher, not simply a popularizer of science or advocate of atheism. Considering this point, it is not justifiable for him to look past what Marxism has to say on the subject of religion.<sup>294</sup>

But what exactly does Marxism have to say on the subject? Brookfield continues:

The most common alternative notion among those who study religion is an idealized conception. What Engels wrote of Feuerbach could be justly applied to Dennett: "In the form he is realistic since he takes his start from man; but there is absolutely no mention of the world in which this man lives; hence, this man remains always the same abstract man who occupied the field in the philosophy of religion." To put it somewhat differently, because Dennett never really examines the social history of man, his hypotheses about the development of religion after agricultural societies arose have a contrived feel to them. Man as Dennett imagines him, naturalistically, substitutes for historical man. An imagined history is substituted for the real one. The danger of adopting an excessively speculative, somewhat imagined starting point for inquiry is demonstrated rather clearly in another way in *Breaking the Spell*. Dennett's relative disinterest in the actual social dimensions of human society renders him vulnerable to complete misunderstandings of the present political situation.<sup>295</sup>

Unfortunately, like Malik and Dyson before him, Brookfield seems to have missed Dennett's central point that any social, historical, *or economic* accounts of religious history must themselves be grounded in a fundamentally naturalistic understanding of man as a biological, evolved, and still evolving entity. Or as Dennett himself explains: "Everything we value – from sugar and sex and money to music and love and religion – we value for reasons. Lying behind, and distinct from, *our* reasons are evolutionary reasons, free-floating rationales that have been endorsed by natural selection."<sup>296</sup> In other words, such sociological accounts of religion as Malik, Dyson, and Brookfield would

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<sup>294</sup> James Brookfield, "Dennett's Dangerous Idea," World Socialist Web Site, 6 November 2006, accessed 22 August 2016, <https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2006/11/spel-n06.html>.

<sup>295</sup> Ibid.

<sup>296</sup> Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, 93.

presumably like to see would undoubtedly help us to discover *our* reasons for adhering to and exhibiting such otherwise perplexing behavior. Dennett's account is simply searching for those underlying evolutionary reasons, of which we may be presently unaware, but which once discovered might shed some evidential light upon the enterprise as a whole. Thus, they represent complementary, not conflicting, components of the same search for knowledge.

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Commenting on Freeman Dyson's review, behavioral psychologist Howard

Rachlin writes:

But Dyson... believes that all debates about religion – not only the question of innate goodness or badness – are orthogonal to scientific inquiry. Religion, Dyson feels, can be usefully studied only from the inside, in religious terms, as William James did in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (James, 1902/1982), not scientific ones. Dennett's proposal to establish a scientific dialog on religion is thus rejected by some of the very people he is trying so hard to reach. As a behaviorist I find it hard to muster any sympathy for Dennett's failure in this regard because, in one crucial area, the behavior of individual organisms, Dennett is a thoroughgoing creationist. Just as some critics unfairly accuse Dennett of trivializing religion, Dennett (1978) has unfairly accused behaviorists in general and Skinner in particular of trivializing human cognition.<sup>297</sup>

In order to defend his labeling of Dennett as a "thoroughgoing creationist," Rachlin employs the following anecdote:

I have an old friend from the Bronx who is a professional actor. I see him at very long intervals – 10 years on the average. Invariably I come away confused. I don't know if he's really a nice guy or is just acting like a nice guy. (I'm not sure whether he knows either.) Having a conversation with a professional actor is like sparring with a professional boxer; they're in absolute control. How could I have resolved my confusion after my conversations with my actor friend? What information did I need that I didn't have? According to Dennett, the information I needed was inside

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<sup>297</sup> Howard Rachlin, "Cui Bono? A Review of *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*, by Daniel C. Dennett," National Center for Biotechnology Information, January 2007, accessed 21 August 2016, <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1790880/>.

my friend at the time of my conversations with him in the form of a set of mechanisms in his brain which, if I only knew how they were organized and their state at the time, would tell me what he was really thinking as he said what he said. It is the collective state of these mechanisms that constitute, for Dennett, the actor's mental state. And it is his mind that directly causes him to say what he says; that is, his behavior is created by his mind and his mind is inside his head. That seems to me nonsense. What I need is not information about my friend's internal state but information about his overt behavior over extended periods during the previous 10 years (and, as it comes in, information about his overt behavior over the next 10 years). A frank conversation about him with his children and wife would tell me far more about what he was really thinking at the time we met than would any kind of examination of his insides.<sup>298</sup>

Leaving aside for the moment that this critique is completely unrelated to Dennett's current project, I would argue that Rachlin has not only misunderstood Dennett's position on behaviorism, but in so doing, he has set up yet another false dichotomy in which behavior and belief are construed as mutually exclusive explanations of human action. (As the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy entry on Behaviorism explains, "Arguably, a version of analytical or logical behaviorism may also be found in the work of Daniel Dennett on the ascription of states of consciousness via a method he calls 'heterophenomenology' (Dennett 2005, pp. 25–56). (See also Melser 2004.)"<sup>299</sup> So not only is Dennett not a "thoroughgoing creationist" when it comes to behaviorism, his notion of heterophenomenology is actually an attempt to bridge the divide between it and constructivism.) But whether or not one believes that behaviorists "trivialize cognition," Dennett's argument that the motivation for some human behavior might be dependent upon their biology (and thus distinct from their own cognitive reasons) would seem to

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<sup>298</sup> Ibid.

<sup>299</sup> George Graham, "Behaviorism," The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Fall 2016 Edition), 11 March 2015, accessed 21 August 2016, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2016/entries/behaviorism/>.

suggest that such concerns are secondary at best (if not themselves trivial) to his overall enterprise. What's more, I would contend that any behaviorist account of religious (or indeed any other category of human) behavior which does not in some way consider any correlation between it and the various internal mental and/or physical states of the evolved brain is deficient by default.

Nevertheless, Rachlin continues:

Behaviorists, following Skinner (1990), are far more consistent Darwinians than Dennett is.... That is, the behavior analyst approaches the study of a human being in exactly the same way as the evolutionary biologist approaches the study of a nonhuman animal.... It is important to specify exactly how an evolutionary view of complex individual behavior patterns differs from Dennett's intentional stance. For Dennett, memes are passed down from the minds of parents to the minds of children. But what exactly are memes and where exactly are they located? Dennett admits (p. 349), "...it is unlikely that any *independently identifiable* common brain structures, in different brains, could ever be isolated as the material substrate for a particular meme" (italics in original). Instead, he argues, each meme, like each thought, wish, belief, etc. is a compound of small mechanisms most likely distributed across various places in our nervous systems. He quotes himself (approvingly) as follows (p. 302): "*Yes we have a soul; but it's made of lots of tiny robots*" (italics in original). Thus, for Dennett, our beliefs reside not in our verbal and nonverbal behavioral patterns but in a set of mechanisms (the tiny robots) in our brains. The data Dennett recommends for cognitive science are behavioral; cognitive science is distinct from neurophysiology. But those data are to be interpreted as evidence for internal mechanisms (the tiny robots) – not indeed neural connections but flow diagrams where the boxes have labels like memory, imagination, thought, and so forth.<sup>300</sup>

So having failed to illustrate Dennett's supposed hostility to behaviorism, Rachlin's subsequent charge is that behaviorists such as himself are "far more consistent Darwinians than Dennett is." So whereas the majority of critics argue that Dennett's account is too focused upon evolutionary biology, Rachlin ultimately argues that it is not attentive enough to its approach. He does, however, concede:

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<sup>300</sup> Rachlin, "Cui Bono? A Review of *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*, by Daniel C. Dennett."

No complete understanding of human behavior can be achieved without understanding internal mechanisms, [but even] if you knew everything there is to know about those tiny robots (and the tinier robots inside them, and those inside them) you would still not understand why people do the things they do and why they say the things they say. You will have ignored the most important scientific fact – the most important Darwinian fact – about those patterns (including religious patterns): their function in the person’s environment (including the social environment).<sup>301</sup>

Once again, it would seem that an either/or explanation of religious behavior/belief that excluded either Rachlin’s insights into behaviorism or Dennett’s cognitive contributions would be substantially less valuable as a result of its omission. Why, then, if “no complete understanding of human behavior can be achieved without understanding internal mechanisms,” does Rachlin feel the need to make this distinction and argue for such an extreme ideological separation of the two in the first place? I honestly don’t know, but to employ Rachlin’s own words in service of a possible explanation: “It is his mind that directly causes him to say what he says; that is, his behavior is created by his mind and his mind is inside his head.” Of course, Dennett would add that there might be underlying psychological or biological reasons (separate from Rachlin’s conscious reasons) for believing and acting as he does, but whatever his motivations for doing so, Rachlin’s resultant behavior “seems to me nonsense.”

It would seem that even Rachlin was eventually forced to admit as much:

Behaviorists disagree with each other about whether complex behavioral patterns of whole organisms are usefully labeled by terms from our mental vocabulary. Skinner (1990) thought not. I believe, on the contrary, that mental terms are useful in behavior analysis (Rachlin, 1994). You could call this the *teleological stance*. Imagination, for example, may be seen, from this perspective, not as an image in your head but as a functional mode of behavior – behaving in the absence of some state of affairs as you normally would in its presence. Suppose two people in a room are both asked to imagine a lion. The first person closes her eyes and says, “Yes, I see it; it has a mane and a tail.” The second person runs screaming from

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<sup>301</sup> Ibid.

the room. The first person is imagining a picture or a movie of a lion but the second is imagining a lion itself. What is the function of such behavior? Imagination is a necessary part of perception. If perception (as distinct from sensation) is current discrimination of complex, temporally extended sequences of stimuli (as distinct from simpler, immediate stimuli), then the immediate discriminative response, especially if made early in the sequence, involves a sort of gamble – behaving as if the extended sequence had occurred. For example, at any given moment I treat my wife as the person she is in the long run not as the particular bundle of sensations she presents to me at that moment. It is in connection with such premature but necessary discrimination (the universal arising out of particular instances) that Aristotle gives us his famous analogy of soldiers in a rout turning one by one and making a stand (Rachlin, 1994, p. 72). The function of the soldiers' behavior is to create an abstraction (the renewed formation) out of individual actions. The first soldier to turn is behaving as he would if all the others had already turned; he is imagining that they had already turned. His imagination is what he does, not what the robots in his head are doing. The functions of our ordinary imaginations are to allow us to get around in the world on the basis of partial information. We do not have to carefully test the floor of every room we walk into. Imagination is also necessary in self-control. One cigarette refusal by a smoker is utterly worthless – like only one soldier in a rout turning and making a stand. Refusal of an individual cigarette is never reinforced – not now, not later, not symbolically, not internally. Only an extended series of cigarette refusals is reinforced. Refusal of the first cigarette is thus an act of imagination – behaving as you would if a state of affairs existed when it does not (yet) exist. Such complex long-term imaginative acts would be shaped from simpler short-term acts. The function of such behavior is clear. Getting up in the morning, at least for me, is an act of imagination.<sup>302</sup>

Thus it would seem that, at the end of the day, Rachlin's teleological stance, specifically as it relates to "the behavior" of imagination, is simply employing a mirrored methodology to Dennett's intentional stance and consequently amounts to a distinction without a difference. For if Rachlin truly believes "that mental terms are useful in behavior analysis," then I would argue that he has already endorsed Dennett's entire analytical framework in the process.

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<sup>302</sup> Ibid.

Inadvertently demonstrating this is in his own review of *Breaking the Spell* is

John C. Greene. He writes:

How would a scientist set out to prove that, in principle, miracles can never occur? The question whether they have occurred in any particular case must be settled by historical evidence, but Dennett shows very little interest in history or in historians like Thomas Cahill, Garry Wills, and John Pairman Brown who have taken the trouble to master the languages and perspectives of the ancient world. Like David Hume, one of his favorite philosophers, he excludes miracles as incompatible with the laws of nature (Hume's criterion) or with "scientific or philosophical materialism" (Dennett's criterion). But there is nothing scientific about materialism as a philosophy, which the Oxford American Dictionary defines as "the opinion that nothing exists but matter and its movements and modifications." Among philosophers the mathematician-logician-philosopher Alfred North Whitehead took the lead in rejecting the concept of matter and expanding the idea of experience to embrace all natural entities, each entity prehending (taking into its own being the rest of the universe in some degree) in its occasions of experience. Among scientists the population geneticist Sewall Wright concluded that for humans "reality consists primarily of streams of consciousness. This fact must take precedence over the laws of nature of physical science in arriving at a unified philosophy of science, even though it must be largely ignored in science itself" (1977: 80). In science, he adds, the richness of the stream of consciousness is impoverished because the scientist restricts his investigation to "the so-called primary properties of matter" (p 80), which, ironically, can be measured only by voluntary actions. Wright concludes that we must acknowledge the necessity "of dealing with the universe as the world of mind" (p 85).<sup>303</sup>

Essentially, Greene is arguing that there is nothing scientific about scientific materialism, that evidence for the existence of miracles can only be historically ascertained on a case-by-case basis and can never be principally prohibited by science (a challenge that any scientist would surely accept), and that matter in motion must necessarily take an ideological backseat to conscious experience when constructing a viable model of reality. Not only is Greene's critique of Dennett utterly at odds with Rachlin's (for certainly,

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<sup>303</sup> John C. Greene, "Review: *Breaking the Spell*," National Center for Science Education, Summer 2007, accessed 22 August 2016, <https://ncse.com/library-resource/review-breaking-spell>.



Dennett cannot be simultaneously obsessed with and dismissive of “the world of the mind,”), I would actually contend that Green’s criticisms are not even criticisms.

For instance, Dennett’s argument explicitly brackets miracles as an area of non-concern for his study. But even should one wish to *prove* a particular miracle, Dennett reminds us that “the only hope of ever demonstrating this to a doubting world would be by adopting the scientific method, with its assumption of no miracles, and showing that science was utterly unable to account for the phenomena. Miracle-hunters must be scrupulous scientists or else they are wasting their time.”<sup>304</sup> As for Greene’s (and Sewell Wright’s) claims concerning Dennett’s admitted materialism, I see no reason why a commitment to physicalism in any way diminishes, obscures, or refutes the notion of conscious experience. Just because mental experience is rooted in the physical brain does not mean that materialism is unconcerned with its contents. Thus, it would seem that, again contrary to Rachlin, Greene is arguing that Dennett’s materialism somehow renders him a behaviorist. And as I previously stated, he cannot both endorse and be dismissive of a particular school of thought at the same time. So not only have Greene and Rachlin failed to make their respective cases, in their attempts, they have inadvertently refuted one another’s primary criticisms of Dennett.

This fact notwithstanding, Greene haughtily (and tellingly) concludes:

“What is truth?” said jesting Pilate, and would not stay for an answer,” wrote Francis Bacon, an early advocate of experimental science. Bacon does not answer Pilate’s question, but in an essay “Of Goodness and Goodness of Nature” he links goodness to the character of the Deity and to the theological virtue of charity. He writes: “The desire of power in excess caused the angels to fall; the desire of knowledge in excess caused man to fall: but in charity there is no excess; neither can angel nor man come in danger by it.... But above all if he [the good man] have St Paul’s perfection... it shows much of a divine nature, and a kind of conformity

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<sup>304</sup> Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, 26.

with Christ himself.”... Apparently this early prophet of a new kind of science based on observation and experiment had none of the animus against religion which inspires the author of *Breaking the Spell*.<sup>305</sup>

In other words, as far as Greene is concerned, Dennett’s core problem is his imprudent quest for excessive knowledge. If only he would content himself with his ignorance and subsequently with only the search for goodness (instead of truth), a much better man would he be. I would counter that the only animus apparent in the preceding paragraph is that of Greene toward science. What’s more, I would contend that his belief that truth and goodness are somehow mutually exclusive says far more about him than it does about Dennett.

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In his article, “A Scientific Approach to Atheism,” Jack Miles argues:

Intellectual outbursts emotionally akin to “Let’s step outside and settle this, shall we?” keep intruding. Thus we read: “If theists would be so kind as to make a short list of all the concepts of God they renounce as balderdash before proceeding further, we atheists would know just which topics were still on the table, but, out of a mixture of caution, loyalty, and unwillingness to offend anyone ‘on their side,’ theists typically decline to do this.” Perhaps so, but then is Dennett prepared to perform a comparable triage for the favorite topics of his fellow atheists? Where do “we atheists” stand, for example, with regard to fellow atheist Howard Stern? We theists would like to know, if Dennett would be so kind, though we fear that out of a mixture of caution, loyalty and unwillingness to offend, he may pass over America’s most influential single atheist in silence.<sup>306</sup>

You might want to read that again. Effectively, Miles is arguing that Dennett’s challenge to the religious to precisely define what they mean by “God” is roughly comparable to a religious person’s challenge to Dennett to address, explain, and/or defend Howard Stern’s comments (on religion, presumably) at some point during his analysis. Not only does this

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<sup>305</sup> Greene, “Review: *Breaking the Spell*.”

<sup>306</sup> Jack Miles, “A Scientific Approach to Atheism,” *The Washington Post*, 28 June 2006, accessed 22 August 2016, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/06/28/AR2006062802144.html>.

confuse belief with the absence of belief, but it also confers an egalitarian authority upon both groups that is neither warranted nor desired. Whether or not one believes that the Pope can speak for all Catholics, such a position would undoubtedly be based upon one's understanding of the commonality and uniformity of Catholic beliefs. But regardless of one's perspective on that particular issue, the analogy simply cannot be extended to anyone who does not share any ostensibly unifying beliefs which would allow them to speak out either for or against an idea or individual from a position of comparable authority.<sup>307</sup> Nevertheless, even were one to grant Miles' request, I fail to see how either the theists' or Stern's responses could serve to derail, discount, or disprove Dennett's overarching argument that religion is a natural phenomenon. It is simply hair-splitting of the most tedious and telling sort.

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In her article, "Escaping Illusion," Kim Sterelny argues that

religious commitment cannot both be the result of natural selection for (for example) enhanced social cohesion and be a response to something that is actually divine. A cohesion-and-cooperation model of religion just says that believers would believe, whether or not there was a divine world to which to respond. If a secular theory of the origin of religious belief is true, such belief is not contingent on the existence of traces of the divine in our world. So although a secular and evolutionary model of religion might be (in a strict sense) neutral on the existence of divine agency, it cannot be neutral on the rationality of religious conviction.<sup>308</sup>

Essentially, Sterelny is arguing that the failure is not in Dennett's execution of his argument, but rather in its foundational premise: that religion can be studied as a strictly

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<sup>307</sup> Despite Miles' implication, neither agnosticism nor atheism (nor any other non-belief) imbues Howard Stern with any authority whatsoever to speak for or against anyone or anything on the subject. Rather, it will be the ideas and opinions to which he does subscribe (and the reason and evidence upon which they are based) that will confirm his credibility (or the absence thereof) to speak on a particular topic with any semblance of authority.

<sup>308</sup> Kim Sterelny, "Escaping Illusion," *My American Scientist*, Fall 2006, accessed 22 August 2016, <http://www.americanscientist.org/bookshelf/pub/escaping-illusion>.

natural phenomenon. This would seem to suggest that William James and Freeman Dyson were correct, and that religion can only be holistically examined and understood from within, by those who share (at least some form of) its faith.

But would we say this about any other subject? Could, for instance, totalitarianism only be studied by those who lived under such staunch political oppression? Or, if the seemingly universal tendency of human beings to safeguard and care for their young could be found to have a biological imperative (as indeed it has for all mammals), would that in any way diminish the emotional bond between parent and child? What's more, would one's knowledge of the role of pheromones in the development of feelings of physical attraction destroy one's capacity to experience romantic love? The answer to all of these questions is in a very significant sense no. So perhaps Sterelny is right that Dennett "cannot be neutral on the rationality of religious conviction," but if it can be shown that such convictions do result in "enhanced social cohesion and cooperation," as Sterelny claims and as Dennett's study seeks to demonstrate, then surely such beliefs can continue to be rationalized (if not always rational) by those who profess to possess them.

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In his article, Troy Jollimore writes:

the desire to appeal both to proponents and skeptics of religion makes for an oddly disjointed, tonally inconsistent and somewhat baggy book. Partly, too, this is a result of Dennett's desire to answer any and all objectors to his project, be they religious conservatives or postmodernist skeptics about science. One understands the desire, but the result is unfortunate: Since most of these objections are highly abstract, they push the book too often in the direction of arid and intangible conceptualization and away from the concrete details of religion as manifested in people's actual lives. A more compelling way of proving the legitimacy of the naturalistic approach might have been to find more points of contact

between the theoretical suggestions and people's actual religious practices.<sup>309</sup>

Perhaps Jollimore's suggestion is correct that a "more compelling way of proving the legitimacy of the naturalistic approach might have been to find more points of contact between the theoretical suggestions and people's actual religious practices." Of course, I would argue that Dennett's intention was to lay the evolutionary groundwork so that such social and historical accounts could more informatively be written. But as for Jollimore's claims that Dennett's responses to anticipated objections made for a disjointed and baggy book, I would hope that the highly abstracted criticisms I have considered up to this point demonstrate that Dennett's efforts were neither pedantic nor pointless. I would contend that this is because Dennett has so effectively traversed the terrain upon which such conventional attacks might otherwise have been mounted. To challenge him, one must effectively label him as either a behaviorist, a rationalist, a materialist, or indeed simply a sophist, because the more concrete avenues of assault have all been effectively and preventatively walled-off by his so-called disjointed digressions.

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In his article, "Daniel Dennett Hunts the Snark," David Bentley Hart writes:

The Bellman – like almost all of [Lewis] Carroll's characters – is a rigorously, even remorselessly rational person and is moreover a figure cast in a decidedly heroic mould. But, if one sets out in pursuit of beasts as fantastic, elusive, and protean as either Snarks or religion, one can proceed from only the vaguest idea of what one is looking for. So it is no great wonder that, in the special precision with which they define their respective quarries, in the quantity of farraginous detail they amass, in their insensibility to the incoherence of the portraits they have produced –

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<sup>309</sup> Troy Jollimore, "Desire for Religion Grows Out of Human Experience / Philosopher Posits it Evolved in the Absence of the Supernatural," SFGate.com, 5 February 2006, accessed 22 August 2016, <http://www.sfgate.com/books/article/Desire-for-religion-grows-out-of-human-experience-2541937.php>.

in fact, in all things but felicity of expression – the Bellman and Dennett sound much alike.<sup>310</sup>

This is quite akin to Jack Miles' criticism that

though Dennett pays lip service to the need for Darwinian theorists of religion to acquaint themselves with actual religion as patiently as Darwin acquainted himself with actual animal breeding, in practice he rarely does so. He defines religion, for example, in a parochially Western way as “social systems whose participants avow belief in a supernatural agent or agents whose approval is to be sought.” A religion without gods, he adds, is “like a vertebrate without a backbone.” But this is a definition that does not begin to cope with Buddhism, a religious tradition that seeks not divine approval but an enlightenment that Pankaj Mishra has aptly characterized as “direct knowledge of the unstable and conditioned nature of the mind and the body.” Dennett waves off the Buddhist exception to his rule as a temporary inconvenience to be addressed by later research.<sup>311</sup>

Thus, it seems that both Hart's and Miles' disapproval of Dennett's approach stems from the fact that he defines religion too narrowly for their tastes, and in so doing, leaves no room for “nontheistic religions” such as (Zen) Buddhism or liberal Christian theology, such as that espoused by Paul Tillich. However, I would argue that both criticisms are ultimately misguided, for Buddha's and Tillich's conceptions of “god” effectively render them agnostic and/or pantheistic philosophers, not theologians (at least not as traditionally conceived).<sup>312</sup> As a result, their ideologies are much more akin to those of Socrates and Spinoza than to any of the other sages and saints of either Buddhism or Christianity. For as Thich Nhat Hanh explains:

The Buddha always told his disciples not to waste their time and energy in metaphysical speculation. Whenever he was asked a metaphysical

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<sup>310</sup> David Bentley Hart, “Daniel Dennett Hunts the Snark,” *First Things*, a Publication of The Institute on Religion and Public Life, January 2007, accessed 22 August 2016, <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2007/01/003-daniel-dennett-hunts-the-snark>.

<sup>311</sup> Miles, “A Scientific Approach to Atheism.”

<sup>312</sup> Merriam-Webster defines theology as “the study of God and of God's relation to the world.” On page 72 of “Theoretical Virtues and Theological Construction,” [*International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 41 (1997)], Scott Shalkowski defines traditional theology in a specifically-Christian context as “philosophical statements of doctrines and explanations of these doctrines that come to us from the early Church Fathers and the Medieval doctors.”

question, he remained silent. Instead, he directed his disciples toward practical efforts. Questioned one day about the problem of the infinity of the world, the Buddha said, “Whether the world is finite or infinite, limited or unlimited, the problem of your liberation remains the same.” Another time he said, “Suppose a man is struck by a poisoned arrow and the doctor wishes to take out the arrow immediately. Suppose the man does not want the arrow removed until he knows who shot it, his age, his parents, and why he shot it. What would happen? If he were to wait until all these questions have been answered, the man might die first.” Life is so short. It must not be spent in endless metaphysical speculation that does not bring us any closer to the truth.<sup>313</sup>

This would seem to suggest that Buddha’s position on the existence of the gods was decidedly agnostic, and thus, by definition, not religious. And as for Buddha’s ideological relation to Socrates, Thomas Huxley once wrote:

Agnosticism, in fact, is not a creed, but a method, the essence of which lies in the rigorous application of a single principle. *That principle is of great antiquity; it is as old as Socrates*; as old as the writer who said, “Try all things, hold fast by that which is good” it is the foundation of the Reformation, which simply illustrated the axiom that every man should be able to give a reason for the faith that is in him; it is the great principle of Descartes; it is the fundamental axiom of modern science. Positively the principle may be expressed: In matters of the intellect, follow your reason as far as it will take you, without regard to any other consideration. And negatively: In matters of the intellect do not pretend that conclusions are certain which are not demonstrated or demonstrable. That I take to be the agnostic faith, which if a man keep whole and undefiled, he shall not be ashamed to look the universe in the face, whatever the future may have in store for him.<sup>314</sup>

As for Tillich’s attempts to deanthropomorphize the Christian God, Eric Steinhart writes:

Tillich says he’s a Christian. But here it’s worth pointing out that Tillich’s “God” is so far from the God of the Bible (and traditional Christian theology) that it’s hard to take his claim of being Christian very seriously. And Tillich has widely been criticized by Christians as offering a strange

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<sup>313</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *Zen Keys: A Guide to Zen Practice* (Harmony; Three Leaves Press ed. Edition, 1994), 42. Of course, there are those who would describe Thich’s Zen apologetics (and my presentation of them as commonly accepted) as distinctly modernist, and not truly representative of the historical understanding of the Buddha’s metaphysical message. If true, Dennett’s argument could quite easily be extended to encompass the more traditional interpretation(s) of the Buddha’s teachings within the confines of his commitment to metaphysical naturalism.

<sup>314</sup> Thomas Huxley, “Agnosticism (1889),” 245-246, emphasis mine, accessed 22 August 2016, <http://aleph0.clarku.edu/huxley/CE5/Agn.html>.

new theory of the divine. Some might say that Tillich was a Christian atheist.... For Tillich, God is both “the power of being in everything and above everything”. I’d say that’s absurd – for Tillich, God is both immanent and transcendent. But it’s impossible to be both immanent and transcendent. To be sure, if Tillich wants to claim to remain within Christianity, then he’s got to affirm the transcendence of being-itself. But it makes very little sense to do so. Much of Tillich’s first volume of *Systematic Theology* looks like a pantheistic or pagan theology onto which a superficial layer of exhausted Christian ideology is painted. That paint peels off easily.<sup>315</sup>

The same could be said of Richard Heffern’s criticism in the article, “Authors Criticize Shallowness of Contemporary Atheism.” In it, he writes that

an impoverished viewpoint results when these secular intellectuals dismiss theology because it’s not derived from science, Fr. Haught writes. They are almost completely ignorant of what’s going on in the world of theology. They talk about the most fundamentalist and extremist versions of faith, and they hold these up as though they’re the normative, central core. They miss the moral core of Judaism and Christianity, the theme of social justice, which takes those who are marginalized and brings them to the center of society. They give us an extreme caricature of faith and religion.” The new atheism is thus theologically unchallenging, says Fr. Haught, consisting of breezy over-generalizations that leave out almost everything that theologians would want to highlight in their own contemporary discussions of God.<sup>316</sup>

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<sup>315</sup> Eric Steinhart, “The Impossible God of Paul Tillich,” Patheos.com, 21 December 2011, accessed 23 August 2016, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/camelswithhammers/2011/12/the-impossible-god-of-paul-tillich/>. With regard to the tension between immanence and transcendence, Austin Cline writes “The need for both qualities can be seen in the other characteristics normally attributed to God. If God is a person and works within human history, then it would make little sense for us not to be able to perceive and communicate with God. Moreover, if God is infinite, then God must exist everywhere – including within us and within the universe. Such a God must be immanent. On the other hand, if God is absolutely perfect beyond all experience and understanding, then God must also be transcendent. If God is timeless (outside of time and space) and unchangeable, then God cannot also be immanent within us, beings who are within time. Such a God must be wholly “other,” transcendent to everything we know. Because both of these qualities follow readily from other qualities, it would be difficult to abandon either without also needing to abandon or at least seriously modify many other common attributes of God. Some theologians and philosophers have been willing to make such a move, but most have not – and the result is a continuation of both of these attributes, constantly in tension.” Austin Cline, “God is Transcendent and Immanent? How is that Possible?” ThoughtCo, accessed September 18, 2018, <https://www.thoughtco.com/god-is-transcendent-and-immanent-251063>.

<sup>316</sup> Rich Heffern, “Authors Criticize Shallowness of Contemporary Atheism,” National Catholic Reporter, 20 June 2008, accessed 23 August 2016, <https://www.ncronline.org/books/2012/09/authors-criticize-shallowness-contemporary-atheism>.



So in essence, I would argue that Dennett is right to dismiss the nontheistic, modernist traditions of Zen Buddhism and Tillichian Christianity (or any other contorted forms of contemporary and/or liberal theology) as decidedly nonreligious. It is Hart, Miles, and Heffern who are mistaken in believing that such philosophical notions, once divorced from their foundational metaphysical doctrines, can still be defined as in any way *religious* without simultaneously redefining the term itself. Or to put it in terms Hart might appreciate, there is indeed a Snark on the loose, but it is not Dennett who is so enthusiastically on the hunt.

Hart's criticism of Dennett's (and Dawkins') theory of memes is even more ironic. For instance, he writes:

Of course, human beings most definitely are shaped to some degree by received ideas and habits, and copy patterns of behavior, craft, and thought from one another, and alter and refine these patterns in so doing. But, since human beings are also possessed of reflective consciousness and deliberative will, memory and intention, curiosity and desire, talk of memes is an empty mystification, and the word's phonetic resemblance to genes is not quite enough to render it respectable. The idea of memes might provide Dennett a convenient excuse for not addressing the actual content of religious beliefs and for concentrating his attention instead on the phenomenon of religion as a cultural and linguistic type, but any ostensible science basing itself on memetic theory is a science based on a metaphor – or, really, on an assonance. Dennett, though, is as indefatigable as the Bellman in his pursuit of that ghostly echo. He is desperate to confine his thinking to a strictly Darwinian model of human behavior but just as desperate to portray religion as a kind of “cultural symbiont” that is more destructive than beneficial to the poor unsuspecting organisms it has colonized. And so memes, for want of more plausible parasites, are indispensable to his tale.<sup>317</sup>

Thus, in a single paragraph, Hart is arguing that Dennett's notion of memes is essentially correct, only imprecisely applied to religion. However, Hart's first sentence would seem

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<sup>317</sup> Hart, “Daniel Dennett Hunts the Snark.”

to show that they are as indispensable to his tale as they are to Dennett's. Nevertheless, he continues:

In fact, the presupposition that all social phenomena must have an evolutionary basis and that it is legitimate to attempt to explain every phenomenon solely in terms of the benefit it may confer (the “cui bono?” question,” as Dennett likes to say) is of only suppositious validity. Immensely complex cultural realities like art, religion, and morality have no genomic sequences to unfold, exhibit no concatenations of material causes and effects, and offer nothing for the scrupulous researcher to quantify or dissect... An evolutionary sociologist, for instance, might try to isolate certain benefits that religions bring to societies or individuals (which already involves attempting to define social behaviors that could be interpreted in an almost limitless variety of ways), so as then to designate those benefits as the evolutionary rationales behind religion. But there is no warrant for doing so. The social and personal effects of religion, even if they could be proved to be uniform from society to society or person to person, may simply be accidental or epiphenomenal to religion. And even if one could actually discover some sort of clear connection between religious adherence and, say, social cohesion or personal happiness, one still would have no reason to assume the causal priority of those benefits; to do so would be to commit one of the most elementary of logical errors: post hoc ergo propter hoc – “thereafter, hence therefore” (or really, in this case, an even more embarrassing error: post hoc ergo causa huius – “thereafter, hence the cause thereof”). In the end, the most scientists of religion can do is to use biological metaphors to support (or, really, to illustrate) an essentially unfounded philosophical materialism.<sup>318</sup>

“The social and personal effects of religion, even if they could be proved to be uniform from society to society or person to person, may simply be accidental or epiphenomenal to religion.” This is Dennett's primary argument! His notion of memes and, more particularly, of “free-floating rationales” establishes this very point. There may or may not be genomic sequences to unfold where art, religion, and morality are concerned, but there are almost certainly memetic ones “lying behind, and distinct from, our reasons,” and Hart's attempt to argue otherwise inevitably descends into a shameless tactic he once sarcastically lambasted Dennett for criticizing. “And then there is his silly tendency to

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<sup>318</sup> Ibid.

feign mental decrepitude when it serves his purposes, as when he pretends that the concept of God possesses too many variations for him to keep track of, or as when he acts scandalized by the revelation that academic theology sometimes lapses into a technical jargon full of obscure Greek terms like *apophatic* and *ontic*.”<sup>319</sup> But perhaps I have misunderstood Hart’s argument and am consequently guilty of having committed the same embarrassing error of *post hoc ergo causa huius*. If so, I ironically beg forgiveness.

Unconvinced (and/or unaware), Hart continues:

These are all minor annoyances, really. The far profounder problem with *Breaking the Spell* is that, ultimately, it is a sublimely pointless book, for... even if Dennett’s theory of the phylogeny of religion could be shown to be largely correct, not only would it fail to challenge belief, it would in fact merely confirm an established tenet of Christian theology and a view of “religion” already held by most developed traditions of faith.<sup>320</sup>

What’s more, Hart argues that Dennett’s hypothesis is ultimately self-defeating because there is, in fact, no such thing as religion in the first place. He writes:

Questions of method, important as they are, need not be raised at all until the researcher can first determine and circumscribe the object of his studies in a convincing way. And here it seems worth mentioning—just for precision’s sake—that religion does not actually exist. Rather there are a great number of traditions of belief and practice that, for the sake of convenience, we call religions but that could scarcely differ from one another more. It might seem sufficient, for the purposes of research, simply to identify general resemblances among these traditions, but even that is notoriously hard to do, since the effort to ascertain what sort of things one is looking at involves an enormous amount of interpretation and no clear criteria for evaluating any of it. One cannot establish where the boundaries lie between religious systems and magic, or folk science, or myth, or social ceremony.<sup>321</sup>

So to summarize Hart’s various critiques: 1) Dennett defines religion too narrowly (for he does not count agnostic and/or pantheistic philosophy amongst its many manifestations);

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<sup>319</sup> Ibid.

<sup>320</sup> Ibid.

<sup>321</sup> Ibid.

2) memes necessarily exist (and are indispensable to societal development) but are separate and superfluous to the study of religion; 3) even if Dennett's theory about religion turns out to be true, the various "developed traditions of faith" will be able to intellectually accommodate it, and; 4) there is no such thing as religion anyway. Since even these criticisms cannot all be true, I would submit that, despite his comprehensive efforts to add metaphorical insult to metaphysical injury, Hart has done little beyond suggest the soundness of Dennett's claims and thus the importance of his work.

But when his "logical" and semantic critiques have failed, Hart must finally rely on that which truly motivated him all along: his faith. He states:

Certainly the Christian should be undismayed by the notion that religion is natural "all the way down." Indeed, it should not matter whether religion is the result of evolutionary imperatives, or of an inclination toward belief inscribed in our genes and in the structure of our brains, or even (more fantastically) of memes that have impressed themselves on our minds and cultures and languages. All things are natural. But nature itself is created toward an end – its consummation in God – and is informed by a more eminent causality – the creative will of God – and is sustained in existence by its participation in the being that flows from God, who is the infinite wellspring of all actuality. And religion, as a part of nature, possesses an innate entelechy and is oriented like everything else toward the union of God and his creatures. Nor should the Christian expect to find any lacunae in the fabric of nature, needing to be repaired by the periodic interventions of a cosmic maintenance technician. God's transcendence is absolute: He is cause of all things by giving existence to the whole, but nowhere need he act as a rival to any of the contingent, finite, secondary causes by which the universe lives, moves, and has its being in him.<sup>322</sup>

Argue with that.

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In his article, "Daniel Dennett – Belief in Belief," Ken Ammi writes:

It would certainly be as fallacious as Dennett's claim to lack of polemics in religious matters to assert that atheists, even the most militant activist sorts, do not accept and engage upon polemics regarding atheism. Yet,

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<sup>322</sup> Ibid.

their belief in unbelief and unbelief in belief comes through in their shock at the fact that they have to bother responding, that they actually have to bother defending a conclusion as obvious as atheism. This is part of the reason that their talks and books are so heavy on emotion and so light on well, anything else. They are quick to condemn, quick to assert arguments from personal preference, arguments from outrage, arguments to ridicule, arguments to embarrassment, etc. Yet, slow to provide premises that go beyond that which they personally prefer in general and slow to go anywhere beyond well-within-the-box-atheist-group-think-talking-points.<sup>323</sup>

Such a statement is almost comical not only for its lack of insight (for why is it that the religious position is so vulnerable to such ridiculing and embarrassing attacks), but also because, in writing it, Ammi commits practically every offense for which he would so scornfully condemn Dennett. This becomes obvious when Ammi (somewhat incredulously) argues:

Belief in unbelief is often expressed in terms of considering atheism to be the default position. However, it is not. Rather, *supernaturalism is the default position*. Until such time as absolute materialism can and does account for all natural phenomena – from consciousness, to life in general, not to mention the whole universe and everything in it – supernaturalism can account for these phenomena (at the philosophic level of what, and perhaps why but not the scientific level of how – a level which is not at all advantageous to materialism). This is because, let us say partly scientifically and partly philosophically, materialism cannot account for said phenomena while supernaturalism can.<sup>324</sup>

In other words, Dennett is wrong to so automatically presume that atheism or materialism can adequately explain all natural phenomena. For Ammi, supernaturalism already manages to satisfactorily do so. The fact that he holds this (non)explanation at least as ardently and assuredly as any advocate for philosophical or scientific materialism ever has is, for Ammi, irrelevant. But the real irony is that Ammi is attributing such faith-based fallaciousness to the methodology of science and not to his own suppositional

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<sup>323</sup> Ken Ammi, “Daniel Dennett – Belief in Belief,” TrueFreeThinker.com, accessed 22 August 2016, <http://www.truefreethinker.com/articles/daniel-dennett-%E2%80%93-belief-belief>.

<sup>324</sup> Ibid., emphasis mine.

claims. What's more, he concludes that even should philosophical or scientific materialism eventually account for all natural phenomena, then his appeal to the supernatural would still be viable *and* necessary. He writes:

The assertion is that everything has a purely materialistic explanation and even if we do not know what the explanation is; some day – thy materialism come – it will be explained thusly. And even if it is not explained materialistically this view demands that one restrict their thinking and simply believe by “faith” that the explanation is materialistic – this is anti-freethought. Meanwhile, it may be of import to note; the theist can consider material explanations, ever mounting material causes for material effects, by noting that yes indeed; God created the material realm wherein there functions a system of material causes and material effects.<sup>325</sup>

So, for Ammi, the explanation that “God did it,” is already sufficient. No scientific advance or philosophical argument could ever shake his conviction that God is still ultimately responsible for everything. In fact, it would only serve to confirm what he already “believes” to be true. Unbeknownst to Ammi, it is this very spell – wherein no amount of evidence could serve to alter one's convictions – that Dennett is so fervently attempting to break. For no matter how hard Ammi tries to square the semantic circle, unbelief in belief is simply not the same as belief in unbelief, and thus it cannot be considered as methodologically akin to the religious' belief in belief. Unbelief requires evidence and logical cohesion, whereas belief (of any sort) renders them both as either obsolete or superfluous.

Or as Robert Graves writes in his review of *Breaking the Spell*:

*Breaking the Spell* is a challenge to the religious to drop the defensive shroud shielding religious belief from criticism and submit their religions to rational inquiry. For the most part Dennett's tone in this book strikes me as forthright and reasonable, but some will find Dennett's tone blunt and some of his arguments offensive. For example, comparisons of religions with infectious organisms, though apt in light if Dennett's memetic

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<sup>325</sup> Ibid.

analysis, will doubtlessly offend many. *This offense is likely in part a result of the very shielding of religion from critique that Dennett opposes.*<sup>326</sup>

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In his article, “Holy Communion,” Richard Norman chastises Dennett for criticizing the specific unfounded and inhumane beliefs of those whose otherwise humanist predilections might prove useful in collectively combatting the numerous problems facing humanity as a whole. He writes:

We have problems enough in the world. The threats of climate change, global poverty, war and repression and intolerance can never be countered unless we are prepared to work together on the basis of a shared humanity. Simplistic generalizations about religion don’t help. In Dawkins’s terminology, that means working with the “moderates” to counter the “extremists”, but it’s actually more complicated than that. Some of our allies against creationism may be deeply prejudiced against gays. Some of the best people working to combat global poverty may be Catholic anti-abortionists. Some of the Muslim allies we need to counter Islamist violence may have deeply sexist attitudes to women. It all demonstrates what a deeply contradictory phenomenon religion is. But we know that. And if religion is so contradictory, that’s probably because human beings are a deeply contradictory species.<sup>327</sup>

Leaving aside for the moment that this is a quintessentially immoral and ultimately self-defeating argument, what Norman seems to be suggesting is that we overlook certain flaws in our would-be allies so that we can tap into their ideological zealotry in other areas. Such a policy amounts to an acceptance of the proverbial “deal with the devil” mentality in which we knowingly partner with those who are moderate or accepting towards one group or cause and ignore their otherwise extremist and intolerant position(s), not to mention those poor individuals whom we are tacitly allowing to suffer

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<sup>326</sup> Paul W. Graves, “Review: Breaking the Spell, by Daniel Dennett,” *Oakland Journal* (Winter 2007 Edition): 136, emphasis mine, accessed 22 August 2016, [http://www2.oakland.edu/oujournal/files/12breaking\\_the\\_spell.pdf](http://www2.oakland.edu/oujournal/files/12breaking_the_spell.pdf).

<sup>327</sup> Richard Norman, “Holy Communion,” *The New Humanist*, 5 November 2007, accessed 22 August 2016, <https://newhumanist.org.uk/articles/1623/holy-communion>.

as a result of our own disregard for their wellbeing. Such a policy could never result in the sort of “shared humanity” to which Norman supposedly aspires.

Perhaps human beings are an intrinsically contradictory species, but a resigned acceptance of that reality, such as that proposed by Norman, is unlikely to offer any insight into this fact, nor does it allow for the emergence of any truly universal action to overcome it. For instance, arguing that the fight against poverty might be better waged in concert with those whose medieval views on reproductive rights are themselves a large contributing factor to the existence of poverty is to add insult to injury to those he supposedly desires to help. The same could be said of a critique of creationism espoused by those who would still see same-sex couples marginalized within their ostensibly more scientific and inclusive view of humanity. In much the same way, I would argue that one cannot hope to counter Islamist violence by continuing to exercise or excuse it against half the human race. Such action is not a means to an end for lessening the suffering of others; rather, it constructs an ideological shield to shelter and encourage it. What Dennett understands (and Norman seemingly does not) is that in order for a “shared humanity” to ever emerge, we must first be willing to delve deeper into our common experiences than an automatic, yet mutually incompatible, respect for irreconcilable doctrine can allow. Or as Tony Houston explains:

Dennett’s point about religion being a “worthy alternative” rather than a “sacred cow” (p. 300) was the idea that most resonated with me from this book. As a humanist concerned with social and economic justice, I am open to alliances with interfaith groups, but not to extolling faith as a virtue. Atheists engaged in interfaith activism will have to confront this dilemma. The problem is that the word “interfaith” communicates a faith-in-faith message and a gratuitous marginalization of atheists. Dennett is perhaps the most persuasive of the Four Horsemen because he is not easily dismissed on the grounds of stridency. Dennett carefully avoids straw-man arguments, as a good philosopher should. He even prefaces his more



pointed indictments of religion with a preemptive apology of sorts. These passages read like a friend about to tell you an uncomfortable truth about yourself.<sup>328</sup>

Or as Dennett himself once said in an interview with Julian Baggini:

Think of how horrible it would be to have to go around and tell people they had been taken in by Bernie Madoff. Think of the pain of learning that you've been made a complete fool of by Bernie Madoff. Do we have to tell those people? Yes. Do we really? Well, yeah, they've lost everything and we have to tell them and no matter how we tell them they're going to feel rotten. Now why isn't it like that?"<sup>329</sup>

Why, indeed?

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In the article, "Getting the Arguments for God Wrong," the anonymous Remonstrant (i.e. Dutch Protestant) author, in reference to Dennett's concise dismissal of the ontological argument for God's existence, writes:

Notice this interesting caveat at the end of his, less than half a page, critique:

"Unless you have a taste for mathematics and theoretical physics on the one hand, or the niceties of scholastic logic on the other, you are not apt to find any of this compelling, or even fathomable."  
Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, p.242.

I don't understand it therefore it's wrong! Well, it almost sounds like it.

Dennett avoids directly misrepresenting the ontological argument but his treatment goes no further than pointing to Gaunilo's objection (although modified from an island to an ice-cream sundae) but, of course, he does not mention any of the many responses made to Gaunilo's objection. The most famous modern philosopher who has contended for the veracity of

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<sup>328</sup> Tony Houston, "Book Review: 'Breaking the Spell,'" Humanists of Rhode Island, 18 January 2013, accessed 22 August 2016, <http://www.humanistsri.com/2013/01/book-review-breaking-spell.html>.

<sup>329</sup> Daniel Dennett, in Julian Baggini's "Dan Dennett and the New Atheism," *The Philosopher's Magazine Online*, March 2010, accessed 23 August 2016, <http://www.philosophersmag.com/index.php/tpm-mag-articles/14-interviews/31-dan-dennett-and-the-new-atheism>.

the ontological argument (Alvin Plantinga) is, not surprisingly, completely ignored.<sup>330</sup>

But let us examine Plantinga's version of the argument to determine whether Dennett's decision to omit it from his discussion was warranted or not. On his website *reasonablefaith.com*, William Lane Craig addresses this very issue, via a Q & A session with a writer named Kamal. In his letter to Professor Craig, Kamal writes:

In his version of the argument, Plantinga conceives of God as a being which is "maximally excellent" in every possible world. Plantinga takes maximal excellence to include such properties as omniscience, omnipotence, and moral perfection. A being which has maximal excellence in every possible world would have what Plantinga calls "maximal greatness." So Plantinga argues:

1. It is possible that a maximally great being exists.
2. If it is possible that a maximally great being exists, then a maximally great being exists in some possible world.
3. If a maximally great being exists in some possible world, then it exists in every possible world.
4. If a maximally great being exists in every possible world, then it exists in the actual world.
5. If a maximally great being exists in the actual world, then a maximally great being exists.
6. Therefore, a maximally great being exists.<sup>331</sup>

After having a discussion with one of his own instructors who stated that "I recall a professor of mine saying once that every philosopher sooner or later comes to the conclusion that the proof is right, but we don't know how, and later comes to the

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<sup>330</sup> "Getting the Arguments for God Wrong." A Remonstrant's Ramblings (blog), 24 April 2014, accessed 23 August 2016, <https://aremonstrantsramblings.wordpress.com/2014/04/24/getting-the-arguments-for-god-wrong/>.

<sup>331</sup> In William Lane Craig's "Misunderstanding the Ontological Argument," ReasonableFaith.org, 23 January 2012, accessed 23 August 2016, <http://www.reasonablefaith.org/misunderstanding-the-ontological-argument>.

conclusion that the proof is wrong, but we don't know why," Kamal asks Professor Craig for his opinion. His response follows. I would ask that, as you read it, you consider Dennett's original criticism of the argument.<sup>332</sup> Craig writes:

I'm afraid that your professor is mostly incorrect in what he says, Kamal. Your prof errs in thinking that the ontological argument goes back earlier than Anselm and in thinking that Anselm's version is the best version of the argument. As Plantinga (as well as Leibniz) has explained, Anselm's version needs reformulation; moreover, Plantinga's version is not susceptible to your prof's objections.

For example, his objection to (2) is based upon an apparent unfamiliarity with possible worlds semantics. To say that some entity exists in a possible world is just to say that such an entity possibly exists. It isn't meant that the entity actually exists somewhere. Look again at my explanation: "To say that God exists in some possible world is just to say that there is a possible description of reality which includes the statement 'God exists' as part of that description." Only if that description is true will the entity, in this case God, actually exist. So (2) is definitionally true.

Again, (3) is virtually definitionally true. A maximally great being is one that has, among other properties, necessary existence. So if it exists in one world, it exists in all of them! In that sense, such a being is different than contingent beings, which exist in only some possible worlds. A unicorn, for example, exists in some possible world, but not in all of them, for its existence is possible but not necessary. So your prof is right that there is something special, not about a maximally excellent being (which, you'll recall, is defined to be a being which is all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-good), but about a maximally great being, which is defined as a being which has maximal excellence in every possible world. If such a being exists in any world, that is to say, if it is possible that such a being exists, then it exists in every possible world, including the actual world.

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<sup>332</sup> On pages 241-2 of *Breaking the Spell*, Dennett writes: "Ever since Immanuel Kant in the eighteenth century, there has been a widespread – but by no means unanimous – conviction that you can't prove the existence of *anything* (other than an abstraction) by sheer logic. You can prove that *there* is a prime number larger than a trillion, and that *there* is a point at which the lines bisecting the three angles of any triangle all meet, and *there* is a 'Godel sentence' for every Turing machine that is consistent and can represent the truths of arithmetic, but you can't prove that something that has effects in the physical world exists except by methods that are at least partly empirical. There are those who disagree, and continue to champion updated versions of Anselm's Ontological Argument, but the price they pay (willingly, one gathers) for their access to purely logical proof is a remarkably bare and featureless intentional object. Even if a *Being greater than which nothing can be conceived* has to exist, as their arguments urge, it is a long haul from that specification to a Being that is merciful or just or loving – unless you make sure to define it that way from the outset, introducing anthropomorphism by a dodge that will not persuade the skeptics, needless to say. Nor – in my experience – does it reassure the faithful."

Logic doesn't falter here. It all hangs on whether you think that (1) is true. (2)-(5) are true whether or not (1) is true. But if all the premises are true, the conclusion logically follows.<sup>333</sup>

I would suggest that, in light of this pseudo-intellectual non-explanation and scholastic sleight of hand, Dennett's original critique surely stands.

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Finding little with which to quibble in the heart of Dennett's argument, David Sloan Wilson is left to argue that it is Dennett's proposed solution to the problem that is ultimately misguided:

His primary recommendation is universal religious education. If only religious believers could be introduced to the full panoply of religious belief, they would become less deluded about their own. I doubt that this policy would have a meaningful impact on the worldwide problems associated with religion. In America, for example, fundamentalist religions are immersed in a larger cultural milieu teeming with "memes" from secular life and other religions. Like a cell maintaining osmotic pressure, a given religion is designed to pump out contrary memes and maintain an internal environment containing the appropriate memes. Elsewhere in the world, does Dennett really believe that we'll solve the problems of the Middle East (for example) by teaching the Palestinians about Judaism and the Israelis about Islam? His policy recommendation might be well-meaning, but it is likely to be ineffective.<sup>334</sup>

But rather than countermanding Dennett's proposal, I would actually argue that Wilson has just inadvertently endorsed it. For instance, when he rightly claims that "In America, for example, fundamentalist religions are immersed in a larger cultural milieu teeming with "memes" from secular life and other religions," he is confirming Dennett's point, which is that passing familiarity and misinformation regarding other faiths is likely to prove insufficient in breaking the spell of one's own. Comparable engaged study, on the

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<sup>333</sup> Craig, "Misunderstanding the Ontological Argument."

<sup>334</sup> David Sloan Wilson, "The New Atheism as a Stealth Religion: Five Years Later," The Evolution Institute, 2016, accessed 23 August 2016. <https://evolution-institute.org/article/the-new-atheism-as-a-stealth-religion-five-years-later/>.

other hand, which is what Dennett is actually proposing, would quite reasonably produce distinctly different results. And as for Wilson's remarks concerning the Israelis and Palestinians, whose conflict (though geographically rooted) is inescapably religious in nature,<sup>335</sup> I would argue that increased knowledge of one another's ideological/political positions (not to mention the mutual human suffering that results from their respective reluctance to moderate them) would likely produce a moment of humanitarian empathy in their otherwise incessant infighting. And while such knowledge alone is unlikely to result in a cessation of hostilities, I would contend that no such ceasefire could ever hope to hold without explicitly addressing such underlying and deeply-held convictions as are professed on both sides of the ideological divide.<sup>336</sup>

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Like Wilson, Darren Hynes and Bernard Wills are equally unconvinced of the viability of Dennett's religious education proposal. They, however, view it not as naïve or ineffectual, but rather as duplicitous and ultimately self-serving. They write:

Working out Dennett's political program turns out to be a bit of a challenge. Nowhere does he mention the problem of the role of religion in democracy, but his whole philosophical discussion seems to be predicated on that question. His account in chapter 11 of the political consequences of his new science is a masterpiece of evasion. Read one way, it says almost nothing. Dennett would have us (somehow) build liberal schools in the Islamic world, teach the world's religions to children in a biologically informed way, and take careful thought about the hormones of young Chinese men deprived of wives by the one-child policy. There is hardly anything more specific than this. Yet Dennett conveys his real intention in the metaphors he uses and the irrelevant digressions with which he peppers his work. He will give the reader ample hints about what he is too

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<sup>335</sup> Their disagreements concerning control of Jerusalem and the various Jewish and Islamic holy sites it contains confirms this.

<sup>336</sup> Compromise may indeed be possible, as joint Israeli-Palestinian polls as recently as 2011 suggest, but all peace initiatives heretofore proposed – such as the so-called “Clinton Parameters” in 2003 – have each contained specific suggestions for assigning stewardship and safeguarding access to the holy sites of each faith within the confines of Jerusalem. It is naïve to think that any subsequent proposals which do not take such religious concerns into account would ever prove themselves venerable or viable.

tactful or too fearful to openly say, that religious believers in general are the greatest threat to our future and that evolutionary naturalism ought to be the public philosophy in advanced democratic countries and if possible elsewhere too, to whatever extent it is practical to enforce it. Dennett's political vision embraces at very least the rule of a philosophy, if not the rule of philosophers. Political authority is founded in truth, and truth is what he claims to possess. If one likes, one may call this Darwinian theocracy.<sup>337</sup>

Detailing precisely how this Darwinian theocracy might ultimately be made manifest,

Hynes and Wills continue:

Nothing could be easier than to draw an authoritarian political agenda from this "memetic" science of religion. It is a perfect and disturbing fit for projects like the war on terror and the profiling of Muslim citizens. After all, if your Muslim neighbour is, as Dennett says he might well be, the carrier of a toxic parasite that controls his actions, shouldn't your reaction be to quarantine him? Where does one put a man infested with a bad meme but in an institution? Now, we do not know for sure whether this meme has some beneficial properties, for science has yet to tell us, but until we have determined this question, is it not better to be safe than sorry? After all, this meme could acquire an atomic weapon, and then what would we do? This is where Dennett's reduction of culture to nature, his reduction of agency to mechanism starts to have real-world consequences. Its implied theoretical dehumanization of a visible class of people coincides with an actual real-world dehumanization going on even as he writes. I do not know what Dennett thinks of the war on terror, but he has (wittingly or not) penned the perfect justification for it. At very best, this bespeaks an astonishing political innocence.<sup>338</sup>

In other words, Hynes and Wills are arguing that Dennett's principle reason for wishing to break the spell of religion is so that he can cast a Darwinian doppelganger in its place.

Rather than wishing to educate and enlighten his fellow human beings, as he claims,

Dennett secretly seeks to indoctrinate or imprison them, but only after having realized

Plato's long anticipated dream of *The Republic*, and ordained himself its first Philosopher

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<sup>337</sup> Darren Hynes and Bernard Wills, "Politicizing Biology: Daniel Dennett's *Breaking the Spell*, Part II," *Toronto Journal of Theology* 27, 2 (2011): 242-243. DOI: 10.3138/tjt.27.2.235.

<sup>338</sup> *Ibid*, 243-244.

King. Never mind that Dennett never implies anything of the sort in his book,<sup>339</sup> or that the work is itself intended as an inoculation of sorts against the type of unreasoned paranoia exhibited by religious fanatics, and isolationists of every stripe, not to mention ostensibly sophistic philosophers such as Hynes and Wills themselves. After all, we need not continually quarantine those who have become infected if a workable vaccine or widespread immunization initiative can be developed and disseminated to counteract the virulent meme, gene, or contagion in the first place.

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Nevertheless, Armin Geertz echoes Hynes' and Will's criticism, arguing that Dennett's only actual concern is personal economic gain. He writes:

There is the question, of course, of priorities. But I argue that Dennett's priorities are wrong. If he had dropped a hundred pages or so of rhetoric, he could have produced a more respectable treatise. As it stands now, everyone will be disappointed: The general (more or less religious) public will be turned off by the rhetoric and hostility, the professional community of comparative religion will definitely be turned off by the arrogance and ignorance, the cognitive scientists of religion will be turned off by the lack of depth and the religious fanatics won't read it anyway. In fact, I bet that a large number of conservative congregations across the U.S. have already been given explicit instructions not to read the book. The politicians will only be irritated and might even consider him to be a dangerous liberal. "Brights" will become a term of mockery. Well, at least the book will sell because Dennett is a big name. So someone will gain from it.<sup>340</sup>

That said, Geertz goes on to accuse Dennett of an underlying political motivation as well.

He continues:

Dennett is dealing with a topic that is of the utmost importance to the study of religion, namely its evolution. No science worthy of its name can

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<sup>339</sup> Even the most cursory examination of the passage to which Hynes and Wills are referring (on pages 327-8) will confirm this.

<sup>340</sup> Armin Geertz, "How Not to Do the Cognitive Science of Religion Today: A Reading of Daniel Dennett," read at the "Seminar on Daniel C. Dennett, Breaking the Spell," hosted by the Laboratory on Theories of Religion, Core Area Research Project on Religion, Cognition and Culture, May 23, 2006, Faculty of Theology, University of Aarhus, Denmark, 12.

ignore issues of origin and evolution. But it must be done with sophistication and fairness to those who have seriously thought about these matters before we did. Standing on the shoulders of giants, we catch fleeting glimpses of the future. We also look back with the knowledge of hindsight. We think bigger because we stand taller. We learn more because we have been diligent students. We advance science because many have done the groundwork for us already. Because of all this industry and the many sacrifices that it has cost us, we need to hold on to the sobering thought that misrepresentation in the name of politics, however well-meaning it may be, is not the way forward.<sup>341</sup>

So even if Dennett is not the avaricious charlatan that Geertz apparently believes him to be, his treatise can never accomplish what it sets out to do until it first recognizes the efforts (both insightful and erroneous) of those who came before him. A sound point; this is undoubtedly why every astronomy course invariably begins with a discussion of the signs of the zodiac and every introductory chemistry course first discusses the various merits and methods of alchemical “science.” By acknowledging the established and dismissing the indefensible, Dennett is merely upholding the basic principles and practices upon which the entire (scientific) discipline is founded: the importance of the empirical precedent, the verifiability of the scientific method, and a consideration of the numerous theories that have thus far survived its scrutiny. To suggest otherwise is, quite simply, absurd.

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In his article, “Dangerous Ideas: The Spell of Breaking the Spell,” Lars Albinus betrays a fundamental misunderstanding not only of Dennett’s primary purpose, but also of Darwin’s theory of natural selection which serves to underwrite it. He argues:

As scientists we should not commit ourselves to any untimely respect towards the feelings of religious people, and maybe Dennett is right that many of them, let alone the entire human race, would in fact be better off not believing in a dangerously zealous and commanding God, but the

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<sup>341</sup> Ibid.



spell-breaking proceedings of natural science may not be the only way, nor even an adequate way, of disenchantment in this regard. Proceeding from the self-understanding of our own values, including various scientific enterprises, we may actually show quite another and very relevant kind of respect in taking people's beliefs seriously as beliefs, that is, understanding their internal coherence, their symbolic structure, their ways of self-reflection in theological traditions. This is also part of science, albeit a human science. This is certainly not to say that every belief has to be respected or credited as rational on its own accounts, quite the contrary, and I am not arguing that we should want to exclude contributions from cognitive, neural or socio-biological sciences. However, since the fall of metaphysics we should give up the dream of finding one closed set of criteria that enable us to own the whole package of truth. Such a dream will probably always turn out to be a dream, and people will be right to turn it down as such, choosing their own traditional stories instead. Let's try to put the theory of natural selection in its proper place. It is a theory, neither verifiable, nor falsifiable, but at best a plausible theory, a good guess, that may point to eye-opening mechanisms in the way in which certain ideas, including religious ones, transmit themselves through the medium of the culturally adapted brain. It cannot sufficiently explain culture, let alone religion, it cannot even explain itself as a theory. If you really think it can, if you are convinced of its all-encompassing truth, it has simply succeeded in becoming a new spellbinder, and then it will become just another dangerous idea just like those it tries to put to the test.<sup>342</sup>

In other words, Albinus is arguing that Dennett is right that religion is undeserving of the level of respect it receives from all other avenues of human thought and interaction.

What's more, he concedes that the natural sciences will undoubtedly have a part to play in dislodging religion from its lofty and unmerited perch far above the killing fields it has long helped to create and to sustain. However, Darwin's theory is ultimately only that: a theory. And if you believe otherwise, then you are just as credulous as those who have bought into some religious ideology of one sort or another. Contrary to Albinus, I would argue that the distance between the proper places of natural selection and religion in the

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<sup>342</sup> Lars Albinus, "Dangerous Ideas: The Spell of Breaking the Spell," read at the "Seminar on Daniel C. Dennett, Breaking the Spell," hosted by the Laboratory on Theories of Religion, Core Area Research Project on Religion, Cognition and Culture, May 23, 2006, Faculty of Theology, University of Aarhus, Denmark, 11.

explanatory landscape of human culture can be measured by the mountain of evidence produced in support of the former that towers over the vacuous chasm that has resulted from the absence of such evidence for the latter. To suggest the two simply reside on opposing peaks is to misrepresent the geographical realities of both and to chart a most unrealistic course between them.

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In his article, “Delusions and Dark Materials: New Atheism as Naïve Atheism and its Challenge to Theological Education,” Michael W. DeLashmutt argues:

New Atheism, or naïve atheism, is a cultural product which is produced and consumed by well educated, middle class elites (principally in North America) who pursue this ideology less as a result of considered argumentation than as a consequence of their preconceived sensibilities. As Tina Beattie notes, “In their representation of religion, these popular authors owe their success partly to the fact that in a media-driven culture the opinions of the famous often count for more than the thoughtful analyses of those who have studied a subject and are aware of its complexities and ambiguities” (Beattie 2008: 8).<sup>343</sup>

In other words, the main reason Dennett (and Dawkins and Harris and Hitchens) have been successful is because we live in a culture that reveres and respects celebrity to the point of obsession. Not only does this equate uninformed popular opinion with logical and scientifically-sound erudition (such as when Jack Miles suggested that Dennett discuss Howard Stern’s atheistic opinions), it is also a way of summarily dismissing the contents of the New Atheists’ arguments without ever having been made to actually wrestle with them. However, after chastising them for their populist appeal, DeLashmutt paradoxically states that

the medium through which New Atheism has chosen to voice its critique (television, film, popular academic writing, and advertising) further

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<sup>343</sup> Michael W. DeLashmutt, “Delusions and Dark Materials: New Atheism as Naïve Atheism and its Challenge to Theological Education,” *The Expository Times* Vol. 120, No. 12 (2009): 589.

undermines the seriousness of the argument. This is not to say that it is unimportant for scholars of religion to attend to popular cultural forms such as television, film, popular books or advertising. Popular culture is the *agora* of the postmodern world; it is the place where deeply held values are expressed and discussed. However, when entering into an analysis of this postmodern *agora* we must learn to read the more diffuse and subtle influences of the cultural milieu. To this end, there is something to be learned about the nature of the New Atheist message which can only be discovered by attending explicitly to the medium of its communication. New Atheism is part of popular culture, and though atheism itself may be grounded in nuanced, complex, and frankly persuasive reasoning; the popular writings of Dawkins, Hitchens, Harris, and indeed Pullman, seem more orientated towards persuasion through saturation than persuasion through argumentation. As such, I suggest that we scrutinize the implications of pre-critical naïve atheism within the cultural milieu, rather than engaging in a polemical and apologetic debate.<sup>344</sup>

So, in order to engage with the New Atheists, DeLashmutt hypocritically suggests that theologians must be willing to simultaneously “stoop to their level” and engage with a popular audience. This is obviously why his final suggestion, that they “scrutinize the implications of pre-critical naïve atheism within the cultural milieu, rather than engaging in a polemical and apologetic debate,” becomes so important. For surely the New Atheists have demonstrated that traditional theology and apologetics simply cannot contend with modern-day science and reason. And since it cannot compete on an equal playing field, DeLashmutt concedes that it may be necessary to change the rules. He explains:

Speaking as a theologian, I find it exceedingly helpful to advise students to think about the knowledge of God (insofar as it is possible to assert such a thing) as epistemologically distinct from other forms of knowledge. My colleague Mike Higton has written a wonderful description of theological knowledge in his undergraduate textbook, *Christian Doctrine*. He distinguishes the knowledge of God from internal sense perception (e.g. hunger), relational knowledge (e.g. partners and friends), and objective knowledge (e.g. the green chair in my office) and encourages his reader to think about the knowledge of God in terms of one’s knowledge of a piece of music (Higton 2008: 47–48). Knowing a piece of music, as a

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<sup>344</sup> Ibid., 589-590.

musician, involves a kind of participation within the music. Yet as anyone who has ever played an instrument can attest to, it is often a kind of knowledge which is exceedingly difficult to pin down. When I used to play the piano, I would at times lose myself in playing a well-rehearsed song. Yet as soon as I would reflect upon the task of playing the piece, I would often cease being able to play the very same music that only seconds before had felt second-nature. Like the knowledge of music, the knowledge of God is a kind of knowledge which can never be fully attained. It is a knowledge which always leads to a kind of unknowing. The epistemological humility of Christian theology is in stark contrast to the sense of epistemological limitlessness asserted by the New Atheists.<sup>345</sup>

In other words, religious knowledge is distinct from and cannot be held to the same standards as philosophical or scientific knowledge. It must instead remain ethereal and incomplete. If only Dennett and the other New Atheists would consider religious knowledge “in terms of one’s own knowledge of a piece of music,” instead of as the various truth claims about cosmology, human nature, and institutional morality that it actually is, then surely they would discover the error of their ways and realize that truth often exists beyond the bounds of empirical evidence. Of course, DeLashmutt’s “epistemological humility” only extends as far as the Christian scriptures and traditions will allow. For in combatting the so-called naiveté of the New Atheism, DeLashmutt would certainly never go so far as to entertain the validity of Islamic or Buddhist knowledge (of God or anything else). To do so would undermine his entire case, and in the process, effectively endorse Dennett’s.

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But to those who would argue that Dennett is simply replacing the religious spell with the scientific, or that his secular vision, if realized, would not allow for the emotional wants and needs of his fellow human beings, I will allow Dennett himself to

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<sup>345</sup> Ibid., 591.

respond. In an article entitled, “Thank Goodness,” composed whilst recuperating from a life-threatening heart operation in 2006, he writes:

Do I worship modern medicine? Is science my religion? Not at all; there is no aspect of modern medicine or science that I would exempt from the most rigorous scrutiny, and I can readily identify a host of serious problems that still need to be fixed. That’s easy to do, of course, because the worlds of medicine and science are already engaged in the most obsessive, intensive, and humble self-assessments yet known to human institutions, and they regularly make public the results of their self-examinations. Moreover, this open-ended rational criticism, imperfect as it is, is the secret of the astounding success of these human enterprises. There are measurable improvements every day.<sup>346</sup>

And when again accused of substituting one bad metaphor for another, Dennett explains just how distinct the notions of *God* and *goodness* are in practice, if not also in principle, and thus why he wishes to thank the latter (and *not* the former) for his recovery.<sup>347</sup> He writes:

The best thing about saying thank goodness in place of thank God is that there really are lots of ways of repaying your debt to goodness – by setting out to create more of it, for the benefit of those to come. Goodness comes in many forms, not just medicine and science. Thank goodness for the music of, say, Randy Newman, which could not exist without all those wonderful pianos and recording studios, to say nothing of the musical contributions of every great composer from Bach through Wagner to Scott Joplin and the Beatles. Thank goodness for fresh drinking water in the tap, and food on our table. Thank goodness for fair elections and truthful journalism. If you want to express your gratitude to goodness, you can plant a tree, feed an orphan, buy books for schoolgirls in the Islamic world, or contribute in thousands of other ways to the manifest improvement of life on this planet now and in the near future.

Or you can thank God – but the very idea of repaying God is ludicrous. What could an omniscient, omnipotent Being (the Man Who has Everything?) do with any paltry repayments from you? (And besides, according to the Christian tradition God has already redeemed the debt for

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<sup>346</sup> Daniel Dennett, “Thank Goodness,” Edge.org, 2 November 2006, accessed 23 August 2016, [https://www.edge.org/conversation/daniel\\_c\\_dennett-thank-goodness](https://www.edge.org/conversation/daniel_c_dennett-thank-goodness).

<sup>347</sup> This is, of course, in reference to the numerous passages in the Old and New Testaments that equate God with *light* (1 John 1:5), *love* (1 John 4:8 and 4:16), and/or *goodness* (Psalms 34:8 and 107:1, Matthew 19:17, Mark 10:18, Luke 18:19, etc.).

all time, by sacrificing his own son. Try to repay that loan!) Yes, I know, those themes are not to be understood literally; they are symbolic. I grant it, but then the idea that by thanking God you are actually doing some good has got to be understood to be just symbolic, too. I prefer real good to symbolic good.<sup>348</sup>

So shouldn't we all.

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<sup>348</sup> Dennett, "Thank Goodness."

## CHAPTER THREE: A TRUE DEVIL'S ADVOCATE: THE CONSCIENTIOUS CONTRARIANISM OF CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS

### Introduction

As the title of this chapter suggests, Christopher Hitchens was never one to shy away from controversy. In fact, he quite often (and quite deliberately) seemed to court it. As he once remarked, “Sit me down across a table with an ashtray and a bottle on it, and cue the other person to make an argument, and I am programmed by the practice of a lifetime to take a contrary position.”<sup>349</sup> Hence a contrarian by nature and a gadfly by choice, Hitchens made a career out of challenging the accepted wisdoms and time-honored traditions of the West, not to mention those whom he felt most espoused or best embodied them. As a journalist, social critic, and public intellectual extraordinaire, Hitchens often reserved his most savage critiques for those ideas and individuals deemed by society to be either incontrovertible or untouchable (or both). These include, but are hardly limited to, such idealized notions as capitalism and Christianity, and such persons as then-president and first lady Bill and Hillary Clinton (in 1999’s *No One Left to Lie To: The Values of the Worst Family*) as well as soon-to-be-saint Teresa (in 1995’s *The Missionary Position: Mother Teresa in Theory and Practice*).

While it is true that most of Hitchens’ personal attacks were aimed at those whom he felt exhibited either a cognitive ethical dissonance (as with Teresa) or a deliberately

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<sup>349</sup> Christopher Hitchens, “On the Limits of Self-Improvement, Part II,” *Vanity Fair*, December 2007, in Windsor Mann’s *The Quotable Hitchens* (Cambridge: De Capo Press, 2011), 76.

ingratiating hypocrisy (as with the Clintons), those assaults waged against what he perceived to be institutional injustices were almost always borne of a single all-consuming concern: the supplanting of individual freedom with coerced conformity. In this light, his critiques upon capitalism and Christianity can be considered as opposite sides of the same ideological coin, the former compelling competitive action, the latter unquestioned belief, and both as the only viable paths to prosperity (whether temporal or celestial). It is this assault upon freewill and the right to self-determination that most offended Hitchens' contrarian sensibilities, and it was these wrongs his writings most often sought to right. Such was undoubtedly his intention in *god is Not Great*.

However, unlike Dawkins' critique, Hitchens' inspirational ire was more firmly rooted in historical reality than in scientific theory, and his more worldly tone and plethora of anecdotal examples are evidence not only of this intention, but also of the depths of his implausibly-expansive intellect. What's more, unlike Dennett's analysis, Hitchens was utterly unconcerned with maintaining observer objectivity, achieving ideological consensus, or in cultivating a culture of mutual respect. *god is Not Great* was intended precisely as the diatribe many subsequent critics believe they are maligning it to be. Unsurprisingly, this resulted in the majority of the religious world's increased attention and incipient hostility towards the New Atheists falling squarely (and in some cases, solely) on Hitchens' physically round, yet intellectually broad Atlas-like shoulders... a burden he intended, anticipated, and was only too happy to bear.

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*So long as man remains free he strives for nothing so incessantly and so painfully as to find someone to worship. But man seeks to worship what is established beyond dispute, so that all men would agree at once to worship it. For these pitiful creatures are concerned not only to find what one or the other can worship, but to find something that*



*all would believe in and worship; what is essential is that all may be together in it. This craving for community of worship is the chief misery of every man individually and of all humanity from the beginning of time. For the sake of common worship they've slain each other with the sword. They have set up gods and challenged one another, "Put away your gods and come and worship ours, or we will kill you and your gods!" And so it will be to the end of the world, even when gods disappear from the earth; they will fall down before idols just the same.*<sup>350</sup>

### Part I: *god is Not Great*

In the opening chapter of his 2007 *god is Not Great*, Christopher Hitchens argues that "there still remain four irreducible objections to religious faith: that it wholly misrepresents the origins of man and the cosmos, that because of this original error it manages to combine the maximum of servility with the maximum of solipsism, that it is both the result and the cause of dangerous sexual repression, and that it is ultimately grounded on wish-thinking."<sup>351</sup> Unlike Dawkins (who sought simply to diagnose the delusion), and Dennett (who endeavored to break the spell), Hitchens enthusiastically and unapologetically seeks to embarrass the believer and embolden the skeptic. With characteristic vim and vitriol, he begins by distinguishing, once and for all, between the faithful flock and those birds of a decidedly different feather.

Here is the point, about myself and my co-thinkers. Our belief is not a belief. Our principles are not a faith. We do not rely solely upon science and reason, because these are necessary rather than sufficient factors, but we distrust anything that contradicts science or outrages reason. We may differ on many things, but what we respect is free inquiry, open mindedness, and the pursuit of ideas for their own sake. We do not hold our convictions dogmatically: the disagreement between Professor Stephen Jay Gould and Professor Richard Dawkins, concerning "punctuated evolution" and the unfilled gaps in post-Darwinian theory, is quite wide as well as quite deep, but we shall resolve it by evidence and reasoning and not by mutual excommunication.<sup>352</sup>

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<sup>350</sup> Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Constance Garnett (New York: The Lowell Press, 2009), 319.

<sup>351</sup> Christopher Hitchens, *god is Not Great* (New York: Twelve, 2007), 4.

<sup>352</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

In other words, Hitchens wishes, at the onset, to dispense with the notion that those of a more secular, scientific disposition are in any way beholden to the flappings and trappings of faith. Science, he argues, is indifferent to the whims and wishes of its practitioners in a way that religion never can be. And though routinely labeled as arrogant for its efforts, Hitchens maintains that proper science actually necessitates a sense of humility on the part of its participants and a commitment to falsifiability on the part of its hypotheses that are both woefully lacking in religion and the religiously-minded. Despite all their claims to the contrary, he states that it is the religious person whose superficially modest faith ultimately belies a belief in the incontestable truth of his tenets and to the singular importance of his personal role in the divine master plan. Of such individuals, Hitchens is blatantly dismissive. He holds that “the person who is certain, and who claims divine warrant for his certainty, belongs now to the infancy of our species. It may be a long farewell, but it has begun and, like all farewells, should not be protracted.”<sup>353</sup> And so it is with faith that Hitchens most wishes to quarrel, because he believes that it “is the foundation and origin of all arguments, because it is the beginning – but not the end – of all arguments about philosophy, science, history, and human nature. It is also the beginning – but by no means the end – of all disputes about the good life and the just city.”<sup>354</sup> In the chapters to follow, Hitchens will examine each of these arguments in detail, ultimately concluding that, for all its claims to health and happiness, in fact, “religion poisons everything.”

In Chapter Two, Hitchens identifies what he believes to be the principle problem with faith and the faithful.

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<sup>353</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>354</sup> Ibid., 12.

The level of intensity fluctuates according to time and place, but it can be stated as a truth that religion does not, and in the long run cannot, be content with its own marvelous claims and sublime assurances. It must seek to interfere with the lives of nonbelievers, or heretics, or adherents of other faiths. It may speak about the bliss of the next world, but it wants power in this one. This is only to be expected. It is, after all, wholly man-made. And it does not have the confidence in its own various preachings even to allow coexistence between different faiths.<sup>355</sup>

In an effort to demonstrate this, Hitchens recalls an encounter with religious broadcaster Dennis Prager, in which he was asked the following question: “I was to imagine myself in a strange city as the evening was coming on. Toward me I was to imagine that I saw a large group of men approaching. Now – would I feel safer, or less safe, if I was to learn that they were just coming from a prayer meeting?”<sup>356</sup> Hitchens responded: “Just to stay within the letter ‘B,’ I have actually had that experience in Belfast, Beirut, Bombay, Belgrade, Bethlehem, and Baghdad.”<sup>357</sup>

In Belfast, Hitchens saw “whole streets burned out by sectarian warfare between different sects of Christianity, and interviewed people whose relatives and friends have been kidnapped and killed or tortured by rival religious death squads, often for no other reason than membership of another confession.”<sup>358</sup> In Beirut, he witnessed the shortsightedness of an accommodationist attempt at sectarian governance, in which “the president by law had to be a Christian, usually a Maronite Catholic, the speaker of the parliament a Muslim, and so on. This never worked well, because it institutionalized differences of belief as well as of caste and ethnicity.”<sup>359</sup> He notes how the wars of religion that were eventually fought there also served to “introduce us to the beauties of

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<sup>355</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>356</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>357</sup> Ibid.

<sup>358</sup> Ibid.

<sup>359</sup> Ibid., 19.

suicide bombing,” undoubtedly referring to the 1983 Shiite attack against a U.S. Marine barracks in Lebanon.<sup>360</sup> Hitchens recalls how Bombay, formerly one of India’s most diverse and pluralistic of cities, ultimately succumbed to “Mr. Bal Thackeray and his Shiv Sena Hindu nationalist movement, who in the 1990s decided that Bombay should be run by and for his coreligionists, and who loosed a tide of goons and thugs onto the streets,” to ensure that it was so.<sup>361</sup>

In Belgrade, Hitchens remembers how the breakup of Yugoslavia and the wars that resulted from it, were couched in largely nationalist lingo, when in truth, the religious labels of Catholic (Croat), Orthodox (Serb), and Muslim (Bosnians) might have been more accurate. “But confessional terminology was reserved only for ‘Muslims,’ even as their murderers went to all the trouble of distinguishing themselves by wearing large Orthodox crosses over their bandoliers, or by taping portraits of the Virgin Mary to their rifle butts. Thus, once again, *religion poisons everything*, including our own faculties of discernment.”<sup>362</sup> In Bethlehem, Hitchens call to mind the traditional arguments against a two-state solution between Israel and Palestine, noting that

surely something so self-evident was within the wit of man to encompass? And so it would have been, decades ago, if the messianic rabbis and mullahs and priests could have been kept out of it. But the exclusive claims to god-given authority, made by hysterical clerics on both sides and further stoked by Armageddon-minded Christians who hope to bring on the Apocalypse (preceded by the death or conversion of all Jews), have made the situation insufferable, and put the whole of humanity in the position of hostage to a quarrel that now features the threat of nuclear war.<sup>363</sup>

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<sup>360</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>361</sup> Ibid.

<sup>362</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>363</sup> Ibid., 24-5.

In Baghdad, during the reign of Saddam Hussein, Hitchens insists that “those who regarded his regime as a ‘secular’ one are deluding themselves... at least since his calamitous invasion of Iran in 1979, which led to furious accusations from the Iranian theocracy that he was an ‘infidel,’ Saddam Hussein had decked out his whole rule – which was based in any case on a tribal minority of the Sunni minority – as one of piety and jihad.”<sup>364</sup> He concludes by saying “No, Mr. Prager, I have not found it a prudent rule to seek help as the prayer meeting breaks up. And this, as I told you, is only the letter ‘B.’ In all these cases, anyone concerned with human safety or dignity would have to hope fervently for a mass outbreak of democratic and republican secularism.”<sup>365</sup>

To these barbarous “B” examples, Hitchens adds the lamentable instances of the West’s cowardly desertion of Salman Rushdie in 1989 following the publication of *The Satanic Verses*, Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell’s ill-conceived explanation that 9/11 was “a divine judgment on a secular society that tolerated homosexuality and abortion,” and the eschatological hopes of many members of the American Religious Right that our most recent war in Iraq might spur us on to Armageddon.<sup>366</sup> The point of all this, Hitchens explains, is that in every case:

religion has been an enormous multiplier of tribal suspicion and hatred, with members of each group talking of the other in precisely the tones of the bigot. The Christians eat defiled pig meat and they and Jews swill poisonous alcohol. Buddhist and Muslim Sri Lankans blamed the wine-oriented Christmas celebrations of 2004 for the immediately following tsunami. Catholics are dirty and have too many children. Muslims breed like rabbits and wipe their bottoms with the wrong hand. Jews have lice in their beards and seek the blood of Christian children to add flavor and zest to their Passover matzos. And so it goes on.<sup>367</sup>

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<sup>364</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>365</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>366</sup> Ibid., 32-35.

<sup>367</sup> Ibid., 36.

In Chapter Three, “A Short Digression on the Pig; or, Why Heaven Hates Ham,” Hitchens offers his own hypothesis for the advent of the Judaic (and later, Islamic) prohibitions against consuming pork, as well as the medieval Christian tendency to employ pork consumption as a sort of conversion confirmation test. He suggests that

according to many ancient authorities, the attitude of early Semites to swine was one of reverence as much as disgust. The eating of pig flesh was considered as something special, even privileged and ritualistic. (This mad confusion between the sacred and the profane is found in all faiths at all times.) The simultaneous attraction and repulsion derived from an anthropomorphic root: the look of the pig, and the taste of the pig, and the dying yells of the pig, and the evident intelligence of the pig, were too uncomfortably reminiscent of the human. Porcophobia – and porcophilia – thus probably originate in a nighttime of human sacrifice and even cannibalism at which the “holy” texts often do more than hint. Nothing optional – from homosexuality to adultery – is ever made punishable unless those who do the prohibiting (and exact the fierce punishments) have a repressed desire to participate. As Shakespeare put it in *King Lear*, the policeman who lashes the whore has a hot need to use her for the very offense for which he plies the lash.<sup>368</sup>

In support of this supposition, Hitchens references both George Orwell’s *Animal Farm* (often banned in Muslim countries) and William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies*, in which the pig (or pig’s head on a stick, as the case may be) are metaphorically understood to represent the darker, more malevolent aspects of human nature. But whatever the reason for this love-hate relationship that seems to permeate all the monotheistic traditions, Hitchens wryly notes that “it would be merely boring and idiotic to wonder how the designer of all things conceived such a versatile creature and then commanded his higher-mammal creation to avoid it altogether or risk his eternal displeasure. But many otherwise intelligent mammals affect the belief that heaven hates ham.”<sup>369</sup>

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<sup>368</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>369</sup> Ibid., 38.

Chapter Four, “A Note on Health, to Which Religion Can Be Hazardous,”

enumerates the various ways in which (and the accompanying reasons why) religion so often sets itself opposed to the tools and practice of modern medicine. He describes the relationship between religion and medicine (as well as science) as:

always necessarily problematic and very often necessarily hostile. A modern believer can say and even believe that his faith is quite compatible with science and medicine, but the awkward fact will always be that both things have a tendency to break religion’s monopoly, and have often been fiercely resisted for that reason. What happens to the faith healer and the shaman when any poor citizen can see the full effect of drugs and surgeries, administered without ceremonies or mystifications? Roughly the same thing as happens to the rainmaker when the climatologist turns up, or to the diviner from the heavens when schoolteachers get hold of elementary telescopes.<sup>370</sup>

As evidence for this claim, Hitchens offers the recent African examples of Muslim condemnations of the polio vaccine (as a secret US-backed conspiracy to sterilize the faithful) in Nigeria in 2005, which resulted in the reemergence there of a previously vanquished disease, as well as the Catholic prohibitions against condom usage in Kenya, on the grounds that it was condoms themselves that transmitted the AIDS virus.<sup>371</sup>

But lest one believe such incidents are now confined to the third world, Hitchens goes on to remind us that while a vaccine to prevent the human papillomavirus (HPV) has been available for some time now in the United States, various elements within the Bush administration “oppose[d] the adoption of this measure on the grounds that it fails to discourage premarital sex. To accept the spread of cervical cancer in the name of god is no different, morally or intellectually, from sacrificing these women on a stone altar and thanking the deity for giving us the sexual impulse and then condemning it.”<sup>372</sup> He

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<sup>370</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>371</sup> Ibid., 45-6.

<sup>372</sup> Ibid., 48.

provides another example, in which a middle-aged mohel from New York, who happened to have herpes, inadvertently transmitted the illness to several small boys during the course of their circumcisions; two of the boys later died as a result. Hitchens incredulously recalls that, in the immediate aftermath, “Mayor [Michael] Bloomberg overrode the reports by distinguished Jewish physicians who had warned of the danger of the custom, and told his health care bureaucracy to postpone any verdict. The crucial thing, he said, was to be sure that the free exercise of religion was not being infringed.”<sup>373</sup>

Hitchens subsequently notes that “the relationship between physical health and mental health is now well understood to have a strong connection to the sexual function, or dysfunction. Can it be a coincidence, then, that all religions claim the right to legislate in matters of sex? The principal way in which believers inflict on themselves, on each other, and on nonbelievers, has always been their claim to monopoly in this sphere.”<sup>374</sup>

He offers the modern-day attitudes of Islam as both a prevalent and prurient example.

When I read the Koran, with its endless prohibitions on sex and its corrupt promise of infinite debauchery in the life to come: it is like seeing through the “let’s pretend” of a child, but without the indulgence that comes from watching the innocent at play. The homicidal lunatics – rehearsing to be genocidal lunatics – of 9/11 were perhaps tempted by virgins, but it is far more revolting to contemplate that, like so many of their fellow jihadists, they *were* virgins. Like monks of old, the fanatics are taken early from their families, taught to despise their mothers and sisters, and come to adulthood without ever having had a normal conversation, let alone a normal relationship, with a woman. This is disease by definition. Christianity is too repressed to offer sex in paradise – indeed it has never been able to evolve a tempting heaven at all – but it has been lavish in its promise of sadistic and everlasting punishment for sexual backsliders, which is nearly as revealing in making the same point in a different way.<sup>375</sup>

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<sup>373</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>374</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>375</sup> Ibid., 55.



In closing the chapter, Hitchens reminds us once again how frequently religious belief is accompanied by a morbid desire to witness the world's end, or at least the parts and peoples of it that have already "fallen." This, he justifies by the self-satisfied, almost gleeful "I told you so's" that pour from the lips of many believers in the aftermath of a hurricane, earthquake, volcano, or tsunami (events which they believe to be likewise causally linked to the events of Noah and the Flood or Sodom and its destruction). He does, however, believe that it is yet possible to counter such nihilistic, self-destructive tendencies, and offers the following anecdote in service of that cause.

There is a celebrated story from Puritan Massachusetts in the late eighteenth century. During a session of the state legislature, the sky suddenly became leaden and overcast at midday. Its threatening aspect – a darkness at noon – convinced many legislators that the event so much on their clouded minds was imminent. They asked to suspend business and go home to die. The speaker of the assembly, Abraham Davenport, managed to keep his nerve and dignity. "Gentlemen," he said, "either the Day of Judgment is here or it is not. If it is not, there is no occasion for alarm and lamentation. If it is, however, I wish to be found doing my duty. I move, therefore, that candles be brought." In his own limited and superstitious day, this was the best that Mr. Davenport could do. Nonetheless, I second his motion.

In Chapter Five, Hitchens sets out to prove that "The Metaphysical Claims of Religion are False." He states his case openly.

Religion comes from the period of human prehistory where nobody – not even the mighty Democritus who concluded that all matter was made from atoms – had the smallest idea what was going on. It comes from the bawling and fearful infancy of our species, and is a babyish attempt to meet our inescapable demand for knowledge (as well as for comfort, reassurance, and other infantile needs).<sup>376</sup>

This is not to say, however, that Hitchens sees no value in studying the individual and collective efforts of those who labored under such undesirable conditions, only that we

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<sup>376</sup> Ibid., 64.

should not attempt to similarly confine ourselves to the necessarily limited horizons of their own worldviews. As he explains:

The scholastic obsessives of the Middle Ages were doing the best they could on the basis of hopelessly limited information, ever-present fear of death and judgment, very low life expectancy, and an audience of illiterates. Living in often genuine fear of the consequences of error, they exerted their minds to the fullest extent then possible, and evolved quite impressive systems of logic and the dialectic.... they tried their hardest to square the circle. We have nothing much to learn from *what* they thought, but a great deal to learn from *how* they thought.<sup>377</sup>

What separates us from those pliable and pitiable scholastics is, quite simply, the works of Newton, Darwin, and Einstein (among others), which have collectively given us a plausible and demonstrable alternative theory of knowledge, writ large, both for ourselves and for the cosmos in which we reside. It is for this reason, Hitchens believes, that religions now focus on more conciliatory measures than on cosmological proofs. “Many religions now come before us with ingratiating smirks and outspread hands, like an unctuous merchant in a bazaar. They offer consolation and solidarity and uplift, competing as they do in a marketplace. But we have a right to remember how barbarically they behaved when they were strong and were making an offer that people could not refuse.”<sup>378</sup> In other words, what these men of science and learning have given us is choice. And as Hitchens explains “the end of god-worship discloses itself at the moment, which is somewhat more gradually revealed, when it becomes *optional*, or only one among many possible beliefs. For the greater part of human existence, it must always be stressed, this ‘option’ did not really exist.”<sup>379</sup> But thanks to the efforts of many sincere agnostics and disavowed skeptics (the majority of whom we shall never know), that

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<sup>377</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>378</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>379</sup> Ibid.

choice now exists, and thus more than half of the battle is already won. He concludes with the hopeful message that once “religion’s monopoly has been broken, it is within the compass of any human being to see these evidences and proofs as the feeble-minded inventions that they are.”<sup>380</sup>

In Chapter Six, “Arguments from Design,” Hitchens attempts to demonstrate his claims from the previous chapter. Taking a decidedly different turn from Dawkins and Dennett, Hitchens seeks to ridicule the notion of design from a more observational, commonsense perspective. Therefore, rather than arguing against design, he grants creationists their assumption (albeit solely for show) and then argues for either complete incompetence or callous indifference on the part of the supposed designer. He states that

the stamp of the lowly origin is to be found in our appendix, in the now needless coat of hair that we still grow (and then shed) after five months in the womb, in our easily worn-out knees, our vestigial tails, and the many caprices of our urinogenital arrangements. Why *do* people keep saying, “God is in the details”? He isn’t in ours, unless his yokel creationist fans wish to take credit for his clumsiness, failure, and incompetence. Those who have yielded, not without a struggle, to the overwhelming evidence of evolution are now trying to award themselves a medal for their own acceptance of defeat. The very magnificence and variety of the process, they now wish to say, argues for a directing and originating mind. In this way they choose to make a fumbling fool of their pretended god, and make him out to be a tinkerer, an approximator, and a blunderer, who took eons of time to fashion a few serviceable figures and heaped up a junkyard of scrap and failure meanwhile. Have they no more respect for the deity than that?<sup>381</sup>

This he compounds by noting that

molecular biology shows us that approximately 98 percent of all the species that have ever appeared on earth have lapsed into extinction. There have been extraordinary periods of life explosion, invariably succeeded by great “dyings out.” In order for life to take hold at all on a cooling planet, it had first to occur with fantastic profusion. We have a micro-glimpse of this in our little human lives: men produce infinitely more seminal fluid

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<sup>380</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>381</sup> Ibid., 85.

than is required to build a human family, and are tortured – not completely unpleasantly – by the urgent need to spread it all over the place or otherwise get rid of it. (Religions have needlessly added to the torture by condemning various simple means of relieving this presumably “designed” pressure.) The exuberant teeming variety of insect life, or sparrow or salmon or codfish life, is a titanic waste that ensures, in some but not all cases, that there will be enough survivors.<sup>382</sup>

In other words, some design! Rather than seeking to give all the credit and ensuing glory to god for this magnanimous enterprise, Hitchens argues that the faithful should instead be searching for someone or something else upon which to place blame for this capricious boondoggle. But hyperbole aside, Hitchens argues that it is precisely because of science that no such efforts are any longer required.

Skepticism and discovery have freed them from the burden of having to defend their god as a footling, clumsy, straws-in-the-hair mad scientist, and also from having to answer distressing questions about who inflicted the syphilis bacillus or mandated the leper or the idiot child, or devised the torments of Job. The faithful stand acquitted on that charge: we no longer have any need of a god to explain what is no longer mysterious.<sup>383</sup>

In Chapters Seven and Eight, Hitchens highlights some of the more abhorrent examples of Old and New Testament immorality. Though much of the ground he covers has already been traversed by either Dawkins or Dennett, Hitchens does provide a few unique footprints of his own along the path. His discussion of the Decalogue is one such instance. After a rather Carlinesque riff on the numerous repetitions, inconsistencies, and impossible commands contained within, Hitchens returns to his central thesis:

It would be harder to find an easier proof that religion is manmade. There is, first, the monarchical growling about respect and fear, accompanied by a stern reminder of omnipotence and limitless revenge, of the sort with which a Babylonian or Assyrian emperor might have ordered the scribes to begin a proclamation. There is then a sharp reminder to keep working and only to relax when the absolutist says so. A few crisp legalistic reminders follow, one of which is commonly misrendered because the

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<sup>382</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>383</sup> Ibid., 96.

original Hebrew actually says “thou shalt do no murder.” But however little one thinks of the Jewish tradition, it is surely insulting to the people of Moses to imagine that they had come this far under the impression that murder, adultery, theft, and perjury were permissible.<sup>384</sup>

Hitchens subsequently introduces the reader to a term he wishes to revive:

“antitheism.” Although originally defined simply as active opposition toward (instead of the mere omission of) religious practice and belief, Hitchens here intends it to possess an emancipatory quality as well. He explains that “we ought to be glad that none of the religious myths has any truth to it, or in it. The Bible may, indeed does, contain a warrant for trafficking in humans, for ethnic cleansing, for slavery, for bride-price, and for indiscriminate massacre, but we are not bound by any of it because it was put together by crude, uncultured human mammals.”<sup>385</sup> He goes on to say that

moreover, the context is oppressively confined and local. None of these provincials, or their deity, seems to have any idea of a world beyond the desert, the flocks and herds, and the imperatives of nomadic subsistence. This is forgivable on the part of the provincial yokels, obviously, but then what of their supreme guide and wrathful tyrant? Perhaps he was made in their image, even if not graven?<sup>386</sup>

In his discussion of the New Testament, Hitchens once again demonstrates the inconsistencies of scripture, this time by illustrating the utter incompatibility, both with logic and with each other, of the so-called canonical gospels. He scoffs that

the scribes cannot even agree on the mythical elements: they disagree wildly about the Sermon on the Mount, the anointing of Jesus, the treachery of Judas, and Peter’s haunting “denial.” Most astonishingly, they cannot converge on a common account of the Crucifixion or the Resurrection. Thus, the one interpretation that we simply have to discard is the one that claims divine warrant for all four of them. The book on which all four may possibly have been based, known speculatively to

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<sup>384</sup> Ibid., 99.

<sup>385</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>386</sup> Ibid., 107.

scholars as “Q,” has been lost forever, which seems distinctly careless on the part of the god who is claimed to have “inspired” it.<sup>387</sup>

He goes on to note that several quintessentially Catholic doctrines, such as the “Immaculate Conception” and the “Assumption,” become necessary only under the guise of fulfilling Old Testament prophecies and shoring up otherwise weak points in the narrative. (After all, how could Jesus have come to redeem the so-called original sin of Adam, if he too was tainted by it? Or, if Mary did not suffer the blemish of original sin, thanks to the doctrine of the “Immaculate Conception,” then shouldn’t she have been exempt from the agonies of death? Thus, the need for the “Assumption.”) He also reminds us of their recent arrival on the scene: 1852 and 1950, respectively.

Hitchens then broadens his previous discussion by elaborating on the (comparatively) recently discovered Coptic Gospel of Judas, which claims that Judas did not betray Jesus (as is canonically claimed), but was rather a willing and key participant in the plot allowing Jesus to fulfill his divinely-inspired purpose. Though as unreliable and unfalsifiable as its accepted counterparts, Hitchens nevertheless argues that “it makes infinitely more sense than the everlasting curse placed on Judas for doing what somebody had to do, in this otherwise pedantically arranged chronicle of a death foretold. It also makes infinitely more sense than blaming the Jews for all eternity.”<sup>388</sup>

Of course, one could claim that neither of these criticisms of the New Testament necessarily leads to evil. For this, Hitchens returns to the illustrious words of C.S. Lewis, who once claimed that to consider Jesus to be merely a moral exemplar and mortal teacher of ethics is to utterly miss the point of his existence. In *Mere Christianity*, Lewis writes:

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<sup>387</sup> Ibid., 112.

<sup>388</sup> Ibid., 113.

That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic – on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg – or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman and something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense.<sup>389</sup>

Thus, it seems that there can be no middle ground. Either one accepts the literal, historical, and moral truth of the scriptures, or else one cannot partake of the earthly or heavenly rewards they promise. This, Hitchens argues, is precisely the sort of abject absolutism and false dichotomy that leads to intolerance in the first place. That said, Hitchens concludes with praise of a sort for his ideological opponent. “I do credit him with honesty and with some courage. Either the Gospels are in some sense literal truth, or the whole thing is essentially a fraud and perhaps an immoral one at that. Well, it can be stated with certainty, and on their own evidence, that the Gospels are most certainly not literal truth.”<sup>390</sup> No doubt Lewis would disagree, but his statement does seem to preclude the sort of highly selective readings of scripture in which many modern day adherents seek to indulge.

In Chapter Nine, Hitchens enumerates the various ideological and textual links between the Old and New Testaments with those of the supposedly last revelation (apologies to Joseph Smith): the Koran. He notes that “quite rightly, Islam effectively disowns the idea that it is a new faith, let alone a cancellation of the earlier ones, and it uses the prophecies of the Old Testament and the Gospels of the New like a perpetual crutch or fund, to be leaned on or drawn upon. In return for this derivative modesty, all it

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<sup>389</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>390</sup> Ibid., 120.

asks is to be accepted as the absolute and final revelation.”<sup>391</sup> What is it, then, that has not allowed for the same sort of textual criticism and scholarly investigations to occur in Islam as they have in the Jewish and Christian traditions?

Hitchens identifies two principal difficulties: the problem with translation and the absence of a reformation. As he explains, these difficulties are substantially compounded as a result of their mutually-detrimental and reciprocally-limiting relationship.

The written Arabic language has two features that make it difficult for an outsider to learn: it uses dots to distinguish consonants like “b” and “t,” and in its original form it had no sign or symbol for short vowels, which could be rendered by various dashes or comma-type marks. Vastly different readings even of Uthman’s version were enabled by these variations. Arabic script itself was not standardized until the later part of the ninth century, and in the meantime the undotted and oddly voweled Koran was generating wildly different explanations of itself, as it still does.<sup>392</sup>

Thus, a definitive translation, much less a non-Arabic translation, seems unlikely.

This problem is greatly enlarged by the fact that the Muslim faith has never undergone anything remotely similar to the Christian Protestant Reformation, initiated by Martin Luther and his 95 Theses in 1517. Hitchens notes that, “there would have been no Protestant Reformation if it were not for the long struggle to have the Bible rendered into the vernacular and the priestly monopoly therefore broken.”<sup>393</sup> He also reminds us that “not only did Islam begin by condemning all doubters to eternal fire, but it still claims the right to do so in almost all of its dominions, and still preaches that these same dominions can and must be extended by war. There has never been an attempt in any age to challenge or even investigate the claims of Islam that has not been met with extremely

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<sup>391</sup> Ibid., 133.

<sup>392</sup> Ibid., 131.

<sup>393</sup> Ibid., 125.



harsh and swift repression.”<sup>394</sup> In other words, where the right to challenge or question does not exist, reform is unlikely to follow.

Unable to help himself, Hitchens concludes the chapter by referencing the work of Christophe Luxenburg, whose 2000 *Syriac-Aramaic Version of the Koran* argued that a great many words within the Koran are themselves not of Arabic origin. As Hitchens gleefully notes, “his most celebrated example concerns the rewards of a ‘martyr’ in paradise: when retranslated and redacted the heavenly offering consists of sweet white raisins rather than virgins.”<sup>395</sup> Here, one cannot help but be reminded of the old Catholic joke which likewise deals with issues of (mis)translation: “We missed the ‘r’! We missed the ‘r’! It says celebrate, not celibate!”

In Chapter Ten, Hitchens examines the discrepancies of both size and scope between miracles supposedly witnessed in the ancient and modern worlds. To begin, he returns to the writings of David Hume, who once defined a miracle as “a disturbance or interruption in the expected and established course of things.”<sup>396</sup> As to the likelihood and frequency of their existence, Hume memorably suggested that

if you seem to witness such a thing, there are two possibilities. The first is that the laws of nature have been suspended (in your favor). The second is that you are under a misapprehension, or suffering from a delusion. Thus the likelihood of the second must be weighed against the likelihood of the first. If you only hear a report of the miracle from a second or third party, the odds must be adjusted accordingly before you can decide to credit a witness who claims to have seen something that you did not see. And if you are separated from the “sighting” by many generations, and have no independent corroboration, the odds must be adjusted still more drastically.<sup>397</sup>

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<sup>394</sup> Ibid.

<sup>395</sup> Ibid., 137.

<sup>396</sup> Ibid., 141.

<sup>397</sup> Ibid.

What's more, Hitchens reminds us that, even if we are willing to suspend our skepticism and grant their (possible) existence, "miracles in any case do not vindicate the truth of the religion that practices them: Aaron supposedly vanquished Pharaoh's magicians in an open competition but did not deny that they could perform wonders as well."<sup>398</sup>

With all this in mind, Hitchens proceeds to examine the central miracle of the Christian faith, Christ's resurrection, as well as the surrounding claims which simultaneously suggest that it both did and did not occur. Assuming that it did, Hitchens recalls that Matthew 27:52-53 says that at the moment of Jesus' death, "the graves were opened; and many bodies of the saints which slept arose, and came out of the graves after his resurrection, and went into the holy city, and appeared unto many." Hitchens claims that "this supposed frequency of resurrection can only undermine the uniqueness of the one by which mankind purchased forgiveness of sins. And there is no cult or religion before or since, from Osiris to vampirism to voodoo, that does not rely on some innate belief in the 'undead.'"<sup>399</sup> Therefore, even if Christ's resurrection could be proven to be true (which it can't), that in and of itself would hardly suffice in unilaterally supporting his claims to divinity. Hitchens then notes that many believers both inside and out of the Christian tradition contradictorily claim that the resurrection never actually took place. For instance, there are Muslims who maintain that Jesus was raised bodily into heaven, while an unfortunate doppelganger was sacrificed in his place. There are also Christians who believe that the resurrection is meant to be understood allegorically, and thus do not affirm the miracle in the truest sense of the word. Both alternative views would also be a problem, as Hitchens explains: "the action of a man who volunteers to die for his fellow

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<sup>398</sup> Ibid., 142.

<sup>399</sup> Ibid., 143.

creatures is universally regarded as noble. The extra claim not to have ‘really’ died makes the whole sacrifice tricky and meretricious. (Thus, those who say ‘Christ died for my sins,’ when he did not really ‘die’ at all, are making a statement that is false in its own terms.)”<sup>400</sup>

Of course, the faithful rarely make such bold claims today. In fact, many modern-day miracles seem rather tawdry and banal when compared to the awe-inspiring biblical marvels of times gone by. To illustrate and to hint at the reason(s) why this is so, Hitchens examines two recent “miracles,” and asks that we consider Hume’s criteria for examining them as we go along. For the first of these, Hitchens recounts that in 2001, he was invited by the Vatican to attend (and testify against) the beatification of Mother Teresa. Hitchens, however notes that “even as they appeared to be asking me this in good faith, their colleagues on the other side of the world were certifying the necessary ‘miracle’ that would allow the beatification (prelude to full canonization) to go forward.”<sup>401</sup> The miracle, as Hitchens describes it, revolves around the supposedly-spontaneous healing of a uterine tumor after an amulet formerly owned by Mother Teresa was placed (by two nuns) upon the abdomen of the afflicted woman, one Monica Besra. Despite the fact that three of Ms. Besra’s doctors, as well as her own husband, all subsequently claimed that she had been cured by “ordinary, regular medical treatment,” general belief and acceptance of the miracle as first reported endured.<sup>402</sup> As Hitchens prophetically noted:

there will soon come a day in Rome when a vast and solemn ceremony will proclaim the sainthood of Mother Teresa, as one whose intercession can improve upon medicine, to the entire world. Not only is this a scandal

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<sup>400</sup> Ibid.

<sup>401</sup> Ibid., 147.

<sup>402</sup> Ibid.

in itself, but it will further postpone the day when Indian villagers cease to trust quacks and fakirs. In other words, many people will die needlessly as a result of this phony and contemptible “miracle.”<sup>403</sup>

As it turns out, that day was September 4, 2016.<sup>404</sup>

In closing, Hitchens examines the merits of a miracle more close to home. He explains:

When the debris had eventually settled on Ground Zero, it was found that two pieces of mangled girder still stood in the shape of a cross, and much wondering comment resulted. Since all architecture has always involved crossbeams, it would be surprising only if such a feature did *not* emerge. I admit that I would have been impressed if the wreckage had formed itself into a Star of David or a star and crescent, but there is no record of this ever having occurred anywhere, even in places where local people might be impressed by it. And remember, miracles are supposed to occur at the behest of a being who is omnipotent as well as omniscient and omnipresent. One might hope for more magnificent performances than ever seem to occur.<sup>405</sup>

Why does god no longer part the waters, cause the sun to stand still, or strike down the firstborn of his chosen people’s oppressors? Hitchens believes the answer is simple.

Those “miracles” occurred a time when knowledge of the cosmos was limited and the scientific enterprise did not yet exist to challenge the inherent provinciality of such claims. Today’s miracles must necessarily be more limited in scope and trivial in appearance. Anything more could never withstand the piercing eye of reason and the eviscerating critique of science.

In Chapter Eleven, “‘The Lowly Stamp of Their Origin’: Religion’s Corrupt Beginnings,” Hitchens suggests that “if we watch the process of a religion in its

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<sup>403</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>404</sup> Juliet Perry and Tim Hume, “Mother Teresa Declared a Saint Before Huge Crowds in the Vatican,” CNN.com, 4 September 2016, accessed 5 September 2016, <http://www.cnn.com/2016/09/04/europe/mother-teresa-canonization/>. (For more on the life, works, and so-called “miracles” of Mother Teresa, please see Hitchens’ *The Missionary Position*.)

<sup>405</sup> Hitchens, *god is Not Great*, 149-50.

formation, then we can make some assumptions about the origins of those religions that were put together before most people could read.”<sup>406</sup> For his examples, Hitchens chooses three modern manifestations of the religious impetus – the various Melanesian “cargo cults” of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the incredible story of the “infant phenomenon” evangelical preacher Marjoe Gortner, and the spurious foundations and scandalous history of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints – and then seeks to discover, for each, the “man (or motivation) behind the curtain.”

Though instances of the so-called cargo cult can be traced back to the mid-nineteenth century, perhaps the most well-known expressions took place during World War II. First the Japanese, and then subsequently the Allied forces who opposed them, crisscrossed the Melanesian islands, bringing with them an absolute cornucopia of “Western” aircraft, weapons, and supplies. The Melanesians, unaccustomed to such modern marvels, understandably attached divine attributes to the objects and to those individuals who brought them. As a result, they began to construct rudimentary runways, complete with bamboo communication antennae and firelight flares, with the intention of attracting or otherwise enticing the airplanes to land, bringing with them a new consignment of wonders from the gods. After the frequency of such encounters diminished with the end of the war, religions and rituals began to develop in their absence, each prophesying the return of an aviator savior of sorts, complete with a material reward for their continued reverence and faith in the interim. Hitchens notes that each time one of these cargo cults emerged, it was always in the hope of attaining some level of measurable wealth and bodily comfort (whether in this life or the next). This, he believes, is a desire that likewise drives many western faiths to this day.

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<sup>406</sup> Ibid., 155.

Some people may be insulted at even the suggestion of a comparison here, but are not the holy books of official monotheism absolutely dripping with material yearning and with admiring – almost mouthwatering – descriptions of Solomon’s wealth, the thriving flocks and herds of the faithful, the rewards for a good Muslim in paradise, to say nothing of many, many lurid tales of plunder and spoils? Jesus, it is true, shows no personal interest in gain, but he does speak of treasure in heaven and even of “mansions” as an inducement to follow him. Is it not further true that all religions down the ages have shown a keen interest in the amassment of material goods in the real world?<sup>407</sup>

In support of this claim, Hitchens examines “the mind-numbing story of Marjoe Gortner.”<sup>408</sup> Almost from birth, young Marjoe (1944- ) was systematically physically and emotionally abused by his parents, effectively brainwashed into believing he was divinely ordained to preach in the Pentecostal Church. From the ages of four to sixteen, Marjoe and his parents traveled around the United States, participating in countless revivals and other religious festivals, grossing no less than three million dollars for their efforts. Following a period of disillusionment and bitterness toward his parents, Marjoe returned to his former hucksterism in his early twenties, until a crisis of conscience caused him to reevaluate his life and to atone for his sins, as it were, by allowing a film crew to document his farewell tour on the revivalist circuit in 1971. In the resultant film, *Marjoe*, the young evangelist exposes every tool and trick of his duplicitous trade, showing how easily he is able to separate the salvation seekers from their own hard-earned savings, with the ethereal promise of greater rewards to follow. As Hitchens notes:

One knew, of course, that the whole racket of American evangelism was just that: a heartless con run by the second-string characters from Chaucer’s “Pardoner’s Tale.” (You saps keep the faith. We’ll just keep the money.) And this is what it must have been like when indulgences were openly sold in Rome, and when a nail or a splinter from the Crucifixion could fetch a nice price in any flea market in Christendom. But to see the crime exposed by someone who is both a victim and a profiteer is

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<sup>407</sup> Ibid., 158.

<sup>408</sup> Ibid.

nonetheless quite shocking even to a hardened unbeliever. After such knowledge, what forgiveness? The film *Marjoe* won an Academy Award in 1972, and has made absolutely no difference at all.<sup>409</sup>

Of course, there are many who will argue that neither the cargo cults of Melanesia nor the lamentable life of Marjoe Gortner are truly indicative of the more mainstream faiths and their supposedly low origins that Hitchens desires to expose. In response to this, he turns his attentions to a religion whose similarly recent inception has not served as a stumbling block to general acknowledgement and acceptance: Mormonism.

Comparing it to Islam, Hitchens maintains that the Mormon religion:

was founded by a gifted opportunist who, despite couching his text in openly plagiarized Christian terms, announced that “I shall be to this generation a new Muhammad” and adopted as his fighting slogan the words, which he thought he had learned from Islam, “Either the Al-Koran or the sword.” He was too ignorant to know that if you use the word *al* you do not need another definite article, but then he did resemble Muhammad in being able only to make a borrowing out of other people’s bibles.<sup>410</sup>

Anticipating an immediate objection, Hitchens continues:

Mormon partisans sometimes say, as do Muslims, that this cannot have been fraudulent because the work of deception would have been too much for one poor and illiterate man. They have on their side two useful points: if Muhammad was ever convicted in public of fraud and attempted necromancy we have no record of the fact, and Arabic is a language that is somewhat opaque even to the fairly fluent outsider. However, we know the Koran to be made up in part of earlier books and stories, and in the case of Smith it is likewise a simple if tedious task to discover that twenty-five thousand words of the Book of Mormon are taken directly from the Old Testament... (The great Mark Twain famously referred to it as “chloroform in print,” but I accuse him of hitting too soft a target, since the book does actually contain “The Book of Ether.”)<sup>411</sup>

To drive the final nail into the coffin, Hitchens examines Mormonism’s troubled history with the American Civil Rights movement, noting that Smith and his followers

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<sup>409</sup> Ibid., 160.

<sup>410</sup> Ibid., 161.

<sup>411</sup> Ibid., 164.

were staunch opponents of abolitionism and equality, both before and well after the events of the Civil War unfolded. He concludes:

If anything proves the human manufacture of religion, it is the way that the Mormon elders resolved this difficulty. Confronted by the plain words of one of their holy books and the increasing contempt and isolation that it imposed upon them, they did as they had done when their fondness for polygamy would have brought federal retribution upon god's own Utah. They had still another "revelation" and, more or less in time for the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1965, had it divinely disclosed to them that black people were human after all.<sup>412</sup>

In Chapter Twelve, "A Coda: How Religions End," Hitchens recounts the story of Sabbatai Sevi, a seventeenth century mystic whose self-messianic claims in many ways rival those of Jesus of Nazareth, and whose life and teachings almost resulted in a similarly religious revolution. Hitchens notes that "all the elements of a true (and a false) prophecy were present. Sabbatai's devotees pointed to his equivalent of John the Baptist, a charismatic rabbi called Nathan of Gaza. Sabbatai's enemies described him as an epileptic and a heretic, and accused him of violating the law."<sup>413</sup> The Ottoman authorities, like the Roman ones of old, recognized that, were Sabbatai "to claim kingdom over all kings, let alone to claim a large tract of their province in Palestine, then he was a secular challenger as well as a religious one." Needing an intimate betrayal to round out the narrative, Hitchens cheekily remarks that "the script was almost complete when a former disciple of Sabbatai's, one Nehemiah Kohen, came to the grand vizier's headquarters in Edirne and denounced his former master as a practitioner of immorality and heresy."<sup>414</sup> Here, however, the story takes a rather surprising turn.

Summoned to the vizier's palace, and allowed to make his way from prison with a procession of hymn-singing supporters, the Messiah was

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<sup>412</sup> Ibid., 167.

<sup>413</sup> Ibid., 170.

<sup>414</sup> Ibid., 171.



very bluntly asked if he would agree to a trial by ordeal. The archers of the court would use him as a target, and if heaven deflected the arrows he would be adjudged genuine. Should he refuse, he would be impaled. If he wished to decline the choice altogether, he could affirm himself to be a true Muslim and be allowed to live. Sabbatai Zevi did what almost any ordinary mammal would have done, made the standard profession of belief in the one god and his messenger and was awarded a sinecure.<sup>415</sup>

Thus, unlike Jesus, Sabbatai did not opt for a martyr's death. He chose instead the more sensible, if less dramatic, option: conversion to Islam and exile into oblivion. And as Hitchens notes, many of his followers didn't quite know what to make of this deviation in script. "There were those who refused to believe in his conversion or apostasy. There were those who argued that he had only become a Muslim in order to be an even greater Messiah. There were those who felt that he had only adopted a disguise. And of course there were those who claimed that he had risen into the heavens."<sup>416</sup> What is the point of this digression, one might ask. Hitchens explains: "had [Sabbatai] been put to death, we should be hearing of it still, and of the elaborate mutual excommunications, stonings, and schisms that [his] followers would subsequently have engaged in."<sup>417</sup> It is therefore in the "almost" and the "might-have-been" religions that one can most clearly witness the tragic, yet predictable, tract to which such messianic faiths are invariably tethered.

In Chapter Thirteen, Hitchens attempts to answer the age-old question, "Does Religion Make People Behave Better?" In keeping with his episodic style, Hitchens offers a comparison between Martin Luther King, Jr. and the man for whom he was named, both of whom claimed to have been spurred on to action by the tenets and teachings of their respective faiths. Hitchens argues that

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<sup>415</sup> Ibid.

<sup>416</sup> Ibid., 172.

<sup>417</sup> Ibid.

when Dr. King's namesake nailed his theses to the door of Wittenberg Cathedral in 1517 and stoutly announced, "Here I stand, I can do no other," he set a standard for intellectual and moral courage. But Martin Luther, who started his religious life being terribly frightened by a near-miss lightning strike, went on to become a bigot and a persecutor in his own right, railing murderously against Jews, screaming about demons, and calling on the German principalities to stamp on the rebellious poor. When Dr. King took a stand on the steps of Mr. Lincoln's memorial and changed history, he too adopted a position that had effectually been forced upon him. But he did so as a profound humanist and nobody could ever use his name to justify oppression or cruelty. He endures for that reason, and his legacy has very little to do with his professed theology. No supernatural force was required to make the case against racism.<sup>418</sup>

In other words, like the ideology upon which it was based, Dr. King's movement managed to transcend the confines of religion and speak to all of humanity, not just an elect few.

As counterexamples, Hitchens recalls the horrific events of Rwanda in 1994 and Uganda in 2005, the latter of which he was an eyewitness to. As a nation, Rwanda boasts one of the highest percentage of Christians, per capita, in all of Africa (roughly 93%). However, the events of 1994 demonstrate that such religiosity in no way predicts morality. In an attack reminiscent of the Nazi's Final Solution, the Hutu majority systematically massacred no less than 70% of their Tutsi brethren, on the grounds that it was the Tutsi who were solely to blame for the various misfortunes that had befallen the nation. And just like in Germany, the Church's actions and attitude throughout the carnage are decidedly mixed. Though some individuals did speak out against the atrocities, the official position of both the Catholic Church and many of the protestant sects ranged from tacit approval to active support, employing an inverted version of the Hamitic racial theory as a justification for their actions. Even the foundational document of the genocidal movement came to be known as the "Hutu Ten Commandments." And

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<sup>418</sup> Ibid., 180.

so in this instance as well as that of Dr. King and his namesake, to conflate religiosity with morality, or more specifically to believe the latter to be entirely dependent upon the former, is to completely miss the point.

This is also true in Uganda, where the ostensibly Christian “Lord’s Resistance Army,” and its fanatical leader, Joseph Kony, have waged a decades-long war against apostates and infidels with the ultimate intention of creating a sort of Christian caliphate in the region, where the Ten Commandments would serve a similar function to Sharia law in Islam. Describing how children were kidnapped, drugged, and forced to take part in atrocities, all the while being indoctrinated by the charismatic Kony, Hitchens states that “he baptized by oil and water, held fierce ceremonies of punishment and purification, and insured his followers against death. His was a fanatical preachment of Christianity.”<sup>419</sup> What do these admittedly extreme examples demonstrate? Hitchens answers:

At a minimum, this makes it impossible to argue that religion causes people to behave in a more kindly or civilized manner. The worse the offender, the more devout he turns out to be. It can be added that some of the most dedicated relief workers are also believers (though as it happens the best ones I have met are secularists who were not trying to proselytize for any faith). But the chance that a person committing the crimes was “faith-based” was almost 100 percent, while the chances that a person of faith was on the side of humanity and decency were about as good as the odds of a coin flip. Extend this back into history, and the odds become more like those of an astrological prediction that just happens to come true. This is because religions could never have got started, let alone thrived, unless for the influence of men as fanatical as Moses or Muhammad or Joseph Kony, while charity and relief work, while they may appeal to tenderhearted believers, are the inheritors of modernism and the Enlightenment. Before that, religion was spread not by example but as an auxiliary to the more old-fashioned methods of holy war and imperialism.<sup>420</sup>

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<sup>419</sup> Ibid., 189.

<sup>420</sup> Ibid., 192.

In Chapter Fourteen, Hitchens pointedly argues that “There is No Eastern Solution.” In it, he notes that “an extraordinary number of people appear to believe that the mind, and the reasoning faculty – the only thing that divides us from our animal relatives – is something to be distrusted and even, as far as possible, dulled. The search for nirvana, and the dissolution of the intellect, goes on. And whenever it is tried, it produces a Kool-Aid effect in the real world.”<sup>421</sup> After recounting the socio-religious wars in Sri Lanka, in which the Hindu Tamil separatists are fighting against the Buddhist Sinhalese majority, Hitchens admits that “conceivably, some readers of these pages will be shocked to learn of the existence of Hindu and Buddhist murderers and sadists. Perhaps they dimly imagine that contemplative easterners, devoted to vegetarian diets and meditative routines, are immune to such temptations?”<sup>422</sup>

The point, of course, is not to rehash the same arguments from Chapter Thirteen. It is simply to demonstrate that

a faith that despises the mind and the free individual, that preaches submission and resignation, and that regards life as a poor and transient thing, is ill-equipped for self-criticism. Those who become bored by conventional “Bible” religions, and seek “enlightenment” by way of the dissolution of their own critical faculties into nirvana in any form, had better take a warning. They may think they are leaving the realm of despised materialism, but they are still being asked to put their reason to sleep, and to discard their minds along with their sandals.<sup>423</sup>

In Chapter Fifteen, “Religion as an Original Sin,” Hitchens examines a number of commonly-held western religious tenets and traditions – such as the doctrine of eternal reward and/or punishment, the doctrine of impossible tasks and rules, the doctrine of blood sacrifice, and the doctrine of atonement – and then asks whether or not such

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<sup>421</sup> Ibid., 198.

<sup>422</sup> Ibid., 199.

<sup>423</sup> Ibid., 204.

practices originated *with* religion and whether or not they can be extinguished while the flame of faith yet burns. After briefly reviewing the notion of ancestral sin (in which descendants must continue to answer and atone for the supposed crimes of their forbears), Hitchens proceeds to dismiss as distinctly *immoral* the ideas of Augustinian “Original Sin,” and the subsequent Christian condemnation of the Jews as “Christ killers.” Why, then, has the practice endured? He explains, “the key to its reluctance is easy to find. If you once admit that the descendants of Jews are not implicated, it becomes very hard to argue that anyone else not there present was implicated, either. One rent in the fabric, as usual, threatens to tear the whole thing apart.”<sup>424</sup>

Like Professor Dawkins before him, Hitchens also discounts the Orwellian notion of “thoughtcrime,” in which the imagining of a sin is considered the same as the physical committing of that sin. One is held to such a high standard that failure (and the ensuing feelings of guilt that accompany it) is all but assured... hence the need for a savior. Similarly, Hitchens contends that the command to love one’s neighbor as oneself is equally impossible. As he explains:

Humans are not so constituted as to care for others as much as themselves: the thing simply cannot be done (as any intelligent “creator” would well understand from studying his own design). Urging humans to be superhumans, on pain of death and torture, is the urging of terrible self-abasement at their repeated and inevitable failure to keep the rules.<sup>425</sup>

But perhaps Hitchens’ most intriguing argument revolves around the notion of blood sacrifice, particularly as it relates to the supposed necessity of Jesus’ crucifixion as an atoning for the sin(s) of Adam. Here, his words are especially cutting.

We cannot, like fearridden peasants of antiquity, hope to load all our crimes onto a goat and then drive the hapless animal into the desert. Our

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<sup>424</sup> Ibid., 210.

<sup>425</sup> Ibid., 213.

everyday idiom is quite sound in regarding “scapegoating” with contempt. And religion is scapegoating writ large. I can pay your debt, my love, if you have been imprudent, and if I were a hero like Sidney Carton in *A Tale of Two Cities* I could even serve your term in prison or take your place on the scaffold. Greater love hath no man. But I cannot absolve you of your responsibilities. It would be immoral of me to offer, and immoral of you to accept. And if the same offer is made from another time and another world, through the mediation of middlemen and accompanied by inducements, it loses all its grandeur and becomes debased into wish-thinking or, worse, a combination of blackmailing with bribery.<sup>426</sup>

Essentially, Hitchens is arguing that the circumstances surrounding the unnecessary (near)sacrifice of Isaac by his father Abraham and the “absolutely necessary” sacrifice of Jesus by his heavenly father, is ultimately a distinction without a difference. Whether it is one’s faith being tested or one’s redemption being purchased, the idea that another living creature can be substituted and sacrificed in one’s place is the epitome of immorality and thus hardly a practice to praise and certainly not one to repeat.

In Chapter Sixteen, Hitchens asks “Is Religion Child Abuse?” Because it in many ways echoes Richard Dawkins’ sentiments in Chapter Nine of *The God Delusion*, my treatment of it here will be comparatively brief and intended solely to supplement, and not revisit, those previous remarks. Focusing on the decidedly sinful aspects of religion, such as the constant specter of eternal damnation, the monstrous act of genital mutilation, and the unconditional proscriptions against abortion, masturbation, and sexual expression in all its extramarital forms, Hitchens ultimately agrees with Professor Dawkins that such wickedness is infinitely compounded by the fact that it is visited most frequently upon the young. He states:

If religious instruction were not allowed until the child had attained the age of reason, we would be living in a quite different world. Faithful parents are divided over this, since they naturally hope to share the wonders and delights of Christmas and other fiestas with their offspring

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<sup>426</sup> Ibid., 211.

(and can also make good use of god, as well as of lesser figures like Santa Claus, to help tame the unruly) but mark what happens if the child should stray to another faith, let alone another cult, even in early adolescence. The parents will tend to proclaim that this is taking advantage of the innocent. All monotheisms have, or used to have, a very strong prohibition against apostasy for just this reason.<sup>427</sup>

In other words, even the religious recognize the abusiveness of faith-based indoctrination, so long as it is the faith of another upon which they are focusing. Unfortunately, such insight seems to fail when concentrated on a more introspected image. More's the pity, since this failure and its consequences are not theirs alone to bear, but instead result in the continuation of this all-too-tragic cycle of abuse.

Expanding upon the latter half of Dawkins' Seventh Chapter in *The God Delusion*, Hitchens' seventeenth chapter examines "The Last-Ditch Case Against Secularism." At the onset, he observes that "the examples most in common use – those of the Hitler and Stalin regimes – show us with terrible clarity what can happen when men usurp the role of gods. When I consult with my secular and atheist friends, I find that this has become the most common and frequent objection that they encounter from religious audiences. The point deserves a detailed reply."<sup>428</sup> To begin, he notes sardonically what such an objection implicitly entails: "that people of faith now seek defensively to say that they are no worse than fascists or Nazis or Stalinists. One might hope that religion had retained more sense of its dignity than that."<sup>429</sup> Hitchens then proceeds to demonstrate how the so-called secularist regimes of the twentieth century are simply theocracies of a different sort, repurposing more than rewriting the old religious playbook.

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<sup>427</sup> Ibid., 220.

<sup>428</sup> Ibid., 230.

<sup>429</sup> Ibid.

Quoting from George Orwell's 1946 essay, "The Prevention of Literature," Hitchens writes that "from the totalitarian point of view, history is something to be created rather than learned. *A totalitarian state is in effect a theocracy*, and its ruling caste, in order to keep its position, has to be thought of as infallible."<sup>430</sup> This applies not only to the regimes of Hitler and Stalin, but also to "Calvin's Geneva" (who silenced any and all opposition to his rule) and to current government of North Korea (whose various leaders have likewise done the same). After echoing Dawkins comments that "those who invoke 'secular' tyranny in contrast to religion are hoping that we will forget two things: the connection between the Christian churches and fascism, and the capitulation of the churches to National Socialism," Hitchens notes that "the North Korean state was born at about the same time that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was published, and one could almost believe that the holy father of the state, Kim Il Sung, was given a copy of the novel and asked if he could make it work in practice."<sup>431</sup> He ultimately concludes that "the alternative to these grotesque phenomena is not the chimera of secular dictatorship, but the defense of secular pluralism and of the right not to believe or be compelled to believe. This defense has now become an urgent and inescapable responsibility: a matter of survival."<sup>432</sup>

Hitchens begins Chapter Eighteen, "The Resistance of the Rational," by repeated that oft-quoted phrase from Psalms 14: "The fool has said in his heart, there is no God." He goes on to boast that "all that we can tell for sure from the otherwise meaningless assertion is that unbelief – not just heresy and backsliding but unbelief – must have been

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<sup>430</sup> Ibid., 232.

<sup>431</sup> Ibid., 242, 248.

<sup>432</sup> Ibid., 252.



known to exist even in that remote epoch.”<sup>433</sup> In what follows, Hitchens attempts to highlight the contributions of several of these proto-secularists and the trials and tribulations they so often faced. After recounting the trial and death of Socrates as well as the subsequent condemnation by Jewish (and later Christian) authorities of Epicurean materialistic philosophy, both on the charge of impiety, Hitchens laments not only that “all major confrontations over the right to free thought, free speech, and free inquiry have taken the same form – of a religious attempt to assert the literal and limited mind over the ironic and inquiring one,” but also how frequently such attempts have been successful.<sup>434</sup>

Hitchens also unreservedly praises the life and works of Benedict Spinoza, whose connective concept of pantheism in many ways presaged the work of Mendel and Darwin by centuries. As Hitchens recounts:

This derided heretic is now credited with the most original philosophical work ever done on the mind/body distinction, and his meditations on the human condition have provided more real consolation to thoughtful people than has any religion. Argument continues about whether Spinoza was an atheist: it now seems odd that we should have to argue as to whether pantheism is atheism or not. In its own expressed terms it is actually theistic, but Spinoza’s definition of a god made manifest throughout the natural world comes very close to defining a *religious* god out of existence.<sup>435</sup>

After dedicating ample space to recap some of the invaluable contributions from such Enlightenment thinkers as Franklin, Jefferson, Paine, and Voltaire, Hitchens goes on to acknowledge the more recent accomplishments of individuals such as Einstein, Freud, Kafka, and Marx.<sup>436</sup> His decision to close, then, with a retelling of the Maccabean Revolt may seem strange and oddly out of place. Hitchens, however, uses it to illustrate what

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<sup>433</sup> Ibid., 254.

<sup>434</sup> Ibid., 258.

<sup>435</sup> Ibid., 262.

<sup>436</sup> For more on these accounts, please see Hitchens’ edited collection of secularist writings, *The Portable Atheist*.

should be, by now, a fairly obvious point. For every example we have of skepticism and honest inquiry, there are countless others whose voices have been effectively silenced (and in some cases, whose lives have been declared forfeit) by the very institutions they dared to question. As he explains:

The Maccabees, who founded the Hasmonean dynasty, were forcibly restoring Mosaic fundamentalism against the many Jews of Palestine and elsewhere who had become attracted by Hellenism. These true early multiculturalists had become bored by “the law,” offended by circumcision, interested by Greek literature, drawn by the physical and intellectual exercises of the gymnasium, and rather adept at philosophy. They could feel the pull exerted by Athens, even if only by way of Rome and by the memory of Alexander’s time, and were impatient with the stark fear and superstition mandated by the Pentateuch. They obviously seemed too cosmopolitan to the votaries of the old Temple – and it must have been easy to accuse them of “dual loyalty” when they agreed to have a temple of Zeus on the site where smoky and bloody altars used to propitiate the unsmiling deity of yore. At any rate, when the father of Judah Maccabeus saw a Jew about to make a Hellenic offering on the old altar, he lost no time in murdering him. Over the next few years of the Maccabean “revolt,” many more assimilated Jews were slain, or forcibly circumcised, or both, and the women who had flirted with the new Hellenic dispensation suffered even worse. Since the Romans eventually preferred the violent and dogmatic Maccabees to the less militarized and fanatical Jews who had shone in their togas in the Mediterranean light, the scene was set for the uneasy collusion between the old-garb ultra-Orthodox Sanhedrin and the imperial governorate. This lugubrious relationship was eventually to lead to Christianity (yet another Jewish heresy) and thus ineluctably to the birth of Islam. We could have been spared the whole thing.<sup>437</sup>

In Hitchens’ final chapter, he unabashedly calls for a new enlightenment.

Claiming that “in our hands and within our view is a whole universe of discovery and clarification, which is a pleasure to study in itself, gives the average person access to insights that not even Darwin or Einstein possessed, and offers the promise of near-miraculous advances in healing, in energy, and in peaceful exchange between different cultures,” Hitchens argues that to cling to the edifice of religion in an age of such

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<sup>437</sup> Ibid., 273-4.

scientific and self-discovery is “as if someone, offered a delicious and fragrant out-of-season fruit, matured in a painstakingly and lovingly designed hothouse, should throw away the flesh and the pulp and gnaw moodily on the pit.”<sup>438</sup> How might one overcome this seemingly ingrained tendency? Hitchens responds:

Above all, we are in need of a renewed Enlightenment, which will base itself on the proposition that the proper study of mankind is man, and woman. This Enlightenment will not need to depend, like its predecessors, on the heroic breakthroughs of a few gifted and exceptionally courageous people. It is within the compass of the average person. The study of literature and poetry, both for its own sake and for the eternal ethical questions with which it deals, can now easily depose the scrutiny of sacred texts that have been found to be corrupt and confected. The pursuit of unfettered scientific inquiry, and the availability of new findings to masses of people by easy electronic means, will revolutionize our concepts of research and development. Very importantly, the divorce between the sexual life and fear, and the sexual life and disease, and the sexual life and tyranny, can now at last be attempted, on the sole condition that we banish all religions from the discourse. And all this and more is, for the first time in our history, within the reach if not the grasp of everyone.<sup>439</sup>

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## Part II: Criticisms and Rebuttals

In his article, “Christopher Hitchens’ Lies do Atheism no Favors,” Curtis White claims:

one enormous problem with Hitchens’s book is that it reduces religion to a series of criminal anecdotes. In the process, however, virtually all of the real history of religious thought, as well as historical and textual scholarship, is simply ignored as if it never existed. Not for Hitchens the rich cross-cultural fertilization of the Levant by Hellenistic, Jewish, and Manichaeic thought. Not for Hitchens the transformation of a Jewish heretic into a religion that Nietzsche called “Platonism for the masses.” Not for Hitchens the fascinating theological fissures in the New Testament between Jewish, Gnostic, and Pauline doctrines. Not for Hitchens the remarkable journey of the first Christian heresy, Arianism, spiritual origin

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<sup>438</sup> Ibid., 282, 283.

<sup>439</sup> Ibid., 283.

of our own thoroughly liberal Unitarianism. (Newton was an Arian and anti-Trinitarian, which made his presence at Trinity College permanently awkward.) Not for Hitchens the sublime transformation of Christian thought into the cathartic spirituality of German Idealism/ Romanticism and American Transcendentalism. And, strangely, not for Hitchens the existential Christianity of Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky, Karl Jaspers, Paul Tillich, Martin Buber, and, most recently, the religious turn of poststructural thought in Jacques Derrida and Slavoj Žižek. (All of these philosophers sought what Žižek calls Christianity's "perverse core.")<sup>440</sup>

Echoing this reproach, Douglas Groothuis, in his review of *god is Not Great*,

notes:

Hitchens gives no concessions to religion in this book. He instead prosecutes a scorched earth (or heaven) policy on every page. Amid his chronicling of various religious people who supported or who failed to oppose Nazism, for example, Hitchens injects but one sentence about Protestant pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer's opposition to Hitler (p. 241). Hitchens says nothing of The Barmen Declaration (1934), a document written principally by German theologian Karl Barth, which unequivocally opposed Nazism for theological reasons. Neither does Hitchens mention the heroism of the Protestant Le Chambon-sur-Lignon village community in France, which bravely sheltered six thousand Jews to protect them from the Nazis. This is typical of his approach: expose religious vices, and ignore or redefine religious virtues.<sup>441</sup>

Although a common criticism of the New Atheists generally, one could easily refute White's and Groothuis' charge of anecdotalism in one of two ways. First, one might simply claim that their counterexamples, selectively chosen as they are, represent a similar effort to tip the scales of argument in their favor, all the while ignoring the numerous historical skeletons in their own ideological closet(s). But finding that critique inadequate, mean-spirited, and/or equally self-serving, one could just as easily reply that

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<sup>440</sup> Curtis White, "Christopher Hitchens' Lies do Atheism no Favors," Salon.com, 23 June 2013, accessed 29 August 2016, [http://www.salon.com/2013/06/23/christopher\\_hitchens\\_lies\\_do\\_atheism\\_no\\_favors/](http://www.salon.com/2013/06/23/christopher_hitchens_lies_do_atheism_no_favors/).

<sup>441</sup> Douglas Groothuis, "Review: *god is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*," The Christian Research Institute, 11 June 2009, accessed 29 August 2016, <http://www.equip.org/article/god-is-not-great-how-religion-poisons-everything/>.

the real problem with Hitchens' treatise is that it judges religion, first and foremost, by the contents of its own *holy* books.

And though White and Groothuis seemingly object to such a practice, I would presume it to be an obvious and innocuous statement that any religious community (irrespective of its professed liberality or lack thereof) that has managed to abandon, evolve, or otherwise obscure its foundational texts and teachings is no longer part of that tradition upon which it is supposedly based. (As Hitchens might say, chemistry is not reformed alchemy; astronomy is not liberal astrology, etc.) For instance, even though many of Aristotle's views were, to some degree, a product of his exposure to the teachings of Plato, his subsequent founding of the Peripatetic School was rightly never considered to be in any way, shape, or *form* (pun intended) Platonic, but rather a philosophical horse of an altogether different color. I would argue that the same classification system applies to Unitarians, Religious Poststructuralists, and other quasi-religionists whose piecemeal adoption and revisionist understanding of scripture belies their inherent, underlying *irreligiosity*.

Nevertheless, White continues:

a large part of his book is devoted to denouncing the stupidity of religious metaphysics, especially the idea that God is an entity outside of the ordinary workings of nature. But Hitchens has his own metaphysical claims, claims for which he seems not to feel any need to create arguments. In opposition to religion he proposes Enlightenment reason. What is "reason" for Hitchens? Your guess is as good as mine. Is it the rules of logic? Is it the scientific method? Is it Thomas Paine's common sense? Some combination of the above? Hitchens seems to feel that, of course, everyone already knows what reason is and there is no need to elaborate its function or its virtues. But this "of course" is the marker of ideology, and the ideologist resists examining his own assumptions because to do so would be to make vulnerable his claims to authority. So eager is Hitchens to get on to the next item in his concatenation of religious insults to reason that he can't be bothered to say what he means

by the term. The one thing that he does seem to be sure of is that reason is something that shouldn't be "outraged." Nevertheless, there is no real difference between Hitchens's outrage to reason and an evangelical's outrage to God.<sup>442</sup>

No real difference? Merriam-Webster's Dictionary defines reason as "the power of the mind to think and understand in a logical way."<sup>443</sup> God, however, is defined as "the perfect and all-powerful spirit or being that is worshipped especially by Christians, Jews, and Muslims as the one who created and rules the universe."<sup>444</sup> Of these two, I would suggest that the latter requires much more contextualization and explication than the former.

White's logic is even more circular when concerning the nature and existence of "conscienceness" (not to be confused with consciousness). He writes:

Isn't Hitchens's own book testimony against his superficial claim that there is something called conscience? He claims that religion is "poison," but is he suggesting that religion made men cruel in spite of themselves? All of them? Millions upon millions of people over thousands of years zealously and destructively defending the faith... in spite of their own innate sense of good and evil? Isn't it more likely that killing the heathens and the heretics and the free thinkers was always something that could be done in perfectly good conscience insofar as it was done for Yahweh, Allah, or Mother Church? If it weren't for the Predators circling overhead, I think the Taliban would sleep quite soundly, never mind that they'll get up the next day and cut off someone's ear for listening to an iPod.<sup>445</sup>

I must confess to being somewhat bewildered by these self-contradicting statements.

First, it appears that White is arguing that conscience is an illusion, and Hitchens' book is evidence of that. Then, he seems to argue that religion can bend conscience to its will, claiming that "killing the heathens and the heretics and the free thinkers was always

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<sup>442</sup> White, "Christopher Hitchens' Lies do Atheism no Favors."

<sup>443</sup> "Reason." Dictionary.com, 2016, accessed 31 August 2016, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/reason>.

<sup>444</sup> "God." Dictionary.com, 2016, accessed 31 August 2016, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/god>.

<sup>445</sup> White, "Christopher Hitchens' Lies do Atheism no Favors."

something that could be done in perfectly good conscience insofar as it was done for Yahweh, Allah, or Mother Church.” Thus, it appears that either conscience doesn’t actually exist, or if it does, it can be molded to shape even the most callous and inhumane of actions. How would either of these realities reasonably be considered a refutation of Hitchens’ argument or, for that matter, a defense of White’s?

Seemingly ignorant of the ideological corner he has painted himself into, White furiously flails his way to a conclusion.

And what of Hitchens himself?... Is he not himself an example of how conscience is about what suits one’s purposes? Personal ethics tend to reflect cultural ethics, and cultural ethics usually follow tribal interests. For Hitchens, too, has a tribe: the “reasonable,” the clean, the well-spoken, the “right sort,” the Oxford men, the ones who know and revel in their difference from the ignorant, the slaves, the Baptist rubes, the ones who don’t go to Cambridge and don’t eat good lunches. Hitchens was of the oligarchs and shared their most intense privilege: the right not to have to take seriously their own lies and misdeeds.<sup>446</sup>

In other words, having failed to demonstrate Hitchens’ sophistry, White must be content to argue that, at the end of the day, Hitchens is (at least) as immoral, self-centered, and tribalistic as the rest of us; no worse perhaps, but, as far as White is concerned, certainly no better. The only difference, it would seem, is that Hitchens is an intellectual elitist who privileges knowledge above its lack.

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Mary Riddell, in her article “The Gospel according to Hitch,” actually argues that on the evidence of this book, Hitchens has spent too much time around religion, not too little. Like an ex-smoker who grows to loathe the habit more than those who have not tasted nicotine, he abominates God with the zealotry implicit in dictatorial faith. Anyone who has grown up in the

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<sup>446</sup> Ibid.

shadow of hellfire evangelism will recognise some answering echo here.  
This is a papal bull for the non-believer.<sup>447</sup>

That is to say that, despite White's claims, Hitchens' problem is actually not a lack of familiarity with religion, but rather a superfluous *overfamiliarity*. He simply knows too much. One presumes, then, that Riddell believes had Hitchens been either less fluent in the language of faith or less informed of the history that accompanies it, he could have written a better book. (I wonder if Riddell would say the same of recuperated drug addicts who decide to become substance abuse counselors? Should their knowledge likewise be considered a hindrance rather than a help? Should they, too, defer to those who know and have experienced less on the subject of addiction and recovery?)

And though Riddell ultimately concurs with most of Hitchens' points about the dangers of religion, she still feels the need to remind us, in her conclusion, that

secular society has still not devised rites of passage to welcome people in to the world and usher them out of it. Like Hitchens, people still get their marriages honoured and their children baptised in the name of a hollow God. Science and reason have all the answers, but the spiritual solace they lack is also missing in an encyclical whose many qualities include no shred of tolerance or doubt. Hitchens's book will be manna to the converted, but his explicit aim is to win believers to his cause. I doubt that he will reclaim a single soul.<sup>448</sup>

In essence, she is arguing that, while Hitchens is right to disbelieve in the spiritual safety net that religion claims to provide, it is inexcusably rude to pull the rug out from under believers until science *can* satisfactorily cushion their fall. However, I would contend that such was never his intention nor ultimately his responsibility. Like Socrates' allegorical philosopher discovered long ago in the cave, truth can free the mind and unshackle the feet, but the impetus for one's journey outward must invariably come from within, and

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<sup>447</sup> Mary Riddell, "The Gospel According to Hitch," *The Guardian*, 3 June 2007, accessed 29 August 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2007/jun/03/society>.

<sup>448</sup> Ibid.



even so, the transcendent light of day will still prove dazzling and disorienting until one's eyes adjust to the new reality. That is the price of enlightenment.

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Speaking of Socrates, in his article, "In God, Distrust," Michael Kinsley writes that

Hitchens is an old-fashioned village atheist, standing in the square trying to pick arguments with the good citizens on their way to church. The book is full of logical flourishes and conundrums, many of them entertaining to the nonbeliever. How could Christ have died for our sins, when supposedly he also did not die at all? Did the Jews not know that murder and adultery were wrong before they received the Ten Commandments, and if they did know, why was this such a wonderful gift? On a more somber note, how can the "argument from design" (that only some kind of "intelligence" could have designed anything as perfect as a human being) be reconciled with the religious practice of female genital mutilation, which posits that women, at least, as nature creates them, are not so perfect after all? Whether sallies like these give pause to the believer is a question I can't answer.<sup>449</sup>

But despite his misgivings about tenor and tone, Kinsley ultimately concurs with Riddell:

Hitchens has outfoxed the Hitchens watchers by writing a serious and deeply felt book, totally consistent with his beliefs of a lifetime. And God should be flattered: unlike most of those clamoring for his attention, Hitchens treats him like an adult.<sup>450</sup>

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In his review of Hitchens' book, Mark Roberts states that

the obvious fact that *god is not Great* contains many apparent facts, therefore, gives us an advantage in trying to evaluate its overall truthfulness. If Hitchens tends to get his facts right, then we would do well to pay close attention to his claims, even those that are not factual per se. He will have shown himself to be a reliable witness and a careful thinker. If, on the contrary, he gets many of his facts wrong, then we would rightly

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<sup>449</sup> Michael Kinsley, "In God, Distrust," *NY Times*, 13 May 2007, accessed 29 August 2016, [http://www.nytimes.com/2007/05/13/books/review/Kinsley-t.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2007/05/13/books/review/Kinsley-t.html?_r=1).

<sup>450</sup> Ibid.

be inclined to doubt what he writes about many things and chalk it up to sloppy thinking.<sup>451</sup>

In service of this end, Roberts announces that he has “found fifteen errors in Hitchens’s treatment of the New Testament, as well as sixteen misunderstandings or distortions. Some of the clear errors are not major in terms of content, but they reveal a kind of sloppiness that is unsettling.”<sup>452</sup> So let us examine some of these so-called errors and see if they, in any way, discredit Hitchens’ overarching claims.

First, Roberts notes that, “nobody, to my knowledge, dates the birth of Jesus to AD 4. Every scholar puts his birth earlier than 4 BC (the date of King Herod’s death). The most likely date for Jesus’s birth seems to be around 6 BC. My guess is Hitchens remembered the ‘4’ correctly but not the era. A minor mistake, but an unsettling one.”<sup>453</sup> Perhaps, but when one examines the context within which Hitchens made this “minor mistake,” one is forced to conclude that the thrust of his argument (that Christian predictions for Armageddon in the year 2000 were completely unfounded) remains undiminished.

As to Roberts’ explicit preference for the year 6 BC, I would respond in two ways. First, his argument for that particular date is clearly an effort to make chrono/logical sense of Luke’s account:

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to their own town to register. So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to

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<sup>451</sup> Mark Roberts, “Christopher Hitchens: My Response to *god is not Great*,” Patheos.com, 2007, accessed 29 August 2016, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/markdroberts/series/god-is-not-great-by-christopher-hitchens-a-response/>.

<sup>452</sup> Ibid.

<sup>453</sup> Ibid.

the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child.<sup>454</sup>

As Roberts writes:

In the Annals of the Roman historian Tacitus there is a reference to a document produced under Augustus that contained a description of “the number of citizens and allies under arms, of the fleets, of subject kingdoms, provinces, taxes” and so on,” in other words, a census.... But we don’t even need to go to a Roman historian to find evidence for the censuses of Augustus. In “The Deeds of the Divine Augustus” written by Augustus himself and published throughout the empire in 14 AD, we read of three censuses conducted under Augustus’s authority (in 28 BC, 8 BC, and 14 AD; see Acts of Augustus, section 8). If Augustus decreed a census in 8 BC, as he claims, it’s quite possible that this was the census described in Luke 2, which was not finished in Judea until a year or two later.<sup>455</sup>

Unfortunately, Quirinius didn’t become governor of Syria until 6 AD,<sup>456</sup> and so it seems that Luke is just as error prone as Hitchens, and that, “we would rightly be inclined to doubt what he writes about many things and chalk it up to sloppy thinking.” Somehow I doubt Roberts would concur.

Another example Roberts feels compelled to mention is that “Hitchens twice refers to the scholar Bart D. Ehrman as ‘Barton Ehrman’ (p. 120, 142). To my knowledge, ‘Bart’ is Mr. Ehrman’s full first name. So, unless he has a nickname unknown to me, it’s an error to call the man ‘Barton.’”<sup>457</sup> Perhaps Roberts is right, but again, I would ask how does this in any way refute Hitchens’ arguments concerning Ehrman’s scholarship. What’s worse, his summary suggestion that one read Timothy Paul Jones’ *Misquoting Truth: A Guide to the Fallacies of Bart Ehrman’s Misquoting Jesus* is an academic passing of the buck (and burden) of the first order.

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<sup>454</sup> Luke 2:1-5 (NIV).

<sup>455</sup> Roberts, “Christopher Hitchens: My Response to *god is not Great*.”

<sup>456</sup> Erich S. Gruen, “The Expansion of the Empire under Augustus” in *The Cambridge Ancient History, Volume X: The Augustan Empire, 43 BC – AD 69* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), 157.

<sup>457</sup> Roberts, “Christopher Hitchens: My Response to *god is not Great*.”

As for the validity of the Old Testament, Carlo Delora notes in his article, “‘God is not great’: Christopher Hitchens is not a liar,”:

“The reality is that there is no evidence whatsoever that the Jews were ever enslaved in Egypt. Yes, there’s the story contained within the bible itself, but that’s not a remotely historically admissible source. I’m talking about real proof; archeological evidence, state records and primary sources. Of these, *nothing exists.*” (Emphasis mine)

That’s not some “new-atheist,” irreligious source. That’s from *Haaretz*, Israel’s oldest daily newspaper, supporting a well-established historical consensus that there was no mass Jewish flight from Egypt, nor widespread Jewish indentured servitude. Most shocking, however, is the fact that James Hoffmeier – the expert quoted by both White and Hamblin – is the former chair of Illinois’ Wheaton College of Biblical, Theological, Religious and Archaeological Studies. A school that recommends archaeology as “an indispensable tool for interpreting the Bible because it provides cultural, historical, social, religious, and linguistic information that sheds light on the context of biblical passages.” This is not an issue with two secular sides, one conveniently ignored by Hitchens to further his fundamentalist form of atheism.<sup>458</sup>

But now for an example of what Roberts considers to be a more substantial mistake. He observes that

Hitchens writes that the “multiple authors” of the Gospels “cannot agree on anything of importance.” This is plainly wrong, unless, I suppose, we allow Hitchens to fill in the blanks of what counts as important. He might say that nothing of importance at all is addressed in the Gospels. (Later he will say that “Thanks to the telescope and the microscope, [religion] no longer offers an explanation of anything important.” [282]). Be that as it may, his point on page 111 is that the Gospels are full of disagreement, especially about the things that matter about Jesus, as the context makes clear. This is simply not true. Though it is true that the New Testament Gospels show considerable diversity in their portraits of Jesus, they agree on many, many things, including matters that are most important both to the Gospel writers and to Christian believers.... The Gospel writers share a common view of reality, one that includes a personal, creator God who has been active in human affairs, especially those of Israel, and so forth

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<sup>458</sup> Carlo Delora, “‘God is not great’: Christopher Hitchens is not a liar,” Salon.com, 6 July 2007, accessed 29 August 2016, [http://www.salon.com/2013/07/06/god\\_is\\_not\\_great\\_christopher\\_hitchens\\_is\\_not\\_a\\_liar/](http://www.salon.com/2013/07/06/god_is_not_great_christopher_hitchens_is_not_a_liar/).

and so on. Someone from a culture not influenced by Judeo-Christianity would undoubtedly see commonalities that I take for granted.<sup>459</sup>

One could grant Roberts' assertions, were it not for the fact that the various gospels are not simply internally inconsistent, but rather that they downright contradict one another in numerous ways. For instance, every a brief comparison between the so-called synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) and the Gospel of John will demonstrate that they disagree on many substantial issues. These include: articulation of the virgin birth, the evidence/need of Jesus' baptism, the nature of the miracles he supposedly performed, the means of attaining the salvation to which he alludes, the length of Jesus' ministry, the date of the last supper, and the location of Jesus' first post-resurrection appearance to his disciples, to name but a few.<sup>460</sup> Despite centuries of attempts to harmonize the gospels, these discrepancies would seem, at the very least, to support Hitchens' skepticism of their historical accuracy *and thus* of their collective (or respective) claims to inerrancy.

Nevertheless, Roberts asserts:

Virtually every scholar I've read, including the most skeptical, would agree that the Gospels are "in some sense literal truth." The proof is that virtually every scholar who says anything about Jesus of Nazareth bases his or her history on the "facts" of the Gospels. So when a scholar states that Jesus was crucified under the authority of Pontius Pilate, this scholar takes at least that part of the Gospel account as literal truth. It's hard to know what Hitchens means by saying that the Gospels, "on their own evidence . . . are most certainly not literal truth." But whatever he means, this cannot be sustained by a close reading of the Gospels. Now, let me add, that very few scholars, including conservative Christians, would argue that the Gospels are merely literal truth. They believe there is something more in the text. They are literal truth shaped in light of

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<sup>459</sup> Roberts, "Christopher Hitchens: My Response to *god is not Great*."

<sup>460</sup> B.A. Robinson, "Conflicts Between the Gospel of John and the Remaining Three (Synoptic Gospels)," ReligiousTolerance.org, 8 July 2013, accessed 29 August 2016, [http://www.religioustolerance.org/chr\\_john.htm](http://www.religioustolerance.org/chr_john.htm).

theological conviction. This isn't a new idea. The Gospel writers say this very thing (see Luke 1:1-4, for example).<sup>461</sup>

“Literal truth shaped in the light of theological conviction.” Indeed. And as Luke 1:1-4 states:

Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.<sup>462</sup>

In this light (of theological conviction), Hitchens' claim that the discrepancy within the gospels demonstrates “that many of the ‘sayings’ and teachings of Jesus are hearsay upon hearsay upon hearsay, which helps explain their garbled and contradictory nature,” seems ever more reasonable.<sup>463</sup> It would appear that even Roberts must eventually (albeit unconsciously) concede this point. He admits:

The Gospel writers don't disagree at all about the Sermon on the Mount because that “sermon” only appears in the Gospel of Matthew. Luke has a similar “sermon,” sometimes called “The Sermon on the Plain” but it's not the same discourse. Furthermore, if you look closely at the different Gospel accounts of the anointing of Jesus, the treachery of Judas, and Peter's denial, you will see some differences. The story of Peter's denial, for example, is found in Matthew 26:69-75, Mark 14:66-72, and Luke 22:54-62. The three accounts are very similar, both in English and in the original Greek. The major difference has to do with whether the rooster crowed once or twice. But this could hardly be an example of the Gospel writers disagreeing wildly.<sup>464</sup>

Perhaps not, but at the very least, these discrepancies would seem to suggest that same sort of “sloppy thinking” that Roberts warned us of previously.

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<sup>461</sup> Roberts, “Christopher Hitchens: My Response to *god is not Great*.”

<sup>462</sup> Luke 1:1-4 (NIV).

<sup>463</sup> Hitchens, *god is Not Great*, 120.

<sup>464</sup> Roberts, “Christopher Hitchens: My Response to *god is not Great*.”

Once exhausted of these so-called mistakes and distortions, Roberts is reduced to making more semantic arguments against Hitchens. Witness the following example:

The claim that some of Jesus's teachings are "flat-out immoral" deserves careful scrutiny. Who would you choose to be a judge of what is moral? Jesus? Or Christopher Hitchens? Now before you vote for Hitchens, please note that his example of the immorality of Jesus's teachings is based on a serious misinterpretation of Jesus's meaning. From a passage where Jesus is teaching people not to worry, Hitchens thinks that Jesus is somehow against "thrift, innovation, family life, and so forth." His textual proof is "Take no thought for the morrow," which appears in Matthew 6:34 in the King James Version of the Bible. In fact, the verb translated four centuries ago as "take no thought" means "do not worry" (Greek, *merimnao*), as is seen in every modern translation I consulted. If Hitchens had made an effort to understand what Jesus was actually saying, then he'd be relieved to know that Jesus doesn't oppose sensible preparation, just anxious preoccupation [sic].<sup>465</sup>

Presuming Roberts means to distinguish between preparation and *preoccupation*, one can certainly forgive his spelling error. But even so, his distinction seems to be more superficial than substantial, and in many ways represents a simple difference in degree rather than one in kind.

However, in other instances, Roberts is forced to abandon reason altogether and instead to make arguments solely on the basis of faith. For instance, he writes:

one might argue that the frequency of resurrections in the New Testament actually strengthens the case for their historicity, but for obvious reasons Hitchens doesn't go there. What he misunderstands is the unique nature of Jesus's resurrection. The other people raised from the dead were raised to ordinary life. We have every reason to believe that, after their coming back to life, they lived ordinary lives and died like everybody else. Jesus's resurrection was in a unique category as the beginning of resurrection to life in the age to come. Jesus's resurrection body was different from other bodies, as is seen from the Gospel accounts and 1 Corinthians 15. None of this proves that Jesus actually rose from the dead, of course, or that His resurrection purchased forgiveness of sins (which, by the way, was more about His death than resurrection). But it does show that Hitchens simply

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<sup>465</sup> Ibid.

does not understand what the writers of the New Testament believed about the resurrection of Jesus.<sup>466</sup>

In response to this, I would simply refer Roberts to an axiom sometimes referred to as Hitchens' razor: "That which can be asserted without evidence can be dismissed without evidence."<sup>467</sup> To that standard, I too shall hold.

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Douglas Groothuis finds himself on similarly unsteady terrain in his argument that

the best way to assess Hitchens's jeremiad or lengthy grievance is to grant him the idea of "god," while defending the one true God of biblical revelation. The Bible proclaims that there are many false gods. Christians have no need to defend religion in general, since Christianity by its very nature claims to be the exclusive and final revelation of God to humanity (see John 14:1-6; Acts 4:12; and Gal. 1:6-11). Christians, consequently, can accept many of Hitchens's attacks on religion as criticisms of false gods without thereby engaging in special pleading for their own view. Some of Hitchens's attacks on the core beliefs of non-Christian religions are cogent; his attacks on Christianity, however, are far less convincing.... Hitchens's treatment of Mormonism (161–168) exposes its corrupt origination, bizarre claims, and unsavory history. This exposé, however, does not argue for atheism per se; a Christian (or a Jew) could read it and grant much of its force, since the gods of Mormonism are false gods.<sup>468</sup>

In other words, Hitchens is right, *god* is not great; *God*, however, is. I would say that Hitchens' razor applies just as equally and forcefully to this argument as it did to Roberts'.

When he attempts to refute Hitchens' appeals to science, and particularly evolution, as illustrative of our condition, Groothuis ventures even farther from the shores of reason. He writes:

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<sup>466</sup> Ibid.

<sup>467</sup> Christopher Hitchens Slate.com, 20 October 2003, accessed 30 August 2016, [http://www.slate.com/articles/news\\_and\\_politics/fighting\\_words/2003/10/mommie\\_dearest.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/fighting_words/2003/10/mommie_dearest.html).

<sup>468</sup> Groothuis, "Review: *god is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*."



Hitchens ridicules the argument from design more than he rationally challenges it. He uses the standard argument that nature manifests too many defects to be designed. (He claims, e.g., that the human eye is inefficiently designed and ineptly fashioned, although the stock argument for this is false.) In so doing, Hitchens never thoughtfully interacts with the design inference advanced by the Intelligent Design (ID) movement.

In a nutshell, William Dembski argues that if something in nature cannot be accounted for on the basis of chance and/or natural law, then the best explanation for its basic structure is design – that is, intelligent causation. For example, the complex and specified informational patterns in DNA cannot be the result of natural laws because they are too complicated; nor can their specificity be explained by chance combinations because these are too improbable. The best explanation for this genetic language, therefore, is a designer. ID theorists grant that a design inference is not sufficient to prove all of the important attributes of God, but their arguments spell trouble for naturalism, which attempts to account for everything in nature on the basis of impersonal chance and necessity.<sup>469</sup>

However, as Dawkins and Dennett have demonstrated, there is nothing random about natural selection, and so this argument represents a fatal flaw not in Hitchens', but in Groothuis' (and presumably Dembski's) understanding of evolutionary theory.<sup>470</sup> Given his previous statements concerning Hitchens' "mistaking" of *god* for *God*, I suppose we should not be surprised.

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In her article, "God-bothering," Amy Bragg argues that

in [Hitchens'] view, all religious faith in all manifestations and at all levels of intensity is the product of either ignorance or stupidity. Now that our scientific knowledge has finally caught up with our psychological needs, his argument runs, we have no need of what he refers to as "the myths of the tribe and the cave and the blood sacrifice." Quite apart from the fact that well over half the humans on Earth have little or no awareness of this scientific knowledge (and quite apart from the fact that what constitutes scientific knowledge is a Hell of a lot more fluid than he seems to want to believe), Hitchens allows no middle ground, no crevice where the heart

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<sup>469</sup> Ibid.

<sup>470</sup> Please see Dawkins' fourth chapter, "Why There Almost Certainly is No God," Dennett's third chapter, "Why Good Things Happen," or my previous summarization of their respective contents for a refresher on their arguments.

can creep through. For a book about how religion poisons everything, *god* [sic] *is Not Great* has virtually nothing to say about faith.<sup>471</sup>

I think Hitchens would find very little to disagree with in Bragg's statement. However, I do not see how widespread scientific ignorance, or that fact that science itself is far more open to challenge and change (when merited by evidence), are criticisms. Even if religion's claim to prominence is that it holds open a "crevice where the heart can creep through," that hardly speaks to its truth or its inherent irreplaceability as counselor or consoler.

Nevertheless, Bragg argues that

pronouncements like the following [from Hitchens] begin to sound shrill and dense:

There would be no such churches in the first place if humanity had not been afraid of the weather, the dark, the plague, the eclipse, and all manner of other things now easily explained.

It's hardly an overstatement to say a man who maintains that Salisbury Cathedral, that the Parthenon, that Notre Dame itself was built because men were afraid of the dark has (as the late Frank Herbert would say) left the path of reason.<sup>472</sup>

Perhaps, but why were they built? The answers to such questions, though undoubtedly edifying to both Hitchens' and Bragg's point(s), are far more likely to lend support for the former and scorn for the latter. Fear of the dark may indeed be too simplistic a charge, but (to stay solely within the D's) fear of damnation, death, or disavowal/disownment by the deity might just as easily (and logically) be substituted. Either way, the heart of Hitchens' critique remains undamaged by the assault.

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<sup>471</sup> Amy Bragg, "God-bothering," OpenLettersMonthly.com, 1 June 2007, accessed 30 August 2016, <http://www.openlettersmonthly.com/god-bothering/>.

<sup>472</sup> Ibid.

Bragg's defense of intelligent design, in the face of Hitchens' critique, is even more inadequate.

Take this passage, for example [from Hitchens]:

When it comes to the whirling, howling wilderness of outer space, with its red giants and white dwarfs and black holes, its titanic explosions and extinctions, we can only dimly and shiveringly conclude that the "design" hasn't been imposed quite yet, and wonder if this is how the dinosaurs "felt" when the meteors came smashing through the earth's atmosphere and put an end to the pointless bellowing rivalry across primeval swamps.

The reason this is disturbing, as is readily apparent after even a middling-close read, is that for all its vocabulary and syntactical fluidity, it is, in fact, gibberish. Pull at any part of any one sentence, and the whole thing comes apart like a ball of yarn. For an entire book, Hitchens has been saying scientific knowledge will set mankind free from all its ancient blood-cults, but here that very scientific knowledge (red giants and white dwarfs and all the other *Lucasfilm* special effects) is what leaves mankind dim and shivering? And is he somehow implying that believers in so-called "intelligent design" maintain that God is not the creator of wilderness too? And what in blazes is that dinosaur stuff? Aside from that quaint mention of "primeval swamps," is Hitchens trying to say an awareness of the immensity of space should make us humble? If so, why does he sound throughout so arrogant about such scientific awareness, boasting that even his children are better than Moses because of it? And if not, is he instead trying to say that heedlessness in the face of such immense knowledge has doomed us, like the dinosaurs? And if so, why use dinosaurs as the example, since, lacking telescopes, they had no choice but to be heedless? It's like Hitchens was smart enough to stick those distancing quotes over 'felt' but lazy enough not to pick a metaphor that isn't nonsense.<sup>473</sup>

Bragg's discomfort and derision aside, Hitchens' point was simply that the design argument only makes sense when viewed from a very narrow perspective of human historical space and time (such as the typical creationist account of six or so thousand years). When viewed, however, through the immensities of cosmological or even geological time, our own species' significance within the overarching story is undeniably

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<sup>473</sup> Ibid.

diminished. By even the most conservative archeological evidence, dinosaurs roamed the earth for at least 165 million years. Humans, by contrast, came onto the scene only some 200,000 (or 6,000, if you like) years ago. Thus, to presume or suggest that earthly creation was undertaken with our species specifically in mind is to ignore the evidence and, in so doing, to shoulder an arrogance at which even Hitchens would shudder.

But perhaps Bragg's conclusion provides insight into the impossible bar she would set for Hitchens in his task. Referring to the same sort of "arrogance" to which she alluded above, Bragg writes:

It's evident everywhere in this sour, foul-tempered book: a Hitchens who infuriates is customary; a Hitchens who provokes thought is what gained him our attention in the first place; a Hitchens who is careless with his words is a new thing, dire and troubling.

Although to be fair to him, no amount of eloquence could have saved a work so brittle, one that is so willing to dismiss any faith that isn't laced with hate, one that has only one tarring brush for the uncountable billions of faithful who've walked this planet since Neanderthals first held elaborate funeral rites for their dead. Such faith – even in the face of all the evils it's done (even in the face of all it's legitimately poisoned), deserves better than these stones cast by he who is most certainly not without sin. *god [sic] is Not Great* does nothing to further any kind of inquiry into religion's ills – it just adds one more voice to the worldwide chorus of intolerance it spends its length denouncing.<sup>474</sup>

In other words, for Bragg, it appears that any attack on faith is doomed to fail – despite the historical, scriptural, and/or experiential support one could muster in its cause – unless it is accompanied by some sort of pseudo-apologist rhetoric to explain or excuse the unfortunate truths of its past, present, and (one fears) future.

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In his review of Hitchens' book, Ross Douhat argues:

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<sup>474</sup> Ibid.

I'm unpersuaded that the Catholic Church's stance on birth control has been a major factor in the spread of AIDS around the world, though again I'm merely relying on statistics – African infection rates, for instance, are highest in heavily Protestant countries; most studies suggest that serious religious practice correlates with lower rates of risky sexual behavior, even among people already infected with HIV – while Hitchens has the irrefutable power of anecdote on his side, specifically a few dumb statements about condoms from Third World churchmen.<sup>475</sup>

It appears that Douthat is unaware that both Pope John Paul II and his successor, Pope Benedict XVI, made numerous pronouncements against the use of artificial contraception during their papacies. For instance, these are Pope Benedict's comments from a March 2009 interview: "I would say that this problem of AIDS cannot be overcome merely with money, necessary though it is. If there is no human dimension, if Africans do not help [by responsible behaviour], the problem cannot be overcome by the distribution of prophylactics: on the contrary, they increase it."<sup>476</sup> Similarly, the Pontifical Council for the Family stated in its 1995 publication, "The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality," that

abuse occurs whenever sex education is given to children by teaching them all the intimate details of genital relationships, even in a graphic way. Today this is often motivated by wanting to provide education for "safe sex"<sup>477</sup>, above all in relation to the spread of AIDS. In this situation, parents must also reject the promotion of so-called "safe sex" or "safer sex", a dangerous and immoral policy based on the deluded theory that the condom can provide adequate protection against AIDS. Parents must insist on continence outside marriage and fidelity in marriage as the only true and secure education for the prevention of this contagious disease.<sup>477</sup>

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<sup>475</sup> Ross Douthat, "Lord Have Mercy: A review of *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*," Catholic Education Research Center, Summer 2007, accessed 30 August 2016, <http://www.catholiceducation.org/en/controversy/persecution/lord-have-mercy-a-review-of-god-is-not-great-how-religion-poisons-everything.html>.

<sup>476</sup> "Interview of the Holy Father Benedict XVI During the Flight to Africa." Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 17 March 2009, accessed 30 August 2016, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2009/march/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20090317\\_africa-interview.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2009/march/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20090317_africa-interview.html).

<sup>477</sup> "The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality." Pontifical Council for the Family, 8 December 1995, accessed 30 August 2016, [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/family/documents/rc\\_pc\\_family\\_doc\\_08121995\\_human-sexuality\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/family/documents/rc_pc_family_doc_08121995_human-sexuality_en.html).

I will certainly agree that claims such as these are indeed “dumb statements,” but as their sources demonstrate, they are hardly confined to the utterances of a few “Third World churchmen.”

However, Douthat goes on to argue that

I’m also unconvinced that male circumcision is quite the species of totalitarianism that *God Is Not Great* makes it out to be, though I am perhaps suffering from what Hitchens, in his Marxist phase, would have described as “false consciousness.” Nor do I believe that the doctrine of hell has wrecked quite so many millions of childhoods as he claims (though he does have citations from James Joyce and Mary McCarthy on his side); or that religion has likewise ruined the act of coitus (a difficult thing to do, one might hazard) for untold numbers of believers; or that the difference between the Spanish Inquisition and the U.S. military chaplaincy is a matter of degree and not of kind. Although Hitchens may be entirely correct that an atheist need “never again confront the impressive faith of an Aquinas or a Maimonides,” because faith of “the sort that can stand up at least for a while in a confrontation with reason” no longer exists, I wish he had risked the confrontation.<sup>478</sup>

While I assume the arguments about the psychological damage inflicted on children by religion’s incessant admonitions of impending and eternal damnation for all unrepentant sinners, as well as those concerning the unwarranted restrictions and denunciations of various forms of sexual congress (particularly those between members of the LGBTQ community), need little defense beyond that which commonsense can provide, Douthat’s arguments concerning male circumcision do merit a brief digression/retort.

According to a 2007 joint report by the World Health Organization and UNAIDS:

Male circumcision is medically indicated for only a few conditions. There is substantial evidence that circumcised men have a lower risk of some reproductive tract infections, as well as penile cancer, but some of these conditions are rare while others are uncommon or treatable, and routine neonatal circumcision is not currently recommended on medical grounds. The safety of male circumcision depends crucially on the setting,

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<sup>478</sup> Douthat, “Lord Have Mercy: A review of *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*.”

equipment and expertise of the provider. Neonatal circumcision is a simpler procedure than adult circumcision, and has very low rates of adverse events. Adolescent or adult circumcision in clinical settings can cause bleeding, haematoma or sepsis, but with no long-term sequelae when undertaken in a clinical setting by experienced, well-trained providers. In contrast, circumcisions undertaken in unhygienic conditions, by inexperienced providers with inadequate instruments, or with poor after-care, can result in serious complications and even death.<sup>479</sup>

The report concludes:

There is already some evidence of increased demand for male circumcision in southern Africa, and this is likely to increase further now that results from the Kenyan and Ugandan trials have confirmed those of the South African trial. Major concerns about increased uptake of male circumcision services are safety, acceptability and risk compensation. Recent studies of acceptability among non-circumcising communities with high incidence of HIV in southern Africa were fairly consistent in finding that a majority of men would be willing to be circumcised if it were done safely and at minimal cost. In addition, the large numbers of men recruited into the trials in noncircumcising communities in South Africa, Uganda and Kenya, and the increased demand for male circumcision in Swaziland and Zambia, suggest that uptake of circumcision could be rapid if there was confidence in provision of safe and affordable surgery. To date, there is modest evidence of risk compensation following adult male circumcision, and care must be taken to embed any male circumcision provision within existing HIV prevention packages that include intensive counselling on safer sex, particularly regarding reduction in number of concurrent sexual partners and correct and consistent use of male and female condoms. Further data, both from the recently completed trials and from observational studies of men pre- and post- elective circumcision, are needed.<sup>480</sup>

However, even the more recent studies conducted by the WHO, while demonstrating a correlation between (male) circumcision and lower rates of HIV/AIDS, ultimately caution that

male circumcision provides only *partial protection*, and therefore should be only one element of a comprehensive HIV prevention package which includes: the provision of HIV testing and counseling services; treatment

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<sup>479</sup> “Male circumcision: Global trends and determinants of prevalence, safety and acceptability,” World Health Organization and Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS, 2007, accessed 30 August 2016, [http://www.unaids.org/sites/default/files/media\\_asset/jc1360\\_male\\_circumcision\\_en\\_0.pdf](http://www.unaids.org/sites/default/files/media_asset/jc1360_male_circumcision_en_0.pdf).

<sup>480</sup> Ibid.

for sexually transmitted infections; the promotion of safer sex practices; the provision of male and female condoms and promotion of their correct and consistent use.<sup>481</sup>

In other words, when coupled with religious prohibitions against the usage of prophylactics, the practice of male circumcision is unlikely to provide much relief in stamping out the African AIDS crisis. Thus, at best, Douthat's claims are fragmentary and misleading. At worst, they represent a callous and deliberate resignation to the status quo suffering of millions.

Therefore, we can be similarly dismissive, or at the very least contextually remonstrative, when Anthony Gottlieb and others like him smugly note that

after rightly railing against female genital mutilation in Africa, which is an indigenous cultural practice with no very firm ties to any particular religion, Hitchens lunges at male circumcision. He claims that it is a medically dangerous procedure that has made countless lives miserable. This will come as news to the Jewish community, where male circumcision is universal, and where doctors, hypochondria, and overprotective mothers are not exactly unknown. Jews, Muslims, and others among the nearly one-third of the world's male population who have been circumcised may be reassured by the World Health Organization's recent announcement that it recommends male circumcision as a means of preventing the spread of AIDS.<sup>482</sup>

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Attempting to criticize Hitchens' appeals to reason and science, Kabir Helminski, in his article, "Christopher Hitchens is Not Great," claims that

Hitchens' verbal weaponry is formidable, and sometimes even entertaining. Much of what he criticizes deserves criticism, but he conflates the excesses and abuses of authoritarian religion with the whole spiritual enterprise, because he is essentially clueless about the spiritual dimension of human experience. He offers, instead, a picture of human endeavor that amounts to enjoying your martini and not allowing yourself

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<sup>481</sup> "Male Circumcision for HIV Prevention," World Health Organization, 2016, accessed 30 August 2016, <http://www.who.int/hiv/topics/malecircumcision/en/>.

<sup>482</sup> Anthony Gottlieb, "Atheists with Attitude, Why do They Hate Him?" *The New Yorker*, 7 August 2007, accessed 31 August 2016, [http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/books/2007/05/21/070521crbo\\_books\\_gottlieb](http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/books/2007/05/21/070521crbo_books_gottlieb).



to be bored by the idiots trying to tell you what God does and doesn't want you to do. Never does he admit to anything noble, virtuous, or beautiful in faith. Never does he exalt anything but the critical mind.<sup>483</sup>

To this, I would respond: yes and no. While it is true that Hitchens does exalt the critical mind above all else, Darwin himself reminds us:

Thus, from the war of nature, from famine and death, the most exalted object which we are capable of conceiving, namely, the production of the higher animals, directly follows. *There is grandeur in this view of life*, with its several powers, having been originally breathed into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved.<sup>484</sup>

As for Helminski's claim that such exaltation is to the exclusion of all else, I will allow Hitchens to speak for himself and his fellow secularists.

We are not immune to the lure of wonder and mystery and awe: we have music and art and literature, and find that the serious ethical dilemmas are better handled by Shakespeare and Tolstoy and Schiller and Dostoyevsky and George Eliot than in the mythical morality tales of the holy books. Literature, not scripture, sustains the mind and – since there is no other metaphor – also the soul.<sup>485</sup>

Reminiscent of Groothuis' arguments concerning the distinction Hitchens supposedly failed to make between *god* and *God*, Helminski goes on to claim that

the God of the mystic is not necessarily the God of sectarian religion. The mystical conception of Divinity goes beyond the narrow sectarian conceptions of God that rule in some religious circles. The Divine Creative Power, from a mystical perspective, is that which has created human nature in its own image, imbuing all human beings, not just religious believers, with a capacity to act selflessly and generously, to follow impulses other than one's own self-interest, and that this tendency is innate, or latent, in the human condition itself. Therefore, human virtue, whether it is rationalized by religious belief or not, is essentially inspired

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<sup>483</sup> Kabir Helminski, "Christopher Hitchens is Not Great," HuffingtonPost.com, 18 February 2012, accessed 31 August 2016, <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/kabir-helminski/christopher-hitchens-is-n-1-b-1158640.html>.

<sup>484</sup> Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species* (New York: Appleton and Company, 1859), 425, [http://darwin-online.org.uk/converted/pdf/1861\\_OriginNY\\_F382.pdf](http://darwin-online.org.uk/converted/pdf/1861_OriginNY_F382.pdf).

<sup>485</sup> Hitchens, *god is Not Great*, 5.

by the Divine Compassion inherent in existence. Mercy and Compassion are intrinsic to the universe and thus they are experienced in the interior spiritual life of every human being unless they are obscured by some other pathology or conditioning.<sup>486</sup>

Thus, in light of Darwin's and Hitchens' comments above, and despite his presumed intention, I would argue that Helminski has inadvertently crafted a quite palatable defense of deism, and in so doing, has effectively made Hitchens' case against religion for him. At best, it is redundant; at its worst, it is a pathological obscuration to that innate humanity we all already share.

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In his "Brief Response to Christopher Hitchens' *god is Not Great*," Neil Shenvi writes:

Anthropology would affirm that there are many, many religions which would not claim that God or the gods are necessarily good at all. For instance, the ancient Greeks knew that the gods were not absolutely good, that they were given to bouts of pettiness, were easily enraged, and generally made humans miserable. Humans may wish for a kind, wise, beneficent God who loves them. But to the ancient Greeks, the gods on Olympus were very real and unfortunately not very nice. From the perspective of biblical monotheism, the charge that God is not good is indeed meaningful, since the Bible affirms everywhere that God is very, very good. But as objections to the existence of some generic supernatural Creator, Hitchens' arguments are actually very poor.<sup>487</sup>

To respond, I would remind Dr. Shenvi of Bertrand Russell's analogy, which has come to be known as "Russell's teapot." In it, Russell states:

I ought to call myself an agnostic; but, for all practical purposes, I am an atheist. I do not think the existence of the Christian God any more probable than the existence of the Gods of Olympus or Valhalla. To take another illustration: nobody can prove that there is not between the Earth and Mars a china teapot revolving in an elliptical orbit, but nobody thinks

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<sup>486</sup> Helminski, "Christopher Hitchens is Not Great."

<sup>487</sup> Neil Shenvi, "A Brief Response to Christopher Hitchens' *god is Not Great*," Neil Shenvi Apologetics, accessed 31 August 2016, <http://www.shenvi.org/Essays/HitchensResponse.htm>.

this sufficiently likely to be taken into account in practice. I think the Christian God just as unlikely.<sup>488</sup>

In other words, failure to disprove a particular hypothesis does not immediately grant that its likelihood of proving true is a 50/50 proposition.

Nevertheless, where Jesus is concerned, Shenvi is forced to make an uncomfortable admission:

Almost everyone recognizes, as do Dawkins and Harris, that Jesus was a man of love, meekness and compassion who frequently violated social, political, and economic norms to reach out to those who most needed forgiveness and love. So far, so good. No one (in the West) objects to the Jesus of love and meekness. Yet any honest study of the New Testament shows that Jesus was not only a man of love and meekness, but also a man of integrity, justice, and legitimately terrifying righteousness. He did not preach a fuzzy message of self-acceptance. He taught that we ought to pursue God with our whole heart, mind, soul, and strength (Mark 12:30). He taught that we ought to fear sin more than we fear the amputation of a limb or even physical death (Matthew 18:8-9). He taught that God would one day judge the world and cast those who broke His law into hell for all eternity (Matthew 25:31-46). This is not a message we like to hear. I don't like to hear it. But this is the Jesus we find in Scripture.<sup>489</sup>

In addition, while attempting to refute fundamentalist arguments for the inerrancy of scripture, Shenvi inadvertently confirms them, for both the Old and New Testaments. He writes:

I would certainly affirm that it is possible to be a Christian without believing in the inerrancy of the Bible, since the earliest Christians did not even possess the whole Bible and since the Bible affirms that Christianity is a matter of our faith in Jesus. But when I become a follower of Christ, it is almost impossible to avoid noticing his reverence for, trust in, and saturation with the Old Testament. An examination of the life of Jesus reveals that he believed the Hebrew Scriptures to be God's inspired words to humanity. He cited the Scriptures constantly, He referred to it in all his teaching, and he even quoted it in the depths of his misery in the Garden of Gethsemane and on the cross. Additionally, in numerous places within the gospels, Jesus appoints his disciples to preach his message and to

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<sup>488</sup> Bertrand Russell, in Dale McGowan's *Voices of Unbelief: Documents from Atheists and Agnostics* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2012), 146.

<sup>489</sup> Shenvi, "A Brief Response to Christopher Hitchens' *god is Not Great*."

record his teaching. In the letters and accounts that make up the bulk of the New Testament, Jesus' closest followers carried out this commission, explaining to new Christians the significance of Jesus' life, death, and Resurrection. *So if we take Jesus seriously, then we will necessarily take the Bible seriously.*<sup>490</sup>

Shenvi's response to Hitchens' claims regarding the "maximum of servility" that religion imposes upon mankind is even more telling. He writes of Hitchens that

it is this bowing and scraping, this lying in the dust, this prostrate attitude towards God that he ultimately cannot bear. Now certainly, almost all religions feature some element of humility and prostration before God simply because of who He is. After all, if the personal God of theism exists, then He created the Universe. He knit us together in our mother's womb and invented the laws of quantum electrodynamics. If we tremble to meet a local celebrity, and gaze in awe at the night sky, it would be implausible to the highest degree if real contact with God did not move us to any kind of reverence.<sup>491</sup>

True, but to what "real contact" is Shenvi referring? I would also argue that words such as *reverence* and *awe* have distinctly different connotations from tremulousness and servility, and thus to hint at their interchangeableness in this, or any other, context is to duplicitously skew the conversation.

But perhaps the most interesting section of Shenvi's essay concerns his attempt(s) to reconcile the doctrines of grace and original sin with the overarching notion of a Heavenly Father who loves his children unconditionally. Shenvi writes:

Even our best deeds cannot make us acceptable to God. Sin has tainted our every action and every thought. So we ought to come away from the biblical doctrine of sin deeply humbled and broken of our self-righteousness. Our wound is incurable and we have no strength in ourselves to heal it.... [But] because I am forgiven on the basis of Jesus' death and Resurrection, I can have assurance that I am completely acceptable to God.... The gospel keeps me from the trap of hypocrisy and self-righteousness because it tells me clearly and unflinchingly of my sin. I can finally look squarely at God's law and be honest about my own failures. I seek to live a good life and to honor God not because I think I

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<sup>490</sup> Ibid., emphasis mine.

<sup>491</sup> Ibid.

am earning his approval, but because He has already given me his approval.<sup>492</sup>

Unfortunately for Shenvi, Hitchens, in his debate with former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, produced the following retort:

Once you assume a creator and a plan, it makes us objects in a cruel experiment, whereby we are created sick, and commanded to be well... over us, to supervise this, is installed a celestial dictatorship, a kind of divine North Korea. Greedy, exigent, greedy for uncritical praise from dawn until dusk and swift to punish the original sins with which it so tenderly gifted us in the very first place.<sup>493</sup>

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In “A Response to Hitchens’ *god is Not Great*,” Father Raniero Cantalamessa accuses Hitchens of cherry-picking his examples, and using semantics to sway his audience and imply his point. He writes:

Tertullian becomes a “church father” so that his “credo quia absurdum” – I believe because it is absurd – can be interpreted as the thought of Christianity as a whole, whereas it is well known that when he wrote these words (here interpreted outside of their proper context and in an inexact way) the Church considered Tertullian a heretic.

Strange that the author should criticize Tertullian, because if there is one apologist he resembles, like a reversed reflection in a mirror, it is precisely the African: The same energetic style, the same will to triumph over his adversary by burying him under a mass of apparently – but only apparently – insuperable arguments: quantity replacing quality of argument.<sup>494</sup>

Let us examine these claims. First, it is true that the quote is “here interpreted outside of [its] proper context and in an inexact way.” A more accurate translation would be “it is

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<sup>492</sup> Ibid.

<sup>493</sup> Christopher Hitchens, in David Barrett’s “Blair and Hitchens Debate Religion as Force for Good,” *The Catholic Herald*, 29 November 2010, accessed 31 August 2016, <http://www.catholicherald.co.uk/news/2010/11/29/blair-and-hitchens-debate-religions-force-for-god/>.

<sup>494</sup> Raniero Cantalamessa, “A Response to Hitchens’ *god is not Great*,” Catholic Online, 26 September 2007, accessed 31 August 2016, <http://www.catholic.org/featured/headline.php?ID=5070>.

by all means to be believed, because it is absurd.”<sup>495</sup> As for the context: the quote is taken from Tertullian’s “On the Flesh of Christ,” when the author was in the process of denouncing the so-called Marcion heresy, which (among other things) argued against the corporeal nature of Jesus. As Tertullian writes:

The Son of God was crucified; I am not ashamed because men must needs be ashamed of it. And the Son of God died; *it is by all means to be believed, because it is absurd.* And He was buried, and rose again; the fact is certain, because it is impossible. But how will all this be true in Him, if He was not Himself true – if He really had not in Himself that which might be crucified, might die, might be buried, and might rise again? I mean this flesh suffused with blood, built up with bones, interwoven with nerves, entwined with veins, a flesh which knew how to be born, and how to die, human without doubt, as born of a human being.<sup>496</sup>

What’s more, Marcionism additionally argued that the vengeful God of the Old Testament was completely incompatible with the more benevolent New Testament teachings of Jesus Christ. Thus in one sense, it actually seems fairer to consider Hitchens more closely aligned with Marcion than with Tertullian, who sought the former’s condemnation and excommunication tirelessly. And as to the Tertullian impulse to condemn those with whom he disagrees, I can allow Hitchens to speak for himself.

And here is the point, about myself and my co-thinkers. Our belief is not a belief. Our principles are not a faith. We do not rely solely upon science and reason, because these are necessary rather than sufficient factors, but we distrust anything that contradicts science or outrages reason. We may differ on many things, but what we respect is free inquiry, open mindedness, and the pursuit of ideas for their own sake. We do not hold our convictions dogmatically: the disagreement between Professor Stephen Jay Gould and Professor Richard Dawkins, concerning “punctuated evolution” and the unfilled gaps in post-Darwinian theory, is

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<sup>495</sup> Tertullian, “On the Flesh of Christ,” trans. Peter Holmes, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 3, eds. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe. (Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885), Revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight, 2009, accessed 1 September 2016, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0315.htm>.

<sup>496</sup> *Ibid.*, emphasis mine.

quite wide as well as quite deep, but we shall resolve it by evidence and reasoning and not by mutual excommunication.<sup>497</sup>

And so although it would be slightly more accurate to compare Hitchens to Marcion than to Tertullian, in the end, to compare him to either is to completely misrepresent his (and their) true intentions.

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In his article, “The Unbeliever,” Stephen Prothero writes:

Among religious leaders only the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. comes off well. But in the gospel according to Hitchens whatever good King did accrues to his humanism rather than his Christianity. In fact, King was not actually a Christian at all, argues Hitchens, since he rejected the sadism that characterizes the teachings of Jesus. “No supernatural force was required to make the case against racism” in postwar America, writes Hitchens. But he’s wrong. It was the prophetic faith of black believers that gave them the strength to stand up to the indignities of fire hoses and police dogs. As for those white liberals inspired by Paine, Mencken and Hitchens’s other secular heroes, well, they stood down.<sup>498</sup>

Nathan Raab, however, in an article for Forbes magazine argued that “Excluding The Bible, which he [King] quoted often, his literary references go back nearly four centuries and cover at least four continents. Better than most, Dr. King peppered his addresses and writings with powerful proverbs, quotations, and complex metaphors, some of which he explained and others which would speak for themselves.”<sup>499</sup> Of these, Raab refers specifically to the writings and ideologies of ten individuals: Thomas Carlyle, William Cullen Bryant, James Russell Lowell, John Donne, Gandhi, Henry David Thoreau, Leo Tolstoy, Washington Irving, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and Ralph Waldo Emerson.

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<sup>497</sup> Hitchens, *god is not Great*, 5.

<sup>498</sup> Stephen Prothero, “The Unbeliever,” *The Washington Post*, 3 May 2007, accessed 1 September 2016, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/05/03/AR2007050301907.html>.

<sup>499</sup> Nathan Raab, “10 People Who Inspired Martin Luther King (And He Hoped Would Inspire Us),” *Forbes*, 20 January 2014, accessed 1 September 2016, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/nathanraab/2014/01/20/10-people-who-inspired-martin-luther-king-and-he-hoped-would-inspire-us/#4f87b3045aa1>.

As to King's reliance upon scripture, I should once again allow Hitchens to mount his own defense. (Among other things, one will notice that Hitchens spoke of King's departure from the "sadism" of the Old Testament, not from the teachings of Jesus, as Prothero claimed. Of course, as Neil Shenvi has demonstrated, "an examination of the life of Jesus reveals that he believed the Hebrew Scriptures to be God's inspired words to humanity. He cited the Scriptures constantly.... [consequently] if we take Jesus seriously, then we will necessarily take the Bible seriously.")<sup>500</sup> Hitchens writes:

But the examples King gave from the books of Moses were, fortunately for all of us, metaphors and allegories. His most imperative preaching was that of nonviolence. In his version of the story, there are no savage punishments and genocidal bloodlettings. Nor are there cruel commandments about the stoning of children and the burning of witches. His persecuted and despised people were not promised the territory of others, nor were they incited to carry out the pillage and murder of other tribes. In the face of endless provocation and brutality, King beseeched his followers to become what they for a while truly became; the moral tutors of America and of the world beyond its shores. He in effect forgave his murderer in advance: the one detail that would have made his last public words flawless and perfect would have been an actual declaration to that effect. But the difference between him and the "prophets of Israel" could not possibly have been more marked. If the population had been raised from its mother's knee to hear the story of Xenophon's *Anabasis*, and the long wearying dangerous journey of the Greeks to their triumphant view of the sea, that allegory might have done just as well. As it was, though, the "Good Book" was the only point of reference that everybody had in common.<sup>501</sup>

And, as he subsequently stated in an interview with Jon Weiner:

The people who actually organized the March on Washington, Bayard Rustin and A. Phillip Randolph, were both secularists and socialists. The whole case for the emancipation of black America had already been made perfectly well by secularists. I don't particularly object to the tactic of quoting the Bible against the white Christian institutions that maintained at first slavery and then segregation. But there's no authority in the Bible for

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<sup>500</sup> Shenvi, "A Brief Response to Christopher Hitchens' *god is Not Great*."

<sup>501</sup> Hitchens, *god is not Great*, 174-5.



civil rights – none whatever. There is authority for slavery and segregation.<sup>502</sup>

But undaunted, Prothero continues:

Hitchens claims that some of his best friends are believers. If so, he doesn't know much about his best friends. He writes about religious people the way northern racists used to talk about "Negroes" – with feigned knowing and a sneer. *God Is Not Great* assumes a childish definition of religion and then criticizes religious people for believing such foolery. But it is Hitchens who is the naïf. To read this oddly innocent book as gospel is to believe that ordinary Catholics are proud of the Inquisition, that ordinary Hindus view masturbation as an offense against Krishna, and that ordinary Jews cheer when a renegade Orthodox rebbe sucks the blood off a freshly circumcised penis. It is to believe that faith is always blind and rituals always empty – that there is no difference between taking communion and drinking the Kool-Aid.<sup>503</sup>

Notice how, having failed to make his case, Prothero is reduced to relating Hitchens' remarks to either inadvertent racism and/or indiscriminate ignorance. Of course, one need look no further than the holy texts in question for a ready supply of support for such inhumane/indefensible positions. But this fact notwithstanding, Prothero then claims that Hitchens believes the religious are "proud" of their numerous offences over the centuries. Not so; Hitchens is merely asking the faithful (moderate and fundamentalist alike) to acknowledge that such atrocities were not the result of a misinterpretation of scripture, but rather of a literal reading of its contents. And because they hold (in at least some sense) to the same texts and teachings as their religious forebears, the modern-day faithful must either admit their tacit approval of such historical misdeeds or else announce their outright condemnation and apostasy. The problem is that, almost without exception, they are willing to do neither.

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<sup>502</sup> Christopher Hitchens, Interview with Jon Weiner for Truthdig.com, 6 June 2007, accessed 1 September 2016, [http://www.truthdig.com/report/item/20070606\\_christopher\\_hitchens\\_religion\\_poisons\\_everything](http://www.truthdig.com/report/item/20070606_christopher_hitchens_religion_poisons_everything).

<sup>503</sup> Prothero, "The Unbeliever."

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For his part, Preston Jones, in his article, “Christopher Hitchens Explains It All for You,” resorts to more piecemeal assaults. For instance, he writes that

Hitchens notices that human beings have a need to worship, but he denies that anything is to be worshipped. He criticizes the Bible for not standing up to the rigors of contemporary forensics, but he knows that ancient literature is fundamentally different from government reports. (It really is absurd to critique Genesis for not mentioning plesiosaurs and pterodactyls.) Hitchens hymns the praises of the knowledge gained from the Human Genome Project, but he doesn’t mention what he surely knows – that the project’s leader, Francis Collins, has made his Christian commitment quite public.<sup>504</sup>

There are at least two problems with Jones’ statement, and I shall deal with the latter first. Admittedly, Francis Collins was the head of the Human Genome Project, and he was and is a Christian. However, his elevation to that position was based solely on his professional and scientific credentials, not upon his evangelism. As Collins himself states in an interview for PBS:

On the one hand, we have scientists who basically adopt evolution as their faith, and think there’s no need for God to explain why life exists. On the other hand, we have people who are believers who are so completely sold on the literal interpretation of the first book of the Bible that they are rejecting very compelling scientific data about the age of the earth and the relatedness of living beings. It’s unnecessary. I think God gave us an opportunity through the use of science to understand the natural world. The idea that some are asking people to disbelieve our scientific data in order to prove that they believe in God is so unnecessary.<sup>505</sup>

Despite the many issues Hitchens would undoubtedly take with such a statement, it nevertheless demonstrates that, for Collins, science is sufficient to understand the natural

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<sup>504</sup> Preston Jones, “Christopher Hitchens Explains It All for You,” BooksandCulture.com, 30 April 2007, accessed 1 September 2016, <http://www.booksandculture.com/articles/webexclusives/2007/april/070430.html?paging=off>.

<sup>505</sup> Francis Collins, “The Question of God,” PBS, 2004, accessed 2 September 2016, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/questionofgod/voices/collins.html>.

world. Thus, one could logically argue that the Human Genome Project is sufficiently sheltered from the narrow intentions and concerns of incompatibility that often come from religious conviction. It is a strictly scientific enterprise.

As to Jones' astonishment that Hitchens would admonish Old Testament authors for their lack of archeological and geologic knowledge, Hitchens responds:

No dinosaurs or plesiosaurs or pterodactyls are specified, because the authors did not know of their existence, let alone of their supposedly special and immediate creation. Nor are any marsupials mentioned, because Australia – the next candidate after Mesoamerica for a new “Eden” – was not on any known map. Most important, in Genesis man is not awarded dominion over germs and bacteria because the existence of these necessary yet dangerous fellow creatures was not known or understood.... This is forgivable on the part of the provincial yokels, obviously, but then what of their supreme guide and wrathful tyrant? Perhaps he was made in their image, even if not graven?... And [even] if it had been known or understood, it would at once have become apparent that these forms of life had ‘dominion’ *over us*, and would continue to enjoy it uncontested until the priests had been elbowed aside and medical research at last given an opportunity. Even today, the balance between Homo sapiens and Louis Pasteur’s “invisible army” of microbes is by no means decided, but DNA has at least enabled us to sequence the genome of our lethal rivals, like the avian flu virus, and to elucidate what we have in common.<sup>506</sup>

Still, Jones continues:

But here we come to the really relevant point about this book’s irrelevance. The overwhelming majority of people who have lived and who live now are “religious” in some way. Add to that the obvious fact (pointed to so nicely in the early chapters of Genesis) that, given enough time, human beings will screw up everything. “Religion” isn’t the problem. This book could have just as easily been titled *People Are Stupid*. Hitchens knows this, and he has the decency to acknowledge the mind-bending atrocities committed by atheist governments such as existed in Stalin’s Soviet Union and Pol Pot’s Cambodia. There’s a reason why people need salvation.<sup>507</sup>

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<sup>506</sup> Hitchens, *god is Not Great*, 90,107, 90.

<sup>507</sup> Jones, “Christopher Hitchens Explains It All for You.”

Indeed. (Some) people are stupid and in need of salvation. Hitchens would only argue that it is salvation from ignorance, not sin, that is most warranted and that will ultimately help us to escape our current wanderings in the windswept deserts of unfounded faith.

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In his article, “An Atheist Critique of Christopher Hitchens,” Phil Ebersole argues that “religious congregations provide people with community, ritual, moral ideals and a way to understand their feelings of transcendence. I have been impressed throughout my life by the simple, unpretentious goodness of ordinary religious people. Hitchens was unable to acknowledge this.”<sup>508</sup> However, Ebersole goes on to demonstrate Hitchens’ point that such benefits need not be the province of religious faith alone. He writes:

What religion does for people is to make them stronger, not necessarily better. Following a religion can empower you to overcome addiction, laziness, cowardice and other sins of the flesh, but it only makes you more kindly, forgiving, humble, patient and dutiful if you want these qualities to begin with; religion equally well reinforces intolerance, chauvinism, ignorance and ruthlessness.

I am a Unitarian Universalist, a member of a small sect which affirms certain religious values, but requires no pretense of belief in any religious doctrines. I have no answers for the metaphysical questions that religion claims to answer. Unitarian-Universalism gives me community, ritual and moral support. I have secular humanist friends who have no need for that. This is fine. It doesn’t mean there’s anything wrong with them; it doesn’t mean there’s anything wrong with me.<sup>509</sup>

According to the Unitarian Universalist Association, their “faith” is based upon seven basic principles. These are as follows:

1st Principle: The inherent worth and dignity of every person;

2nd Principle: Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;

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<sup>508</sup> Phil Ebersole, “An Atheist Critique of Christopher Hitchens,” (blog), 23 June 2013, accessed 2 September 2016, <https://philebersole.wordpress.com/2013/06/23/an-atheist-critique-of-christopher-hitchens/>.

<sup>509</sup> Ibid.

3rd Principle: Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;

4th Principle: A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;

5th Principle: The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;

6th Principle: The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;

7th Principle: Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.<sup>510</sup>

However, these principles are prefaced by the following remarks from the “Reverend” Barbara Wells ten Hove: “The Principles are not dogma or doctrine, but rather a guide for those of us who choose to join and participate in Unitarian Universalist religious communities.”<sup>511</sup> I would first argue that nothing in these seven principles, especially when considered en masse, is even reminiscent of any sort of religious ideology with which I am familiar. But even should one dispute that statement, these contextualizing remarks from Wells ten Hove (claiming that even the principles themselves are open to subjective interpretation and voluntary adherence or rejection) demonstrates that they are in fact an utterly secularist community, politely and politically hidden beneath a pseudo-religious, and thus socially acceptable, veneer. Of course, Hitchens might disagree.

In an interview with Jennie Rosenberg Gritz, Hitchens once said:

I’ve spoken at Unitarian churches very often. It seems to me, again, that they don’t give me enough to disagree with. But as for lumping them in, I’ll say this. Have you read Camus’s *La Peste*? At the end, the plague is over, the nightmare has dissipated, the city has returned to health. Normality has resumed. But he ends by saying that underneath the city, in

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<sup>510</sup> “Our Unitarian Universalist Principles,” Unitarian Universalist Association, 2016, 2 September 2016, <http://www.uua.org/beliefs/what-we-believe/principles>.

<sup>511</sup> Barbara Well ten Hove, in “Our Unitarian Universalist Principles,” Unitarian Universalist Association, 2016, accessed 2 September 2016, <http://www.uua.org/beliefs/what-we-believe/principles>.

the pipes and in the sewers, the rats were still there. And they'd one day send their vermin up again to die on the streets of a free city. That's how I feel about religion. Thanks to advances of science, education, political tolerance, pluralism and so on, religion can now be one option among many – who cares who's a Unitarian or who's a Congregationalist? But in the texts, the actual texts, there is always this toxin that's ready to be revived. What I say is, "Do you believe this stuff or don't you?" In other words, "In what respect are you different from a humanist?" The authority of the texts is always on the side of the extremists, because they do say what they say. So be aware of this danger. That's all I'm arguing.<sup>512</sup>

Either way, it seems that both Hitchens and Ebersole ultimately recognize that "community, ritual, and moral support," can be found when and wherever two human beings convene with such intentions in mind.

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Even Hitchens' own brother, Peter, argues that Christopher's impressions of religion are somewhat inaccurate, or at the very least, incomplete. Speaking of *god is Not Great*, Peter argues:

There is one chapter in this book whose implications are sinister. It is Chapter 16, which attempts to suggest that religion is child abuse. On the basis of such arguments, matched by similar urgings from Professor Richard Dawkins, I can see a movement growing to outlaw the teaching of faith to children. Then what? Liberal world reformers make the grave mistake of thinking that if you abolish a great force you don't like, it will be replaced by empty space. We abolished the gallows, for example, and found we had created an armed police and an epidemic of prison suicides. We abolished school selection by exams, and found we had replaced it with selection by money. And so on.<sup>513</sup>

However, this argument is tantamount to a camel in search of that proverbial final straw, because as Christopher once noted:

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<sup>512</sup> Christopher Hitchens, in Jennie Rothenberg Gritz's, "Transcending God," *The Atlantic*, July 2007, accessed 2 September 2016, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2007/07/transcending-god/306076/>.

<sup>513</sup> Peter Hitchens, in "Hitchens vs Hitchens." Mail Online. DailyMail.com, 2 June 2007, accessed 2 September 2016, [http://www.dailymail.co.uk/pages/live/articles/news/newscomment.html?in\\_article\\_id=459427&in\\_page\\_id=1787&in\\_a\\_source](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/pages/live/articles/news/newscomment.html?in_article_id=459427&in_page_id=1787&in_a_source).

If you don't know what's in King James and how it sounds, you won't understand a lot of what's in Shakespeare or Milton or John Donne or George Herbert, to name only a few examples. Enormous numbers of phrases in common use would be opaque to you. You wouldn't know where they came from. They would be empty.... Religion was our first attempt at philosophy. It was the first and the worst, but it's still part of our history and tradition. As it is, children don't know where anything comes from – they don't know the literary canon or the historical record. So I think to be religiously literate is very important. I also think if you start showing them the stuff as they approach the age of literacy and reason, there isn't the slightest chance they're going to believe in it.<sup>514</sup>

As Dawkins, Dennett, Harris, and Hitchens have all repeatedly argued, a well-rounded knowledge of *all* the world's major faiths (in contrast to the teachings solely of one's own) is required not only for an appreciation of history and literature, but also as a foundational prerequisite of becoming a true and productive citizen of the world. As Dawkins once stated:

The *Bible Literacy Report* published in Fairfax, Virginia... provides many examples, and cites overwhelming agreement by teachers of English literature that biblical literacy is essential to full appreciation of their subject. Doubtless the equivalent is true of French, German, Russian, Italian, Spanish and other great European literatures. And, for speakers of Arabic and Indian languages, knowledge of the Qur'an or the Bhagavad Gita is presumably just as essential for full appreciation of their literary heritage. Finally, to round off the list, you can't appreciate Wagner (whose music, as has been wittily said, is better than it sounds) without knowing your way around the Norse gods.<sup>515</sup>

As a result, (to my knowledge) none of the New Atheists have suggested removing world religion from any educational curriculums. Quite the opposite: they would like to see such efforts expanded. Odd then that so many of the faithful do not share in their wishes.

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In his editorial, "God is Greater than Christopher Hitchens," Shmuley Boteach notes that

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<sup>514</sup> Hitchens, in Jennie Rothenberg Gritz's, "Transcending God."

<sup>515</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 344.

in his book, Hitchens mocks the Ten Commandments. Didn't the ancient Israelites already know that thievery and murder were wrong? Quite right. Mankind would have easily legislated much of the morality contained in the Bible even without God. But then the whole point of the Ten Commandments is the establishment of absolute, divine morality. These are not laws legislated by man and subject, therefore, to human tampering. They are the absolute rules that dare never be changed - at any time, at any place, under any circumstances.<sup>516</sup>

I admit to being somewhat confused by this statement. On the one hand, it appears that Rabbi Boteach is arguing that "absolute, divine morality," is inherently superior to the (more malleable) human variety. On the other, he claims that (all else being equal) both could and would have arrived at precisely the same list of commandments and proscriptions. What, then, distinguishes one from the other? According to Boteach, it is that the rules inspired by divine morality are absolute and not "subject... to human tampering."

Leaving aside for the moment the fact that a number of the commandments do not deal with moral issues of any kind (divine or otherwise), I would respond that it seems Boteach is conflating moral absolutism with basic humanism. For instance, someone who absolutely believes "thou shalt do no murder" is unequivocally bound by that commandment, and may admit of no exception (even in the possession of subsequent divine permission). So either God is *immoral* for ordering the murder of the Amalekites (1 Samuel 15:3) or his people are immoral for ignoring his previous commandment, or both. On the contrary, humanism might likewise admit of a near-universal morality, but in this instance, it would be based on the commonality of the human condition and thus open to revision and improvement whenever humanity deems it logically or evidentially

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<sup>516</sup> Shmuley Boteach, "God is greater than Christopher Hitchens." *The Jerusalem Post*, 3 June 2007, accessed 2 September 2016, <http://www.jpost.com/Opinion/Editorials/God-is-greater-than-Christopher-Hitchens>.



appropriate.<sup>517</sup> (As a result, one doubts that it could have so callously commanded, or even sanctioned, such genocide, no matter the circumstance.) This is how the United States of America reasonably and even simultaneously manages to both revere and amend its constitution, and I would suggest that it is also the reason the other 603 commandments contained within the Bible are not all still considered as absolutist or morally binding as Rabbi Boteach's words would imply. What's more, I would contend that it is this ability to revise and to improve upon our understanding of ethics and the treatment of our fellow man that makes any of our actions or beliefs truly *moral* in the first place.

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In his otherwise approving article, "Unbelievable," even fellow New Atheist Dan Dennett argues that

at their best, [Hitchens'] indictments are trenchant and witty, and the book is a treasure house of zingers worthy of Mark Twain or H. L. Mencken. At other times, his impatience with the smug denial of the self-righteous gets the better of him, and then he strikes glancing blows at best, and occasionally adopts a double standard, excusing his naturalist heroes for their few lapses into religious gullibility on the grounds that they couldn't have known any better at the time, while leaving no such wiggle room for the defenders of religion over the ages.<sup>518</sup>

But is this so-called double standard one of Hitchens' making or is it instead one that has long existed between the religious and the secular? The distinction Dennett would make between Hitchens' "naturalist heroes," and "the defenders of religion over the ages" is likely one that both groups would suggest and accept. Science admits of no certainty;

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<sup>517</sup> It might be useful here to think of the United States' ever-evolving legal distinctions between first degree murder, felony murder, second degree murder, voluntary manslaughter, and involuntary manslaughter, as well as the non-crime of justifiable homicide. These gradations have only been possible because of the "human tampering" that Rabbi Boteach seems to despise, but they have almost certainly resulted in a more humane (and thereby more moral) criminal justice system.

<sup>518</sup> Daniel C. Dennett, "Unbelievable," Boston.com, 13 May 2007, accessed 2 September 2016, <http://www.boston.com/ae/books/articles/2007/05/13/unbelievable>.

even when the evidence rests entirely on one side of the scale, a good scientist always acknowledges the possibility that future evidence may yet come to light... potentially even enough to change his or her mind. The same could be said of the philosopher's reverence for logic: regardless of one's personal affinity for or belief in a proposition, a better argument could always potentially be presented (i.e. the truth will invariably out and logic will be the means and/or mechanism by which this outing will occur). The religious mind, by contrast, admits of no such possibility (at least where essential tenets of the faith are concerned). There is every reason to expect that Hitchens' naturalist heroes would, today, willingly reexamine the evidence and, when and where reasonable to do so, alter their opinions on science, philosophy, *and* faith. They can be free of their former lack of evidence, errors of logic, or failures of the imagination in a way that the religious can never be. No matter how far humanity progresses socially or how much we increase our knowledge, for the religious mind, all new data must invariably be weighed and measured against the old. One hopes Dennett might agree, and perhaps he does. Here are the words that came immediately upon the heel of his previous comments:

But these excesses are themselves a valuable element of this wake-up call. They say to every complacent but ignorant churchgoer: look how angry this well-informed critic of religion is. Perhaps when you know what he has uncovered about the words and deeds of religions around the world you will share his sense of betrayal of what is best in humankind.<sup>519</sup>

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Most of Varadaraja V. Raman 's criticisms seem to stem from Hitchens' tendency to employ somewhat inflammatory language in his attack(s) upon various members of the religious community. In his review, he writes: "most of Hitchens' narratives are well-reasoned, his arguments are incisive, and his anecdotes are telling. Unfortunately, some

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<sup>519</sup> Ibid.

of them are marred by ad hominem attacks, with words like *fraud*, *hypocrite*, *fool*, and *idiot*.”<sup>520</sup> In choosing to punctuate his condemnations of the faith and faithful with such provocative language, Raman believes Hitchens has neglected what should have been a more important focus of his book:

Gone are the days when the polished language and refined reasoning of Bertrand Russell were the model for attacks on religion. Just as the boundary lines in movies have gradually been stretched in the use of foul language, coarse attacks on religion are also becoming more daring and explicit. Now you can use the word stupid half a dozen times in a book that is less than 300 pages to make your point. Such language is quite acceptable, except in regions and religions where the author’s physical existence will be put at risk. Indeed, the strongest argument against religions should be, aside from the superstitions they engender, the threats they pose to free thought and speech wherever their spokesmen hold power over people’s lives. Hitchens doesn’t devote enough pages to this.<sup>521</sup>

Raman’s preoccupation with semantics and tone continues:

In making his case for why religions ought to be dispensed with, Hitchens lists a series of charges against them (p. 205), all of which are valid up to a point, and none of which is taken literally by countless practitioners of the major religions in this day and age. The first of these, “presenting a false picture of the world to the innocent and the credulous” reveals his bias: the pictures are not *false* (which implies intention to cheat), but *mistaken* (like the 18th century phlogiston theory), formulated centuries ago by thinkers who did not have the benefit of the knowledge and insights we possess today. We can in fairness blame the folks who adopt them today, but not the originators of the ideas.<sup>522</sup>

But the distinction Raman wishes to make between *false* and *mistaken*, and the phlogiston analogy he employs to support it, are both problematic at best. To my knowledge, no one who upheld the phlogiston theory of combustion did so from a position of absolute

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<sup>520</sup> Varadaraja V. Raman, “Review of Christopher Hitchens' *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*,” MetaNexus.net, 5 December 2007, accessed 2 September 2016, <http://www.metanexus.net/book-review/review-christopher-hitchens-god-not-great-how-religion-poisons-everything>.

<sup>521</sup> Ibid.

<sup>522</sup> Ibid.

authority and power, but rather from a perspective of and with respect toward an accepted (albeit nascent) scientific methodology. As such, by means of experimentation, it was eventually disproven and replaced with the more scientifically sound oxygen theory. But in the interim and aftermath, and despite the incendiary nature of the debate, no one was ever burned for their failure to adhere to the phlogiston theory or for their subsequent failure to cease such allegiance when science had proven it to be *mistaken*. The same simply cannot be said for those poor souls who espoused belief in Adoptionism, Antinomianism, Apollinarism, Arianism, Marcionism, Montanism, Nestorianism, Pelagianism, or any of the countless other so-called heresies with which Christianity has historically concerned itself. As a result, I would argue that those who maintain that their beliefs are *unfalsifiable*, and subsequently proceed to enforce that belief through persecution, deserve all the rancor and ridicule Hitchens' critique can manage.<sup>523</sup>

Nevertheless, Raman continues: "He lists the doctrine of blood sacrifice as another evil. But not all religions subscribe to this: Christianity, Buddhism, Sikhism, Jainism, and Vaishnava Hinduism are generally against this practice, and they include vast numbers of religious people."<sup>524</sup> And while I would tend to agree with the majority of this statement, Raman's decision to include a religion that is based entirely upon blood sacrifice (Christianity: i.e. Christ's crucifixion) perhaps speaks to a subconscious bias of his own.

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<sup>523</sup> In other words, were there no ulterior motive(s) or ancillary concern(s) surrounding one's ostensibly *mistaken* religious beliefs, then there would be no need to so steadfastly and unquestioningly adhere to them in the face of contradictory evidence (or critical opinion). It is precisely because these beliefs so often confer an authoritative aura and/or cloak of righteous reassurance around those who profess them that the religious are reluctant to alter or abolish them. Conversely, a scientist can freely admit of a mistake without imperiling his or her respect and position within the scientific community; in fact, such open-mindedness often results in the enhancement of both. The same cannot always (or even often) be said of the comparative and inescapable close-mindedness of religious belief.

<sup>524</sup> Raman, "Review of Christopher Hitchens' *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*."

His refutation of the fourth and final of Hitchens' charges is even more telling:

The fourth charge is “the doctrine of eternal reward and/or punishment.” Again, a valid criticism, but it works well among the masses. When artifacts were stolen from the Baghdad museum after the fall of Hussein, an Imam issued a call to the vandals, threatening them with eternal residence in the Islamic hell: sure enough, many items promptly found their way back to where they belonged. A misguided doctrine for sure, but one that served a purpose.<sup>525</sup>

Excusing the immorality of such a statement, I would argue that this also serves to demonstrate the problem of Raman's refutation of Hitchens' first argument concerning *false* claims. As a means of control, “the doctrine of eternal reward and/or punishment” has undoubtedly served a purpose. Unfortunately, that purpose has never been to accurately represent reality, but rather to bend our perceptions of it to the authoritative will of religion and those who purport to lead it.

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In her review of *god is Not Great*, Wendy Kaminer writes:

For every act of cruelty associated with religion, believers will point to acts of compassion – for which Hitchens credits humanism, not religion. I'm not sure what he means by humanism; I credit – and blame – human nature. The suggestion that humanism (or any nontheistic belief system) is responsible for all the good that men and women do, while religion, poisoning everything, is responsible for evil seems a bit unfair. But it complements the tendency of believers to credit “true” religion for virtue, while blaming false religions, or no religion, for vice.<sup>526</sup>

A seemingly fair observation, until one considers just what Kaminer means by human nature. Generally speaking, human nature is defined as those characteristics which humans *naturally* possess, free from the constraints or influences of culture or creed.

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<sup>525</sup> Ibid.

<sup>526</sup> Wendy Kaminer, “Review: *god is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*,” TheHumanist.com, 22 August 2007, accessed 2 September 2016, <http://thehumanist.com/magazine/september-october-2007/reviews/book/god-is-not-great-how-religion-poisons-everything>.

Thus when Hitchens speaks of humanism, one could reasonably argue that he is referring to the collective efforts of humans to elevate and enlighten their fellow human beings to their former and original status. Religion, by contrast, generally speaks to either the evils or the incompleteness/imperfections of humanity, and is almost always one of the first voices whispering in our ears that our human nature is tainted and thus in need of something outside of ourselves in order to save it from itself.

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In his review for *Paste Magazine*, Denis Covington asks:

What then of the National Socialist scientists who conducted experiments on Jewish children in Hitler's death camps? Clearly psychopaths and brutes, they did not claim "a heavenly warrant" for the cruelty they inflicted. Should they, too, have been "understood" since they were not committing their crimes in the name of God, but in the name of science?<sup>527</sup>

But is this critique accurate? After all, the entire thrust of the Third Reich's racist ideology can be traced to Hitler's mistaken belief in the so-called Aryan/Dravidian myth.

As Ishaan Tharoor explains in his article for *Time Magazine*:

The idea of the Aryan race has seemed historical fact ever since the Nazis embraced its myth. Seeking a racial foil to those dubious Semites, they arrived upon the Aryans – a tribe of all-conquering Central Asian chariot-riders and horse lords who supposedly swept through India and Iran ("land of the Aryans") a bit less than 4,000 years ago before depositing their linguistic legacy in what's now Europe. The Nazis appropriated the swastika, an ancient sign of Vedic Hinduism – itself supposedly a legacy of the Aryans – as their totem. Heinrich Himmler, who grew obsessed with locating his *volk's* ancestral patrimony, thought of his SS as another form of the Hindu Kshatriya, or warrior, caste and reputedly walked around with a scroll copy of the *Bhagavad Gita*, that famous passage from the epic *Mahabharata* that counsels man on ethical action.<sup>528</sup>

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<sup>527</sup> Denis Covington, "Christopher Hitchens: *God is Not Great*," *Paste Magazine*, 9 May 2007, accessed 3 September 2016, <https://www.pastemagazine.com/articles/2007/05/christopher-hitchens-god-is-not-great.html>.

<sup>528</sup> Ishaan Tharoor, "The Aryan Race: Time to Forget About It?" *Time*, 15 December 2011, accessed 3 September 2016, <http://world.time.com/2011/12/15/the-aryan-race-time-to-forget-about-it/>.

In light of this evidence, I think it's reasonable to conclude that Covington's arguments, well-intentioned though they may be, are ultimately specious. The Nazis who placed those Jewish children in Hitler's death camps did in fact believe they could claim "a heavenly warrant" for their actions, only perhaps not from the one most presumably believe.

Covington, however, continues:

When Hitchens recites the horrendous persecutions inflicted on authority of the Church of Rome, he often leaves the impression that these were mostly crimes committed by believers against unbelievers, but history is rarely so neat. The Anabaptists in 16th-century Antwerp were themselves believers in a just and loving God, but they were nonetheless burned at the stake, buried alive, drowned, eviscerated and hanged simply because they refused to baptize infants (their logic being that baptism should be reserved for professing believers who had attained the age of reason). The "rational mammal" (a Hitchens conceit) would probably conclude that the motives for all of these crimes, even if precisely deduced, would be immaterial; that the perpetrators were monsters, whatever their faith; and that the victims, even if believers, shouldn't in any way be blamed for the horrors visited upon them.<sup>529</sup>

Again, I am confused. Covington appears to be attempting to refute Hitchens' argument that "religion poisons everything" by claiming that religious violence was not confined solely to apostates and infidels but was likewise visited upon countless dissenting viewpoints within any number of individual faiths. If so, then point taken. However, his argument that such actions should not (indeed cannot) be blamed on faith, is completely discredited by his own example of the Anabaptists and the reason for their slaughter at the hands of the Catholic Church. Outside of their respective faiths and the minute differences among them, what reasons for antagonism and persecution remain? I would contend that the Catholics' willingness to kill and the Anabaptists' willingness to die can

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<sup>529</sup> Covington, "Christopher Hitchens: *God is Not Great*."

only be attributable to their faith. Thus, contrary to Covington's claims, I do not think we could even consider it to have been immaterial to the issue at hand.

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In his article, "Atheist Crusaders," Phillip E. Johnson writes:

On the frivolous side, Hitchens likes to deflate supposedly great men by calling them "mammals," but this derisory term brings in the problem of self-reference. While Hitchens never refers to the authorities on his side as "mammals," reserving that category for those whom he wishes to belittle, it will not escape the reader that if "great men" are only mammals, then so are scientists, including the esteemed Charles Darwin and the not-quite-so-esteemed Richard Dawkins, and so, of course, is Hitchens himself. Which raises the question: Why should we take seriously any speculation by a mere mammal, or even the consensus of mammal opinion, about the origin of its species, no matter how much evidence the mammals imagine themselves to have gathered?<sup>530</sup>

Aside from his semantic squabbling, Johnson seems to be suggesting that because the religious and the secular are both mammalian, the enormous disparity between the amount of evidence each side is able to bolster in support of its cause is ultimately irrelevant. One would hope this is not the case, but as for Johnson's criticism that Hitchens describes only the religious as mammalian, one could argue it is a consequence of the fact that they present nothing in the way of science or logic that would supersede their innate and undisputed biology and thus lend credence to their claims.<sup>531</sup>

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<sup>530</sup> Phillip E. Johnson, "Atheist Crusaders," *Touchstone: A Journal of Mere Christianity* (Spring 2010), accessed 3 September 2016, <http://www.touchstonemag.com/archives/article.php?id=23-02-009-c>.

<sup>531</sup> When Johnson asks why we should consider "any speculation by a mere mammal, or even the consensus of mammal opinion," particularly as it relates to the origin of species, he demonstrates his fundamental misunderstanding and/or misrepresentation of the entire scientific enterprise. Speculation may be the genesis of the genre, and consensus may indeed be the culmination of the process, but the intervening methodological strenuousness between those two scientific bookends is the connective tissue that serves to bridge initial uncertainty with subsequent substantiveness. In other words, in science, erroneous speculations and unwarranted consensuses are eventually amended or eliminated by the self-corrective mechanisms present within the methodology itself, regardless of the personal agendas and/or shortcomings of its practitioner(s).



Johnson, however, continues his semantical assault on Hitchens polemical style.

He writes:

Hitchens has two besetting faults: He does not define his terms carefully, and he does not know where to stop. The latter quality was evident in his obsessive efforts to hound Henry Kissinger as a war criminal and to discredit Mother Teresa for her resolute opposition to abortion. Both faults are evident in *God Is Not Great*. The subtitle of this book is *How Religion Poisons Everything*, yet Hitchens throws out accusations without bothering to define “religion” or, for that matter, “everything.” (Does the latter include, for example, art, music, and literature?) Looseness with definitions helps Hitchens blame whatever is wrong with the world on “religion.”<sup>532</sup>

While it is true that Hitchens never explicitly defines religion in *god is Not Great*, it is safe to say that he would have been both aware and comfortable with Daniel Dennett’s definition in *Breaking the Spell*. Dennett writes, “Tentatively, I propose to define religions as social systems whose participants avow belief in a supernatural agent or agents whose approval is to be sought. This is, of course, a circuitous way of articulating the idea that a religion without God or gods is like a vertebrate without a backbone.”<sup>533</sup> As for Hitchens’ failure to define the word *everything*, I believe I can help. It means “all things,” and yes, it includes art, music, and literature. While Johnson might attempt to argue that Da Vinci’s *Last Supper*, Handel’s *Messiah*, or Milton’s *Paradise Lost* are hardly poisoned by their explicitly religious contents, I would counter that the artistic, musical, and literary genres to which they belong have undoubtedly been poisoned by the Church’s historic impetus to ban or destroy any such offerings that did not religiously conform to their preconceived ideas and sensibilities. Pagan and/or heretical art, music, and literature all but assuredly suffered much the same fate as the blasphemous beliefs

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<sup>532</sup> Johnson, “Atheist Crusaders.”

<sup>533</sup> Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, 9.

themselves. Thus, when measured by that which we've lost (or that which was never permitted to be), Hitchens can rightly say that, yes, "religion poisons everything."<sup>534</sup>

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In his review, Sam Schulman writes:

At heart Hitchens is an unrelieved misanthrope. And, to his credit, he does exhibit a deeper familiarity with human depravity than any of our other anti-religionist authors, whose faith in the perfectibility of mankind is almost comically touching. The question, given his root-and-branch misanthropy, is where on earth he derives his conviction that mankind would be better off without religion. The answer would seem to be: nowhere. Take, for instance, the phenomenon of sexual repression, which Hitchens blames on religion and regards (it goes without saying) as an unmitigated evil. But sexual repression, in one form or another, has characterized every human community in history, and always will. Religion can be a highly efficient means of enforcing sexual repression; but if it did not exist, some other means would have been found to impose limitations on the expression of human sexuality.<sup>535</sup>

Admittedly, Schulman might be right. Humanity may yet find secular means of imposing "limitations on the expression of human sexuality." In fact, in terms of medical science's staunch opposition to such sexual practices as incest and pedophilia, one could argue that it already does. (Conversely, it should be noted that the holy texts of all three Abrahamic religions exhibit, and in some cases even appear to endorse, such despicable behavior.) But as for the forms of sexual expression which religions most frequently abhor, namely those of fornication and homosexuality, I would like the opportunity to examine Schulman's claims for myself. Unfortunately, just as "sexual repression, in one form or another, has characterized every human community in history," so too has religious belief

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<sup>534</sup> Merriam-Webster defines poison as "a substance that inhibits the activity of another substance or the course of a reaction or process." In this context, one could certainly apply the term *religion* to such enterprises as art, music, and literature without suggesting that the interaction necessarily prove fatal. Rather, it is simply a substance that *inhibits the activity* of another.

<sup>535</sup> Sam Schulman, "god is Not Great, by Christopher Hitchens," *Commentary Magazine*, 1 June 2007, accessed 3 September 2016, <https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/god-is-not-great-by-christopher-hitchens/>.

of one variety or another. Before we can determine whether “some other means would have been found,” we must first acknowledge that, in the history of civilization up to this point, it has not yet proven necessary to do so.

Undeterred, Schulman continues:

What, then, does Hitchens wish to put in place of religion? He calls for a new Enlightenment, and proposes that we realize its promise by imitating the Socratic method of rational thinking – a suggestion that compels him to engage in some fancy footwork in order to deny there was anything supernatural in Socrates’ insistence that he had a daimon, an inner voice, that enabled him to distinguish good from evil. But this recommendation falls into the same morass as Hitchens’s urging of Shakespeare and Tolstoy over the Bible as teachers of morality. In each case the point is not only anachronistic but odd, given that none of these sages, let alone the Enlightenment itself, is remotely conceivable apart from the religious civilization out of which they all sprang.<sup>536</sup>

A great deal of Hannes Stein’s argument mirrors that of Schulman, as evidenced by the following passage:

My first objection to his thesis that piety poisons everything may seem weak. If religion is truly an evil, why could it motivate so many to great artistic accomplishments? Somewhere Hitchens mentions in passing that he loves Mozart’s music (which speaks for him). But what about Mozart’s requiem: only a cold-hearted fool could not be gripped by the profound religious seriousness that resounds there. And the spectacular mosques built by Muslims in India? The opening of Bach’s Saint Matthew’s Passion? His Chaconne in D minor? And finally: what about that anthology of Hebrew writings, marketed for centuries with the Greek name “Bible”? The Joseph story that Thomas Mann retells expansively in his best novel? What about the grandiose and shattering Book of Job, the dark wisdoms of Solomon, the anti-racism of the prophet Amos, the sermon of justice of the most unhappy prophet, the seer Jeremias? Hitchens finds in the Bible only a good phrase or some nice verse, here and there, but nothing more. In general, he finds nothing of quality in it. Given his evident literary sensibilities, it is difficult to believe him on this point.<sup>537</sup>

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<sup>536</sup> Ibid.

<sup>537</sup> Hannes Stein, “On Christopher Hitchens’ *god is Not Great*,” Telos Online, 8 October 2007, accessed 3 September 2016, <http://www.telospress.com/on-christopher-hitchens-god-is-not-great/>.

Or this one:

And this leads to Hitchens's weakest argument. He claims that atheists – in contrast to believers – don't have to stare into the Torah to find edification; instead he and his ilk have works of literature, since Shakespeare, Tolstoy, Schiller, Dostoevsky, and George Eliot treat complex ethical themes better than mythical moral stories of the sacred texts – so he asserts. And with that, he shoots himself in the foot. Since all the writers he cites as examples depend deeply on the Bible. To be compelling, Hitchens's argument would have to be purged of any Judeo-Christian influence. It would run something like this: “Homer, Ovid, Horace, and Virgil treat complex ethical conflicts better than the Old and New Testament.” Hardly however a tenable claim (Homer's *Iliad* or Ovid's *Ars Amatoria* as moral guides?)<sup>538</sup>

Again, I am forced to admit that Schulman and Stein are at least partially right.

Shakespeare and Tolstoy and the Enlightenment itself are not “remotely conceivable apart from the religious civilization out of which they all sprang.” Unfortunately, this does not speak to the issue Hitchens wished to raise: that in their own ways, each of them surpassed or transcended the dogmatic views of their respective religious cultures to better illuminate the human condition that for so long had been forced to lie dormant underneath.<sup>539</sup> But perhaps an analogy will better serve to demonstrate the speciousness of Schulman's claim. Athenian democracy was borne under the despotic shadow of oligarchy. Would we then claim that it is only conceivable within or appropriate to that context? Or would we instead recognize it for the transformative and humanizing initiative it is and thus endeavor to elevate it above the humble and very specific circumstances of its birth?<sup>540</sup>

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<sup>538</sup> Ibid.

<sup>539</sup> For more, see *god is Not Great*, 150-153.

<sup>540</sup> In other words, could not democratic reforms be instituted across a variety of governmental structures (monarchies, republics, etc.) without either an accusatory tone toward those presently in power or a suspicion of underlying revolutionary motives toward those advocating their own inclusion in the political process? The centuries-long evolution of democracy within the United States (to slowly include first poor white men, then black men, before finally broadening to encompass women of all ethnicities) would seem to suggest that such progress is indeed possible.

Referencing Hitchens' lament on the success of the Maccabean revolt, Schulman concludes:

Hitchens's yearning for a world purified of Jews (and therefore of Christians and Muslims) may remind some of Nietzsche. The comparison is unfair, but inevitable. Hitchens's sketch of a new Enlightenment posits not a world of supermen but only a mild utopia, populated by men in togas discoursing eternally on the eternal verities, a world like the one painted by the Victorian romanticist Lawrence Alma-Tadema, or envisioned by Oscar Wilde in his gullible, amateurish tract *The Soul of Man under Socialism*. But that is just the trouble. Shorn of the culture we have, a culture nurtured and preserved by monotheistic religion, his proffered utopia amounts to just another invitation to barbarism. Hitchens here shows himself to be more credulous and sentimental – and much more insidious – than any of the religious mythmakers he so earnestly despises.<sup>541</sup>

Humanism and enlightenment as nothing more than “another invitation to barbarism?” I would submit that such statements say more about Schulman's understanding of humanity than Hitchens', and as such, demonstrate the effect that such *nurturing* religion has undoubtedly (and perhaps even unconsciously) had upon him.

Even more revealing of bias is the way in which Hannes Stein's review comes to a close. He writes:

This clever thinker cannot understand that Jewish monotheism is something unique and ultimately paradoxical: a religion that is critical of religion. The Hebrew Bible begins with a blasphemy. God created the original chaos, in contrast to the pagan gods who emerged from it. And on the fourth day, He set sun, moon, and stars in the heaven, as a sign for times, days, and years. In other words, the planets and stars, which in the rest of the Middle East were worshiped as deities, were nothing more than lamps and clocks. This was an act of enlightenment. In its wake, man could face creation freely. He was no longer compelled to appeal to it with magical (and often bloody) rituals; he was not forced to fall prostrate in front of every tree nymph or river god. His head was clear enough to marvel at creation – an admiration we find everywhere in the Psalms – and to study its laws with the art of astronomy.<sup>542</sup>

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<sup>541</sup> Schulman, “*god is Not Great*, by Christopher Hitchens.”

<sup>542</sup> Stein, “On Christopher Hitchens' *god is Not Great*.”

Thus, the Enlightenment of the 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup>, and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries was ultimately superfluous, as are Hitchens' pleas for a revitalized one now. All that is necessary is respect and appreciation for the uniqueness of Jewish monotheism, to which, it must be noted, Hannes Stein coincidentally belongs.<sup>543</sup>

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In his review, Josh Wilkerson argues that

while we as Christians may disagree with Hitchens's claims of religion as an immoral man-made apparition, we cannot argue against the historical injustices performed in the name of God. While we disagree with Hitchens's understanding of religious doctrines, we cannot argue against his own experience of these doctrines in practice. This is exactly the problem for Hitchens – Christian dogmatism over matters which we do not have authority to speak.

We misuse the Bible when we think it a political constitution or a science textbook. The church cannot address the assertions of atheism until it first admits to and addresses its own faults within. We can no longer attempt to legislate conversions or to rationalize belief to people. Mr. Hitchens lives by reason; we live by faith. Our lifestyles then should demonstrate themselves as markedly different, ceasing to ignore the perversion of the church in the past to fit with culture, and discontinuing the distortion of the church to fit with the modern, rationalistic culture of today. "Let the advocates and partisans of religion rely on faith alone, and let them be brave enough to admit that this is what they are doing." His remark sounds

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<sup>543</sup> In other words, Stein is suggesting that, in freeing humanity from the innumerable superstitions of polytheism, Jewish monotheism presents the world with a more concise and (consequently) enlightened form of religion. And while it would indeed seem to considerably reduce the complexity of one's beliefs all the while maintaining one's sense of marvel for the complexity of creation itself, one need only remember that this reduction in no way confirms the truth of its claims. As Richard Dawkins once remarked "none of us feels an obligation to disprove any of the millions of far-fetched things that a fertile or facetious imagination might dream up. I have found it an amusing strategy, when asked whether I am an atheist, to point out that the questioner is also an atheist when considering Zeus, Apollo, Amon Ra, Mithras, Baal, Thor, Wotan, the Golden Calf and the Flying Spaghetti Monster. I just go one god further (*The God Delusion*, 53)." With this in mind, it would seem that Hitchens could offer a similarly reductive solution to Stein – to likewise go one god further – though I doubt such a suggestion would be considered with the same seriousness Stein seems to ask of his own audience. Of course, Hitchens' point was simply that religious belief (of any stripe) is hardly a prerequisite for marveling at the universe or "[studying] its laws with the art of astronomy."

as if coming from the pulpit, and we should take it under exactly that authority.<sup>544</sup>

Though a startlingly frank and refreshing admission, beneath the applause from the religious and secular alike, one can almost hear Camus' rats once more scurrying frantically toward the surface.

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In his critique, Tony Higon writes:

Religion, he says, is so uncertain of itself that it can't tolerate different faiths (p. 1) and it interferes in the lives of unbelievers. However, I would respond that it is no part of Christianity to seek power over people or to force religious views onto them. But it is legitimate respectfully and without manipulation, to seek to share good news with those who do not yet believe it.<sup>545</sup>

But here is an example of that good news Higon so desperately wishes to share:

[Hitchens] goes on to describe the idea of the atonement as God inflicting torture and murder on his son in order to impress humans (p. 209) and that Christians hold the immoral belief that this absolves human beings of responsibility.... Hitchens does not understand even the basics about Christianity, including the vicarious suffering of Christ. God, incarnate in Jesus, decided in his infinite love to enter into the pain and suffering, which failing human beings have brought upon themselves, in order to redeem them. In this he shows his love and compassion for them. He also satisfies his perfect justice (required by his utter holiness) by bearing in himself the serious consequences of human wrongdoing. By rights humanity should take those consequences but God provides a way of forgiveness and eternal acceptance for those who trust him, believe that he has done all this, and express their gratitude. The New Testament teaching on hell refers to the consequences which those who knowingly refuse this rescue operation choose for themselves. There is no absolving of human responsibility. If I know that God entered into that suffering because of human sin, including mine, to redeem us, then I deeply recognise my

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<sup>544</sup> Josh Wilkerson, "Book Review: *god is Not Great*, by Christopher Hitchens," *Dallas Theological Seminary Magazine*, 1 November 2008, accessed 3 September 2016, <http://www.dts.edu/read/book-review-8212-i-god-is-not-great-i-by-christopher-hitchens-josh-wilkerson/>.

<sup>545</sup> Tony Higon, "*god is not Great*, by Christopher Hitchens – a Critique," Christian Teaching Resources, 2010, accessed 3 September 2016, <http://www.christianteaching.org.uk/godisnotgreat.html>.

responsibility and will live a life of gratitude to and love for God, seeking to please him through good behaviour.<sup>546</sup>

Did you catch that? In the same paragraph, Higton argues that “by rights humanity should take those consequences but God provides a way of forgiveness and eternal acceptance for those who trust him.... The New Testament teaching on hell refers to the consequences which those who knowingly refuse this rescue operation choose for themselves. There is no absolving of human responsibility.” Thus, it would seem that, despite Higton’s claims to the contrary, both absolution and manipulation are present in abundance, but here, I let Hitchens speak for himself.

We cannot, like fearridden peasants of antiquity, hope to load all our crimes onto a goat and then drive the hapless animal into the desert. Our everyday idiom is quite sound in regarding “scapegoating” with contempt. And religion is scapegoating writ large. I can pay your debt, my love, if you have been imprudent, and if I were a hero like Sidney Carton in *A Tale of Two Cities* I could even serve your term in prison or take your place on the scaffold. Greater love hath no man. But I cannot absolve you of your responsibilities. It would be immoral of me to offer, and immoral of you to accept. And if the same offer is made from another time and another world, through the mediation of middlemen and accompanied by inducements, it loses all its grandeur and becomes debased into wish-thinking or, worse, a combination of blackmailing with bribery.<sup>547</sup>

Nevertheless, Higton continues:

Hitchens criticises Jesus for forbidding people even to think about coveting goods or to look upon a woman in the wrong way.... He confuses temptation and sin. Of course people will be tempted by covetousness and sexual desire. That will be a real experience. But the fact is that Christian Faith can help the individual to refuse to entertain that temptation or to fall to it in practice. Hitchens’ deterministic view of humans not being constituted to love their neighbour as themselves is sad. Again there is much evidence that, by the grace of God, people can obey that commandment.<sup>548</sup>

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<sup>546</sup> Ibid.

<sup>547</sup> Hitchens, *god is Not Great*, 211.

<sup>548</sup> Tony Higton, “*god is not Great*, by Christopher Hitchens – a Critique.”



Unfortunately, it seems that in this instance Higton, not Hitchens, has fundamentally misunderstood Jesus' commandment. After all, the passage in question, Matthew 5:28, reads: "But I tell you that *anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.*"<sup>549</sup> Consequently, to claim that "Christian Faith can help the individual to refuse to entertain that temptation or to fall to it in practice," is the spiritual equivalent of offering a life jacket to an already-drowned man: while we may appreciate and applaud the intention behind the gesture, it is simply too little, too late to be of any real value.

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In his review entitled, "This Book is not Good," Gene McCarragher writes:

As Mark Twain once mused, give a man a reputation as an early riser and he can sleep until noon. With *God Is Not Great*, a caustic polemic on the evils of religion, Hitchens has earned the dubious honor of confirming Twain's aphorism. Anyone expecting a masterful demolition of all things sacred will be disappointed. Bullying and shallow, *God Is Not Great* is a haute middlebrow tirade, a stale venting of outrage and ridicule. Beneath his Oxbridge talent at draping glibness in the raiment of erudition, Hitchens proves to be an amateur in philosophy, an illiterate in theology, and a dishonest student of history. Too belligerent to be nimble and too parochial to be generous, the once-captivating Hitchens demonstrates why he has forfeited any claim on our attention.<sup>550</sup>

In his attempt to refute Hitchens' arguments on design and the problem of an infinite regress for the designer, McCarragher offers two separate but equally insubstantial explanations:

The notion of a creator, he observes, raises "the unanswerable question of who...created the creator" – an objection that theologians "have consistently failed to overcome." Really? Any decent freshman survey could have informed Hitchens that, as Aquinas and many others have patiently explained, God is not an entity and thus is not ensnared in any

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<sup>549</sup> Matthew 5:28 (NIV), emphasis mine.

<sup>550</sup> Gene McCarragher. "This Book is Not Good," *Commonweal Magazine*, 11 June 2007, accessed 3 September 2016, <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/book-not-good>.

serial account of causality. Not a thing himself, God is rather the condition of there being anything at all. Thus, “creation” is not a gargantuan act of handicraft but rather the condition of there being something rather than nothing. Creation didn’t happen long ago; it’s right now, and forever. (This is why “creationism” is bad science – because it’s bad theology.)... Wittgenstein came to much the same conclusion. In the *Philosophical Investigations*, he disposed of Hitchens’s allegedly insuperable objection. Just because you can always build another house in the village, Wittgenstein noted, does not change the fact that there is a last house right now. Explanations must end somewhere, as he famously conceded: “I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned.” It’s no real irony, then, that the godfather of linguistic analysis could respect and share the wonder of mysticism. “Not how the world is, is the mystical,” he wrote in the *Tractatus*, “but *that* it is.”<sup>551</sup>

Better theology perhaps, but a better explanation, hardly.

What’s even worse, at least according to McCarragher, is that Hitchens’ particular brand of atheism is itself an implicit tribute to... capitalism. Incredibly, he writes:

Today’s atheism pays extravagant homage to idols dear to the professional and managerial ranks. Science as truth; the technological mastery of nature; credentialed expertise as the only credible form of learning; efficiency and profit as the sole ends of economic and political life: these shibboleths comprise the mental universe of the Western middle classes. Colored by an incoherent blend of Darwinism and environmentalism, a bland infatuation with science and technology is the bourgeois halo around instrumental reason, and nothing in the new secularism of Dawkins, Harris et al. serves to exorcise that enchantment. While Hitchens likes to bask in the grand tradition of atheism (he throws out allusions to every great skeptic from Lucretius to Bertrand Russell), his ill-tempered tract rarely ventures outside the boundaries of the suburban moral imagination, even as it manages to flatter a corporate executive’s every conceit.<sup>552</sup>

Thus for McCarragher, Hitchens’ appreciation for science and technology, his respect for higher education, as well as his championing of Darwinism and environmentalism can all be either reduced or attributed to an underlying suburban desire for personal and/or economic aggrandizement, his seeming desire to share these values with and to the

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<sup>551</sup> Ibid.

<sup>552</sup> Ibid.

benefit of his fellow man notwithstanding. This of course, also seems to contradict not only the bulk of Hitchens' lifework but also his final message. As Andrew Sullivan notes:

As he lay dying, [Hitchens] asked for a pen and paper and tried to write on it. After a while, he finished, held it up, looked at it and saw that it was an illegible assemblage of scribbled, meaningless hieroglyphics. "What's the use?" he said to Steve Wasserman. Then he dozed a little, and then roused himself and uttered a couple of words that were close to inaudible. Steve asked him to repeat them. There were two:

"Capitalism."

"Downfall."

In his end was his beginning.<sup>553</sup>

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But not wishing to end on such a sour, melancholy note, I would instead conclude with Hitchens' closing remarks from a debate he participated in with William Dembski in 2010, five months after his cancer diagnosis and just over a year before his untimely death. Understandably, the question of his own mortality was raised, and the need for a speedy conversion (to Christianity) subsequently suggested. Here is how Hitchens responded:

I'll close on the implied question that Bill asked me earlier: Why don't you accept this wonderful offer? Why wouldn't you like to meet Shakespeare, for example?

I don't know if you really think that when you die you can be corporeally reassembled, and have conversations with authors from previous epochs. It's not necessary that you believe that in Christian theology, and I have to say that it sounds like a complete fairy tale to me. The only reason I'd want to meet Shakespeare, or might even want to, is because I can meet him, any time, because he is immortal in the works he's left behind. If you've read those, meeting the author would almost certainly be a disappointment.

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<sup>553</sup> Andrew Sullivan, "The Hitch Has Landed," The Dish, 20 April 2012, accessed 3 September 2016, <http://dish.andrewsullivan.com/2012/04/20/hitchs-service/>.

But when Socrates was sentenced to death for his philosophical investigations, and for blasphemy for challenging the gods of the city – and he accepted his death – he did say, well, if we are lucky, perhaps I’ll be able to hold conversation with other great thinkers and philosophers and doubters too. In other words the discussion about what is good, what is beautiful, what is noble, what is pure, and what is true could always go on.

Why is that important, why would I like to do that? Because that’s the only conversation worth having. And whether it goes on or not after I die, I don’t know. But I do know that that’s the conversation I want to have while I’m still alive. Which means that to me, the offer of certainty, the offer of complete security, the offer of an impermeable faith that can’t give way, is an offer of something not worth having. I want to live my life taking the risk all the time that I don’t know anything like enough yet; that I haven’t understood enough; that I can’t know enough; that I’m always hungrily operating on the margins of a potentially great harvest of future knowledge and wisdom. I wouldn’t have it any other way.

And I’d urge you to look at... those people who tell you, at your age, that you’re dead till you believe as they do – what a terrible thing to be telling to children! And that you can only live by accepting an absolute authority – don’t think of that as a gift. Think of it as a poisoned chalice. Push it aside however tempting it is. Take the risk of thinking for yourself. Much more happiness, truth, beauty, and wisdom will come to you that way.<sup>554</sup>

What could I possibly add to that?

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<sup>554</sup> ChristopherHitchslap, “Christopher Hitchens vs. William Dembski FULL,” *YouTube* Video, 2:26:34. 10 October 2011, accessed 4 September 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D6K43WSZrml>.

## CHAPTER FOUR: SUPERSEDING THE SUPERNATURAL: SAM HARRIS AND THE END OF FAITH

### Introduction

Separated from his elder Horsemen by a generation or more, it is perhaps ironic that it was Sam Harris' 2004 *The End of Faith* that in many ways ignited the New Atheist movement. Though begun in the immediate aftermath of the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks of 2001 (when Harris was still a graduate student at UCLA), his treatise should not be construed as the Islamophobic, reactionist, propaganda piece that so many of his critics maliciously malign it to be. That characterization is at once too confining and, at the same time, too charitable. For it is not only the religious extremism of the Islamic world with which Harris is concerned, but also the politically-correct pleas for (and proponents of) religious toleration in the more democratically-inclined, ostensibly-Christian nations of the West; the latter of whom he believes are directly responsible for the propagation and propitiation of the former. According to Harris, the problem is not only that we have turned a blind eye to the intolerable beliefs and behaviors of others, but also that we have enshrined the principle of multiculturalism as both a defense of our inaction as well as the pinnacle achievement of our supposedly enlightened society. But despite our collective hopes to the contrary, blind eyes simply cannot claim Enlightenment.

This paradoxical and potentially problematical notion was perhaps best summed up by the philosopher of science Karl Popper in his 1945 *The Open Society and its Enemies*, in which he argues:

Unlimited tolerance must lead to the disappearance of tolerance. If we extend unlimited tolerance even to those who are intolerant, if we are not prepared to defend a tolerant society against the onslaught of the intolerant, then the tolerant will be destroyed, and tolerance with them.... We should therefore claim, in the name of tolerance, the right not to tolerate the intolerant. We should claim that any movement preaching intolerance places itself outside the law, and we should consider incitement to intolerance and persecution as criminal, exactly as we should consider incitement to murder, or to kidnapping; or as we should consider incitement to the revival of the slave trade.<sup>555</sup>

This is, in essence, the plea of Harris' book. We must not, he argues, characterize as inherently and/or holistically intolerant the practice of chastising specifically intolerant ideas, individuals, or cultures. While this should, of course, encompass such aspects of secular human interaction as oppressive political policy, evident economic exploitation, and other socially-sanctioned forms of physical and/or psychological abuse, Harris believes, as we shall see, that all of these characteristics (and more) are either demonstrably present or plausibly permissible in most, if not all, of the world's extant religions. As a neuroscientist and philosopher, he believes the remedy for the often incompatible ethics of various religious doctrines and traditions isn't the abject embrace of cultural or moral relativism, but instead the adoption and advancement of a so-called science of morality in their stead, one grounded upon both the evidentially discernible achievements of the scientific method as well as the foundational appreciation for logic and reason that would serve to undergird and enlighten the better angels of our collective natures, thus allowing them to finally and fruitfully take flight. Thus in prefacing a

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<sup>555</sup> Karl Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies, Volume I: The Spell of Plato* (London: George Rutledge and Sons, LTD, 1947), 226.

newfound science of ethics, one begins to understand the importance of Harris' clarion call for *The End of Faith*.

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*Christianity has done all it possibly could to draw a circle round itself, and has even gone so far as to declare doubt itself to be a sin. We are to be precipitated into faith by a miracle, without the help of reason, after which we are to float in it as the clearest and least equivocal of elements – a mere glance at some solid ground, the thought that we exist for some purpose other than floating, the least movement of our amphibious nature: all this is a sin! Let it be noted that, following this decision, the proofs and demonstration of the faith, and all meditations upon its origin, are prohibited as sinful. Christianity wants blindness and frenzy and an eternal swan-song above the waves under which reason has been drowned!*<sup>556</sup>

### Part I: *The End of Faith*

In the opening chapter of *The End of Faith* Sam Harris suggests that “the idea that any one of our religions represents the infallible word of the One True God requires an encyclopedic ignorance of history, mythology, and art even to be entertained – as the beliefs, rituals, and iconography of each of our religions attest to centuries of crosspollination among them.”<sup>557</sup> And yet, Harris laments, “If our polls are to be trusted, nearly 230 million Americans believe that a book showing neither unity of style nor internal consistency was authored by an omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent deity.”<sup>558</sup> What accounts for this sort of sustained credulity and willful ignorance? As the title of his treatise implies, Harris believes that, above all, faith is to blame. He elaborates:

Two myths now keep faith beyond the fray of rational criticism, and they seem to foster religious extremism and religious moderation equally: (1) most of us believe that there are good things that people get from religious

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<sup>556</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Dawn of Day*, trans. John McFarland Kennedy (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1911), 80-81.

<sup>557</sup> Sam Harris, *The End of Faith* (New York: Norton, 2004), 16.

<sup>558</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

faith (e.g., strong communities, ethical behavior, spiritual experience) that cannot be had elsewhere; (2) many of us also believe that the terrible things that are sometimes done in the name of religion are the products not of faith per se but of our baser natures – forces like greed, hatred, and fear – for which religious beliefs are themselves the best (or even the only) remedy. Taken together, these myths seem to have granted us perfect immunity to outbreaks of reasonableness in our public discourse.<sup>559</sup>

It is these so-called “myths” that Harris most wishes to challenge, for as he explains, religious moderation is no more to be desired than religious extremism, since the former always necessarily entails the *potential* resurrection of the latter (and thus can never truly be considered its ideological antidote or antithesis).<sup>560</sup>

Rather than bring the full force of our creativity and rationality to bear on the problems of ethics, social cohesion, and even spiritual experience, moderates merely ask that we relax our standards of adherence to ancient superstitions and taboos, while otherwise maintaining a belief system that was passed down to us from men and women whose lives were simply ravaged by their basic ignorance about the world.<sup>561</sup>

And so long as this overall framework of faith is allowed to remain in place, the religious house of cards, shoddily-constructed though it may be, is unlikely to buckle even under the heartiest skepticism and most sustained scientific scrutiny.

Of course, there are those who would argue that Harris’ decision to cast religious moderates in the same unflattering light as extremists is to minimize or otherwise ignore the obvious differences between the two. Harris, however, responds that “the only reason anyone is ‘moderate’ in matters of faith these days is that he has assimilated some of the fruits of the last two thousand years of human thought (democratic politics, scientific advancement on every front, concern for human rights, an end to cultural and geographic

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<sup>559</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>560</sup> On pages 14-15, Harris notes “one of the central themes of this book... is that religious moderates are themselves the bearers of a terrible dogma: they imagine that the path to peace will be paved once each of us has learned to respect the unjustified beliefs of others. I hope to show that religious tolerance... is one of the principal forces driving us towards the abyss.”

<sup>561</sup> Harris, *The End of Faith*, 21.



isolation, etc). The doors leading out of scriptural literalism do not open from the *inside*.”<sup>562</sup> He subsequently elaborates: “Religious moderation is the product of *secular* knowledge and scriptural *ignorance* – and it has no bona fides, in religious terms, to put it on a par with fundamentalism.”<sup>563</sup> Thus, for Harris, religious moderation (sensible though it may seem) is tantamount to the sort of intellectual fence-sitting that true reasoning simply cannot abide. Those who advocate it are, in a very real sense, hoping to have their cake and eat it too.

To attack this appeal to religious moderation from a different angle, Harris goes on to argue that “most of what we currently hold sacred is not sacred for any reason other than that it was thought sacred *yesterday*.”<sup>564</sup> In proof of this point, he asks us to consider the following hypothetical situation:

What if all our knowledge about the world were suddenly to disappear? Imagine that six billion of us wake up tomorrow morning in a state of utter ignorance and confusion. Our books and computers are still here, but we can't make heads or tails of their contents. We have even forgotten how to drive our cars and brush our teeth. What knowledge would we want to reclaim first? Well, there's that business about growing food and building shelter that we would want to get reacquainted with. We would want to relearn how to use and repair many of our machines. Learning to understand spoken and written language would also be a top priority, given that these skills are necessary for acquiring most others. When in this process of reclaiming our humanity will it be important to know that Jesus was born of a virgin? Or that he was resurrected? And how would we relearn these truths, if they are indeed true? By reading the Bible? Our tour of the shelves will deliver similar pearls from antiquity – like the “fact” that Isis, the goddess of fertility, sports an impressive pair of cow horns. Reading further, we will learn that Thor carries a hammer and that Marduk's sacred animals are horses, dogs, and a dragon with a forked tongue. Whom shall we give top billing in our resurrected world? Yaweh or Shiva? And when will we want to relearn that premarital sex is a sin? Or that adulteresses should be stoned to death? Or that the soul enters the zygote at the moment of conception? And what will we think of those

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<sup>562</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>563</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>564</sup> Ibid., 24.

curious people who begin proclaiming that one of our books is distinct from all others in that it was actually written by the Creator of the universe?<sup>565</sup>

In other words, religious conviction is, in many ways, simply religious convention, and despite all claims to the contrary, one's geography and temporality are every bit as foundational in the development of one's faith as one's belief in the universality and eternity of his or her particular doctrine. Harris believes that once one comes to this realization, blind faith can finally be seen for the self-inflicted ideological injury it always was.

How, then, are we to rescue reason from the faith-imposed exile in which it currently suffers? Harris believes the solution must be multi-faceted. First and foremost, we must start to demand the same sort of empirical evidence for religious claims (particularly those containing hypotheses involving natural phenomena) that we (even the faithful among us) insist upon for all others. Our collective failure to do so has resulted in a sort of cognitive dissonance from which we are all now obliged to suffer. Harris demonstrates:

Tell a devout Christian that his wife is cheating on him, or that frozen yogurt can make a man invisible, and he is likely to require as much evidence as anyone else, and to be persuaded only to the extent that you give it. Tell him that the book he keeps by his bed was written by an invisible deity who will punish him with fire for eternity if he fails to accept its every incredible claim about the universe, and he seems to require no evidence whatsoever.<sup>566</sup>

Secondly, we must confront our seemingly-ingrained fears about death and the spiteful uncertainty it represents, and realize the role that such fears continue to play in the proliferation of religious moderates and extremists alike. As Harris explains "our felt

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<sup>565</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>566</sup> Ibid., 19.

sense of what is real seems not to include our own death. We doubt the one thing that is not open to any doubt at all.... A single proposition – *you will not die* – once believed, determines a response to life that would be otherwise unthinkable.”<sup>567</sup> Using modern-day Islam as an example, Harris illustrates: “Subtract the Muslim belief in martyrdom and jihad, and the actions of suicide bombers become completely unintelligible, as does the spectacle of public jubilation that invariably follows their deaths; insert these peculiar beliefs, and one can only marvel that suicide bombing is not more widespread.”<sup>568</sup> Though apparently only an example of extremism, Harris argues that even the seemingly-benign agnosticism of religious moderates toward the specter of death “represents a failure to criticize the unreasonable (and dangerous) certainty of others.”<sup>569</sup> In order to demonstrate the ways in which religious moderation often leads to fundamentalist domination, Harris offers the following projection: “In our next presidential election, an actor who reads his Bible would almost certainly defeat a rocket scientist who does not. Could there be any clearer indication that we are allowing unreason and otherworldliness to govern our affairs?”<sup>570</sup>

Finally, Harris argues, we must endeavor to separate our notion of spirituality from the various religious creeds and supernatural claims to which it has historically been tethered and subjected. Although many of his fellow atheists consider such a task to be little more than a fool’s errand, Harris argues that “spirituality can be – indeed, must be – deeply rational, even as it elucidates the limits of reason. Seeing this, we can begin to

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<sup>567</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>568</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>569</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>570</sup> Ibid.

divest ourselves of many of the reasons we currently have to kill one another.”<sup>571</sup> In support of his position, Harris admits:

We cannot live by reason alone. This is why no quantity of reason, applied as antiseptic, can compete with the balm of faith, once the terrors of this world begin to intrude upon our lives.... It is time we realized that we need not be unreasonable to suffuse our lives with love, compassion, ecstasy, and awe; nor must we renounce all forms of spirituality or mysticism to be on good terms with reason.<sup>572</sup>

Although a seemingly Herculean undertaking, Harris believes that is already within both our reach *and* our grasp to accomplish it.

Our primary task in our discourse with one another should be to identify those beliefs that seem least likely to survive another thousand years of human inquiry, or most likely to prevent it, and subject them to sustained criticism. Which of our present practices will appear most ridiculous from the point of view of those future generations that might yet survive the folly of the present? It is hard to imagine that our religious preoccupations will not top the list. It is natural to hope that our descendants will look upon us with gratitude. But we should also hope that they look upon us with pity and disgust, just as we view the slaveholders of our all-too-recent past. Rather than congratulate ourselves for the state of our civilization, we should consider how, in the fullness of time, we will seem hopelessly backward, and work to lay a foundation for such refinements in the present. We must find our way to a time when faith, without evidence, disgraces anyone who would claim it. Given the present state of our world, there appears to be no other future worth wanting.<sup>573</sup>

Only if and when we are successful we will finally be able to answer Robert Browning’s ostensibly rhetorical question, “what’s a heaven for?”

In Chapter Two, “The Nature of Belief,” Harris opens with a bold claim: “we are no more free to believe whatever we want about God than we are free to adopt unjustified beliefs about science or history, or free to mean whatever we want when using words like

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<sup>571</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>572</sup> Ibid.

<sup>573</sup> Ibid., 48. Of course, there are those who would note that faith with evidence equates to knowledge and thus can no longer be properly understood as faith. To reply, I would simply state that while faith without evidence may indeed be merely a redundant description of faith itself, this definition also implies that such unfounded belief should never be considered as synonymous with knowledge (or considered as grounds for its professed possession by the faithful).

‘poison’ or ‘north’ or ‘zero.’ Anyone who would lay claim to such entitlements should not be surprised when the rest of us stop listening to him.”<sup>574</sup> Unlike Dawkins and Dennett who sought to explain and/or expose religious belief as a by-product of evolution, Harris is primarily concerned with establishing precisely what such belief necessarily implies and entails. He explains:

We can believe a proposition to be true only *because* something in our experience, or in our reasoning about the world, actually speaks to the truth of the proposition in question.... if a person believes in God because he has had certain spiritual experiences, or because the Bible makes so much sense, or because he trusts the authority of the church, he is playing the same game of justification that we all play when claiming to know the most ordinary facts. This is probably a conclusion that many religious believers will want to resist; but resistance is not only futile but *incoherent*. There is simply no other logical space for our beliefs about the world to occupy.<sup>575</sup>

How, then, has religious belief managed to endure without evidence, in a climate and culture that otherwise requires it? Harris thinks the explanation is two-fold. First, he argues that our ability to accurately perceive our own surroundings, satisfactorily synthesize the consequent data, and form logically coherent assumptions as a result has been greatly exaggerated. He recounts how “studies of ‘change blindness,’ for instance, have revealed that we do not perceive nearly as much of the world as we think we do, since a large percentage of the visual scene can be suddenly altered without our noticing.”<sup>576</sup> But even if our abilities had not been overstated, we would still be faced with another, even more insurmountable, procedural problem:

If perfect coherence is to be had, each new belief must be checked against all others, and every combination thereof, for logical contradictions. But here we encounter a minor computational difficulty: the number of necessary comparisons grows exponentially as each new proposition is

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<sup>574</sup> Harris, *The End of Faith*, 53.

<sup>575</sup> *Ibid.*, 62, 63.

<sup>576</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

added to the list. How many beliefs could a *perfect* brain check for logical contradictions? The answer is surprising. Even if a computer were as large as the known universe, built of components no larger than protons, with switching speeds as fast as the speed of light, all laboring in parallel from the moment of the big bang up to the present, it would still be fighting to add a 300th belief to its list.<sup>577</sup>

In other words, personal embellishments and perceptual failures aside, the human mind is simply not capable of presenting a complete and consistently coherent image of the “outside” world. What’s more, such observational shortcomings are invariably compounded by the fact that those beliefs and conceptualizations that are possible simply cannot be checked against all previous assumptions and assertions. One wonders how the human mind does not immediately drown in such an overcrowded and overstimulating sea of information. For an explanation, Harris returns to the work of Benedict Spinoza. He states: “Spinoza thought that belief and comprehension were identical, while disbelief required a subsequent act of rejection. Some very interesting work in psychology bears this out. It seems rather likely that understanding a proposition is analogous to perceiving an object in physical space. Our default setting may be to accept appearances as reality until they prove to be otherwise.”<sup>578</sup> This is Harris’ second point, and it explains how religious faith has survived. It is precisely because so many of its tenets cannot be empirically disproven that faith has not fallen victim to scientific scrutiny in the same way that almost every other previously held implausible notion has.

Despite such seemingly-defeatist connotations, Harris does not believe that our species’ biological limitations must forever render faith off-limits to science. He defiantly insists that “faith is an impostor.... It is the search for knowledge on the installment plan:

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<sup>577</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>578</sup> Ibid., 61.

believe now, live an untestable hypothesis until your dying day, and you will discover that you were right.”<sup>579</sup> He continues:

The truth is of paramount concern to the faithful themselves; indeed, the truth of a given doctrine is the very object of their faith. The search for comfort at the expense of truth has never been a motive for religious belief, since all creeds are chock-full of terrible proposals, which are no comfort to anyone and which the faithful believe, despite the pain it causes them, for fear of leaving some dark corner of reality unacknowledged.... People of faith claim nothing less than knowledge of sacred, redeeming, and metaphysical truths: *Christ died for your sins; He is the Son of God; All human beings have souls that will be subject to judgment after death.* These are specific claims about the way the world is.... faith in a doctrine *is* faith in its truth.... Thus, if a Christian made no tacit claims of knowledge with regard to the literal truth of scripture, he would be just as much a Muslim, or a Jew – or an atheist – as a follower of Christ.<sup>580</sup>

But how does this discovery result in the end of faith Harris so fervently longs for? He elaborates: “we have names for people who have many beliefs for which there is no rational justification. When their beliefs are extremely common we call them ‘religious’; otherwise, they are likely to be called ‘mad,’ ‘psychotic,’ or ‘delusional.’... The danger of religious faith is that it allows otherwise normal human beings to reap the fruits of madness and consider them *holy*.”<sup>581</sup> Essentially, Harris is arguing that

we must begin speaking freely about what is really in these holy books of ours, beyond the timid heterodoxies of modernity – the gay and lesbian ministers, the Muslim clerics who have lost their taste for public amputations, or the Sunday churchgoers who have never read their Bibles quite through. A close study of these books, and of history, demonstrates that there is no act of cruelty so appalling that it cannot be justified, or even mandated, by recourse to their pages. It is only by the most acrobatic avoidance of passages whose canonicity has never been in doubt that we can escape murdering one another outright for the glory of God.<sup>582</sup>

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<sup>579</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>580</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>581</sup> Ibid., 72, 73.

<sup>582</sup> Ibid., 78.

It has often been said that “misery loves company.” Harris is, in effect, challenging us to see whether or not the same holds true for shame.

Chapter Three, “In the Shadow of God,” Harris dedicates to analyzing Christianity’s historical antipathy towards heretics, witches, and Jews. Like Dawkins’ and Hitchens’ chapters on the Old and New Testaments, Harris’ primary purpose here is to demonstrate the immense immoral lengths to which religion can drive an otherwise ethical and intelligent person. In order to demonstrate this tendency in both the medieval and modern worlds, he decides to examine both the Catholic Inquisition and the Jewish Holocaust.

To begin, Harris reminds us of the initial target of the Inquisition’s inextinguishable wrath was neither witchcraft nor Judaism; it was instead Catharism, a particularly austere form of Manicheanism and/or Gnosticism in which the material joys of this world were shunned on the promise of eternal bliss in the next one. Of precisely what were the Cathars guilty? Harris recalls the testimony of Saint Bernard, an outspoken critic of Catharism: ““As to [the Cathars’] conversation, nothing can be less reprehensible... and what they speak, they prove by deeds. As for the morals of the heretic, he cheats no one, he oppresses no one, he strikes no one; his cheeks are pale with fasting.... his hands labor for his livelihood.””<sup>583</sup> In other words, the Cathars’ unpardonable crimes were ultimately victimless ones, consisting of little more besides unorthodox views on creation and the ascetic ideal. Nevertheless, “heresy is heresy.”<sup>584</sup> Harris subsequently recounts a number of instances where heretics, fornicators, infidels, and other religious nonconformists were impulsively accused, inhumanely tortured,

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<sup>583</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>584</sup> Ibid.



unjustly convicted, and summarily put to death (usually by fire), before ultimately concluding:

There really seems to be very little to perplex us here. Burning people who are destined to burn for all time seems a small price to pay to protect the people you love from the same fate. Clearly, the common law marriage between reason and faith – wherein otherwise reasonable men and women can be motivated by the content of unreasonable beliefs – places society upon a slippery slope, with confusion and hypocrisy at its heights, and the torments of the inquisitor waiting below.<sup>585</sup>

When describing the almost unspeakable horrors borne by some 40,000 – 50,000 persons (over a period of three centuries) suspected of witchcraft, Harris laments that “even the relentless torture of the accused was given a perverse rationale: the devil, it was believed, made his charges insensible to pain, despite their cries for mercy. And so it was that, for centuries, men and women who were guilty of little more than being ugly, old, widowed, or mentally ill were convicted of impossible crimes and then murdered for God's sake.”<sup>586</sup> What finally brought about an end to such despicable behavior? In a word, science. Harris notes how the Catholic Church's decision to end its persecution of witches did not occur until the mid-nineteenth century, when “the germ theory of disease emerged, laying to rest much superstition about the causes of illness.”<sup>587</sup> And thus it no longer made sense to accuse women of crimes which they were, all intentions aside, utterly incapable of committing. What's more, microorganisms are all but impossible to see and nowhere near as entertaining to burn.

When describing the plight of the Jews, Harris states that anti-Semitism “is as integral to church doctrine as the flying buttress is to a Gothic cathedral, and this terrible

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<sup>585</sup> Ibid., 86-7.

<sup>586</sup> Ibid., 89-90.

<sup>587</sup> Ibid., 89.

truth has been published in Jewish blood since the first centuries of the common era.”<sup>588</sup>

Besides the obvious reason of bearing the ultimate responsibility for Jesus’ untimely death (which nevertheless had to occur), Harris raises the medieval fears of “blood libel” and “host desecration” as both evidence and explanation of Christianity’s unceasing antipathy towards Judaism. Like the belief that a witch’s curse could produce illness, medieval Christians were convinced that their blood (particularly that of their newborn children) was required in the performance of a number of Jewish rituals. He elaborates:

It was well known that all Jews menstruated, male and female alike, and required the blood of a Christian to replenish their lost stores. They also suffered from terrible hemorrhoids and oozing sores as a punishment for the murder of Christ.... Christian blood was also said to ease the labor pains of any Jewess fortunate enough to have it spread upon pieces of parchment and placed into her clenched fists. It was common knowledge, too, that all Jews were born blind and that, when smeared upon their eyes, Christian blood granted them the faculty of sight. Jewish boys were frequently born with their fingers attached to their foreheads, and only the blood of a Christian could allow this pensive gesture to be broken without risk to the child.<sup>589</sup>

Where host desecration was concerned, Harris recounts how the doctrine of transubstantiation inadvertently led to fears that “the Jews would seek to harm the Son of God again, knowing that his body was now readily accessible in the form of defenseless crackers? Historical accounts suggest that as many as three thousand Jews were murdered in response to a single allegation of this imaginary crime.”<sup>590</sup>

As one might imagine, it was once again emergent science, not spontaneous sympathy, that ultimately demonstrated both the senselessness of these fears and the ridiculousness of the belief(s) that inspired them. Unfortunately, not even modern-day

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<sup>588</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>589</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>590</sup> Ibid., 99.

scholarship was able to translate such scientific advances into societal acceptance. Centuries of mistrust and misinformation between Christian Europe and its sorrowful, sojourning Jewish population(s) would eventually result in one of the most tragic events in the history of the world: the Holocaust. As Harris explains:

Nazism evolved out of a variety of economic and political factors, of course, but it was held together by a belief in the racial purity and superiority of the German people. The obverse of this fascination with race was the certainty that all impure elements – homosexuals, invalids, Gypsies, and, above all, Jews – posed a threat to the fatherland. And while the hatred of Jews in Germany expressed itself in a predominately secular way, it was a direct inheritance from medieval Christianity. For centuries, religious Germans had viewed the Jews as the worst species of heretics and attributed every societal ill to their continued presence among the faithful.<sup>591</sup>

In proof of this inheritance (and this unconscious/unconscionable relationship), Harris notes that

throughout this period, the church continued to excommunicate theologians and scholars in droves for holding unorthodox views and to proscribe books by the hundreds, and yet not a single perpetrator of genocide – of whom there were countless examples – succeeded in furling Pope Pius XII's censorious brow.... Although not a single leader of the Third Reich – not even Hitler himself – was ever excommunicated, Galileo was not absolved of heresy until 1992.<sup>592</sup>

But today, while the evils of Christianity seem comparatively muted or mild and the number of its inquisitors appears to be on a precipitous decline, a proliferation of both seems to be occurring, virtually unchecked and unchallenged, within the Muslim world. This is the subject of Harris' next Chapter, "The Problem with Islam."

Harris maintains that "Islam and Western liberalism remain irreconcilable.

Moderate Islam – *really* moderate, *really* critical of Muslim irrationality – scarcely seems to exist. If it does, it is doing as good a job at hiding as moderate Christianity did in the

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<sup>591</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>592</sup> Ibid., 104, 105.

fourteenth century (and for similar reasons).”<sup>593</sup> Elsewhere he states: “A future in which Islam and the West do not stand on the brink of mutual annihilation is a future in which most Muslims have learned to ignore most of their canon, just as most Christians have learned to do. Such a transformation is by no means guaranteed to occur, however, given the tenets of Islam.”<sup>594</sup>

Such a position is controversial for a number of reasons. First, it appears to single out Islam as being especially intractable to revision and reform, and thus shifts the impetus for change solely upon the so-called moderate Muslims who “scarcely seem to exist.” Second, it seems to minimize the various political and economic crises throughout the Muslim world, which have undoubtedly coalesced and helped to create the present instability and reciprocal antagonism. Finally, such a position ostensibly ignores the fact that such social and political chaos is largely the result of Western intervention and imperialism. In what follows, Harris will address each criticism, in turn, with an ultimate eye toward demonstrating that all three fundamentally misinterpret or misrepresent Muslim ideology.

Harris begins by critiquing the work of Kenneth Pollack:

Like most commentators on these matters, Pollack seems unable to place himself in the position of one who *actually believes* the propositions set forth in the Koran – that paradise awaits, that our senses deliver nothing but evidence of a fallen world in desperate need of conquest for the glory of God. Open the Koran, which is perfect in its every syllable, and simply read it with the eyes of faith.... On almost every page, the Koran instructs observant Muslims to despise nonbelievers. On almost every page, it prepares the ground for religious conflict. Anyone who... still [does] not see a link between Muslim faith and Muslim violence should probably consult a neurologist.<sup>595</sup>

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<sup>593</sup> Ibid., 111.

<sup>594</sup> Ibid., 110.

<sup>595</sup> Ibid., 117, 123.

In order to drive his point home, Harris cites several dozen verses from the Koran, all of which vilify the infidel and encourage (if not outright demand) that violence be visited upon him. Harris then wryly notes that “this is what the Creator of the universe apparently has on his mind (when he is not fussing with gravitational constants and atomic weights).”<sup>596</sup>

To those who would claim that the conflict between East and West is primarily political and only superficially religious, Harris argues:

I take it to be more or less self-evident that whenever large numbers of people begin turning themselves into bombs, or volunteer their children for use in the clearing of minefields (as was widespread in the Iran-Iraq war), the rationale behind their actions has ceased to be merely political. This is not to say that the aspiring martyr does not relish what he imagines will be the thunderous political significance of his final act, but unless a person believes some rather incredible things about this universe – in particular, about what happens after death – he is very unlikely to engage in behavior of this sort. Nothing explains the actions of Muslim extremists, and the widespread tolerance of their behavior in the Muslim world, better than the tenets of Islam.<sup>597</sup>

He allocates additional space for refuting the claims of Fareed Zakaria:

According to Zakaria, “if there is one great cause of the rise of Islamic fundamentalism, it is the total failure of political institutions in the Arab world.” Perhaps. But “the rise of Islamic fundamentalism” is only a problem because the *fundamentals of Islam* are a problem. A rise of Jain fundamentalism would endanger no one. In fact, the uncontrollable spread of Jainism throughout the world would improve our situation immensely. We would lose more of our crops to pests, perhaps (observant Jains generally will not kill anything, including insects), but we would not find ourselves surrounded by suicidal terrorists or by a civilization that widely condones their actions.<sup>598</sup>

But perhaps the most intriguing section of the chapter is Harris’ argument with Noam Chomsky. Noting that Chomsky has long been a decrier of United States’ foreign

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<sup>596</sup> Ibid., 117.

<sup>597</sup> Ibid., 137.

<sup>598</sup> Ibid., 148.

policy, Harris begins by agreeing with a great many of his criticisms, before arguing that they are ultimately beside the point.

We have surely done some terrible things in the past. Undoubtedly, we are poised to do terrible things in the future. Nothing I have written in this book should be construed as a denial of these facts, or as defense of state practices that are manifestly abhorrent. There may be much that Western powers, and the United States in particular, should pay reparations for. And our failure to acknowledge our misdeeds over the years has undermined our credibility in the international community. We can concede all of this, and even share Chomsky's acute sense of outrage, while recognizing that his analysis of our current situation in the world is a masterpiece of moral blindness.<sup>599</sup>

What is this moral blindness to which he alludes? Harris argues that it is Chomsky's decision to consider Western and Eastern (specifically Muslim) intentions as (im)moral equivalents. Though both sides are undoubtedly responsible for a great deal of death and destruction:

nothing in Chomsky's account acknowledges the difference between intending to kill a child, because of the effect you hope to produce on its parents (we call this "terrorism"), and inadvertently killing a child in an attempt to capture or kill an avowed child murderer (we call this "collateral damage"). In both cases a child has died, and in both cases it is a tragedy. But the ethical status of the perpetrators, be they individuals or states, could hardly be more distinct.... Where ethics are concerned, intentions are everything.<sup>600</sup>

What, then, can we do? Harris has two suggestions, one semantic, the other substantive. First, we must realize and publically acknowledge that the conflict between East and West is, at its core, a religious/ideological one. Such an admission would not only recast our respective efforts in an entirely new light, but it would also serve to reflect some of that light back on a scarcely-visible problem we still have at home. As Harris explains:

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<sup>599</sup> Ibid., 140-1.

<sup>600</sup> Ibid., 146, 147.

Western leaders who insist that our conflict is not with Islam are mistaken; but, as I argue throughout this book, we have a problem with Christianity and Judaism as well. It is time we recognized that all reasonable men and women have a common enemy. It is an enemy so near to us, and so deceptive, that we keep its counsel even as it threatens to destroy the very possibility of human happiness. Our enemy is nothing other than faith itself.<sup>601</sup>

Harris thinks that such an acknowledgment would help us to distinguish and define precisely what it is, in terms of values and beliefs, that separates us from our adversaries. And by recognizing faith as a common foe, as opposed to the common friend it is currently believed to be, Harris believes that our respective causes could ultimately transcend their tribalistic tendencies and at long last attain truly humanistic status. This is his second suggestion.

What constitutes a civil society? At minimum, it is a place where ideas, of all kinds, can be criticized without the risk of physical violence. If you live in a land where certain things cannot be said about the king, or about an imaginary being, or about certain books, because such utterances carry the penalty of death, torture, or imprisonment, you do not live in a civil society. It appears that one of the most urgent tasks we now face in the developed world is to find some way of facilitating the emergence of civil societies everywhere else.<sup>602</sup>

But lest one think that our problems rest solely, or even primarily, in the East under the iron fist of Islam, Harris' fifth chapter, "West of Eden," reminds us that there are still many obstacles we have yet to overcome at home. Harris opens the chapter with an especially distressing example. "For many years U.S. policy in the Middle East has been shaped, at least in part, by the interests that fundamentalist Christians have in the future of a Jewish state. Christian 'support for Israel' is, in fact, an example of religious

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<sup>601</sup> Ibid., 131.

<sup>602</sup> Ibid., 150.

cynicism so transcendental as to go almost unnoticed in our political discourse.”<sup>603</sup>

Similarly, when commenting on the war on terror,

undersecretary of defense for intelligence at the Pentagon, William Boykin, once stated that “our enemy is a guy named Satan.”<sup>604</sup> And although such comments seemed to raise a skeptical eyebrow or two in the media, Harris laments that “most Americans probably took them in stride. After all, 65 percent of us are quite certain that Satan exists.”<sup>605</sup> But it is not just in matters of foreign policy where the specter of faith casts its ominous shadow.

Harris recalls how former House Majority Leader Tom DeLay once “attributed the shootings at the Columbine High School in Colorado to the fact that our schools teach the theory of evolution,” and how former Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia had often referenced his faith to vindicate America’s continued belief in the morality and justice of capital punishment.<sup>606</sup> He then notes how our perpetual war on drugs, as well as the particular moral and judicial vigilance we display toward private matters engaged in either individually or between consenting adults (recreational drug use, the viewing of pornography, prostitution, sodomy, etc.) are almost always victimless crimes. From a strictly economic perspective, it scarcely makes sense that we, as a nation, should spend upwards of \$4 billion in an effort to curtail marijuana usage, while allocating only \$93 million to securing our seaports, and only \$2 billion to rebuilding Afghanistan’s devastated infrastructure. It also seems strange that “more people are imprisoned for nonviolent drug offenses in the United States than are incarcerated, for any reason, in all

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<sup>603</sup> Ibid., 153.

<sup>604</sup> Ibid., 156.

<sup>605</sup> Ibid.

<sup>606</sup> Ibid., 156, 157.



of Western Europe (which has a larger population).”<sup>607</sup> However, when one considers that “the idea of a victimless crime is nothing more than a judicial reprise of the Christian notion of *sin*,” such behavior begins to make (at least some kind of) sense.<sup>608</sup> Harris explains:

It is no accident that people of faith often want to curtail the private freedoms of others. This impulse has less to do with the history of religion and more to do with its logic, because the very idea of privacy is incompatible with the existence of God. If God sees and knows all things, and remains so provincial a creature as to be scandalized by certain sexual behaviors or states of the brain, then what people do in the privacy of their own homes, though it may not have the slightest implication for their behavior in public, will still be a matter of public concern for people of faith.<sup>609</sup>

The implications of such actions are harmful enough at home, but their damage extends far beyond our physical and ideological borders. As Harris describes: “Such a bizarre allocation of resources is sure to keep Afghanistan in ruins for many years to come. It will also leave Afghan farmers with no alternative but to grow opium. Happily for them, our drug laws still render this a highly profitable enterprise.”<sup>610</sup>

But perhaps Harris’ most illustrative example is his discussion of the debate over stem cell research. He states:

Here is what we know. We know that much can be learned from research on embryonic stem cells. In particular, such research may give us further insight into the processes of cell division and cell differentiation. This would almost certainly shed new light on those medical conditions, like cancer and birth defects, that seem to be merely a matter of these processes gone awry. We also know that research on embryonic stem cells requires the destruction of human embryos at the 150-cell stage. There is not the slightest reason to believe, however, that such embryos have the

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<sup>607</sup> Ibid., 164, 163.

<sup>608</sup> Ibid., 159.

<sup>609</sup> Ibid.

<sup>610</sup> Ibid., 164.

capacity to sense pain, to suffer, or to experience the loss of life in any way at all. What is indisputable is that there are millions of human beings who do have these capacities, and who currently suffer from traumatic injuries to the brain and spinal cord. Millions more suffer from Parkinson's and Alzheimer's diseases. Millions more suffer from stroke and heart disease, from burns, from diabetes, from rheumatoid arthritis, from Purkinje cell degeneration, from Duchenne muscular dystrophy, and from vision and hearing loss. We know that embryonic stem cells promise to be a renewable source of tissues and organs that might alleviate such suffering in the not too distant future.<sup>611</sup>

Thus, the allegations of immorality that often swirl around stem cell research are, at best, stagnating in murky, ill-conceived waters. As Harris notes, “In neurological terms, we surely visit more suffering upon this earth by killing a fly than by killing a human blastocyst, to say nothing of a human zygote (flies, after all, have 100,000 cells in their brains alone)... Those opposed to therapeutic stem-cell research on religious grounds constitute the biological and ethical equivalent of a flat-earth society.”<sup>612</sup> He ultimately concludes:

Faith drives a wedge between ethics and suffering. Where certain actions cause no suffering at all, religious dogmatists still maintain that they are evil and worthy of punishment (sodomy, marijuana use, homosexuality, the killing of blastocysts, etc.). And yet, where suffering and death are found in abundance their causes are often deemed to be good (withholding funds for family planning in the third world, prosecuting nonviolent drug offenders, preventing stem-cell research, etc). This inversion of priorities not only victimizes innocent people and squanders scarce resources; it completely falsifies our ethics. It is time we found a more reasonable approach to answering questions of right and wrong.<sup>613</sup>

This is precisely what Harris sets out to do in his final two chapters, “A Science of Good and Evil,” and “Experiments in Consciousness.” He begins by stating that “our ethical intuitions must have their precursors in the natural world, for while nature is indeed red in tooth and claw, it is not merely so. Even monkeys will undergo

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<sup>611</sup> Ibid., 166.

<sup>612</sup> Ibid., 167.

<sup>613</sup> Ibid., 168-9.

extraordinary privations to avoid causing harm to another member of their species. Concern for others was not the invention of any prophet.”<sup>614</sup> But just what shape might a science of morality take?<sup>615</sup> Harris admits that the question is “one for which I do not have a detailed answer – other than to say that whatever answer we give should reflect our sense of the possible subjectivity of the creatures in question.”<sup>616</sup> In other words, the various anthropocentric (human-based) and theocentric (god-based) moralities of religion must eventually yield to more inclusive forms in which consideration and compassion is extended to all living creatures deemed capable of suffering from its absence.<sup>617</sup> But whatever the form, Harris thinks the answer will invariably be tied to the advancements (and perhaps limitations) of neuroscience. After all, this has already occurred in several other areas of study. As Harris explains: “To say that a person is ‘color-blind’ or ‘achromatopsic’ is now a straightforward statement about the state of the visual pathways in his brain, while to say that he is ‘an evil sociopath’ or ‘lacking in moral fiber’ seems hopelessly unscientific. This will almost certainly change.”<sup>618</sup>

In addition to faith, Harris identifies a number of other obstacles standing between us and a science of good and evil. The two most prominent and most pressing, he believes, are relativism and intuition. Harris notes how the first, relativism, has found

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<sup>614</sup> Ibid., 172.

<sup>615</sup> In a subsequent response to his 2010 *The Moral Landscape*, Harris explains this application of science: “For those unfamiliar with my book, here is my argument in brief: Morality and values depend on the existence of conscious minds – and specifically on the fact that such minds can experience various forms of well-being and suffering in this universe. Conscious minds and their states are natural phenomena, of course, fully constrained by the laws of Nature (whatever these turn out to be in the end). Therefore, there must be right and wrong answers to questions of morality and values that potentially fall within the purview of science. On this view, some people and cultures will be right (to a greater or lesser degree), and some will be wrong, with respect to what they deem important in life.” <https://samharris.org/response-to-critics-of-the-moral-landscape/> Accessed 9 October 2018.

<sup>616</sup> Harris, *The End of Faith*, 177.

<sup>617</sup> Otherwise, the divisive and inherently incompatible doctrines of various religious faiths will prevent a universally accepted and equally applicable morality from ever taking root.

<sup>618</sup> Harris, *The End of Faith*, 175.

favor in many intellectual circles inside and out of the university, and in so doing has “placed all worldviews more or less on an equal footing. No one is ever really *right* about what he believes; he can only point to a community of peers who believe likewise.”<sup>619</sup>

Harris dismisses this view out of hand by demonstrating just how logically incoherent it truly is.

The general retort to relativism is simple, because most relativists contradict their thesis in the very act of stating it. Take the case of relativism with respect to morality: moral relativists generally believe that all cultural practices should be respected on their own terms, that the practitioners of the various barbarisms that persist around the globe cannot be judged by the standards of the West, nor can the people of the past be judged by the standards of the present. And yet, implicit in this approach to morality lurks a claim that is not relative but absolute. Most moral relativists believe that tolerance of cultural diversity is better, in some important sense, than outright bigotry. This may be perfectly reasonable, of course, but it amounts to an overarching claim about how all human beings should live. Moral relativism, when used as a rationale for tolerance of diversity, is self-contradictory.<sup>620</sup>

But while the problem of relativism may have proven itself to be at least somewhat substantive, the issue of intuition Harris considers to be far more semantic in scope. After noting that the principal issue practitioners of science and logic have traditionally taken with intuition is its ostensibly oppositional stance to reason, Harris argues that this belief is actually a false dichotomy of sorts. He explains:

Reason is itself intuitive to the core, as any judgment that a proposition is “reasonable” or “logical” relies on intuition to find its feet. One often hears scientists and philosophers concede that something or other is a “brute fact” – that is, one that admits of no reduction. The question of why physical events have causes, say, is not one that scientists feel the slightest temptation to ponder. It is just so. To demand an accounting of so basic a fact is like asking how we know that two plus two equals four. Scientists presuppose the validity of such brutishness – as, indeed, they must.<sup>621</sup>

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<sup>619</sup> Ibid., 178.

<sup>620</sup> Ibid., 179.

<sup>621</sup> Ibid., 183.

That is, those in favor of a more scientifically-sound notion of ethics and morality need not divorce themselves of their intuitive sense or sensibility. These can instead be repurposed to labor in the service of science in a way that is both collaborative and constructive to the overall enterprise.

Perhaps an example or two of the ways in which relativism and intuition currently function in our moral discourse will serve to demonstrate Harris' ultimate point that both are in need of reconsideration and revision. In the case of relativism, Harris suggests that we "consider the practice of 'honor killing.'"<sup>622</sup> Where intuition is concerned, he chooses to deliberate on our intuitive sense of right and wrong within the context and the confines of our current war on terror. I include both instances below.

On honor killing, Harris writes:

What can we say about this behavior? Can we say that Middle Eastern men who are murderously obsessed with female sexual purity actually love their wives, daughters, and sisters *less* than American or European men do? Of course, we can. And what is truly incredible about the state of our discourse is that such a claim is not only controversial but actually *unutterable* in most contexts.... Any culture that raises men and boys to kill unlucky girls, rather than comfort them, is a culture that has managed to retard the growth of love. Such societies, of course, regularly fail to teach their inhabitants many other things – like how to read. Not learning how to read is not another *style* of literacy, and not learning to see others as ends in themselves is not another style of ethics. It is a *failure* of ethics.<sup>623</sup>

As for intuition, specifically how it relates to our acceptance of warfare and our simultaneous aversion to torture, Harris states:

The difference between killing one man and killing a thousand just doesn't seem as salient to us as it should.... In many cases we will find the former far more disturbing. Three million souls can be starved and murdered in the Congo, and our Argus-eyed media scarcely blink. When a princess dies in a car accident, however, a quarter of the earth's population falls

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<sup>622</sup> Ibid., 187.

<sup>623</sup> Ibid., 189-90.

prostrate with grief. Perhaps we are unable to feel what we must feel in order to change our world.... Whenever we consent to drop bombs, we do so with the knowledge that some number of children will be blinded, disemboweled, paralyzed, orphaned, and killed by them. It is curious that while the torture of Osama bin Laden himself could be expected to provoke convulsions of conscience among our leaders, the unintended (though perfectly foreseeable, and therefore accepted) slaughter of children does not.<sup>624</sup>

In other words, perplexing moral quagmires such as these can and will continue to result so long as our intuition is permitted to exist and to operate outside of and in opposition to science and reason. Only when all such forces combine can a true science of morality finally emerge.

In his final chapter, “Experiments in Consciousness,” Harris makes the intriguing case that spirituality can indeed be sequestered from *all* forms of belief and that what remains can be empirically studied and/or experientially confirmed by almost everyone. Though a controversial claim, in the eyes of both the religious as well as his fellow atheists, Harris explains:

The history of human spirituality is the history of our attempts to explore and modify the deliverances of consciousness through methods like fasting, chanting, sensory deprivation, prayer, meditation, and the use of psychotropic plants. There is no question that experiments of this sort can be conducted in a rational manner. Indeed, they are some of our only means of determining to what extent the human condition can be deliberately transformed. Such an enterprise becomes irrational only when people begin making claims about the world that cannot be supported by empirical evidence.<sup>625</sup>

Unlike Hitchens, Harris believes that some Eastern traditions, Buddhism in particular, may have certain insights to offer the West in its quest, particularly those of mindfulness meditation and the illusory nature of self. He argues:

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<sup>624</sup> Ibid., 185, 184.

<sup>625</sup> Ibid., 210.

Even the contemporary literature on consciousness, which spans philosophy, cognitive science, psychology, and neuroscience, cannot match the kind of precise, phenomenological studies that can be found throughout the Buddhist canon.... The fundamental insight of most Eastern schools of spirituality, however, is that while thinking is a practical necessity, the failure to recognize thoughts *as thoughts*, moment after moment, is what gives each of us the feeling that we call “I,” and this is the string upon which all our states of suffering and dissatisfaction are strung.... Once the selflessness of consciousness has been glimpsed, spiritual life can be viewed as a matter of freeing one’s attention more and more so that this recognition can become stabilized.<sup>626</sup>

In the epilogue, Harris reiterates his original thesis:

We do not know what awaits each of us after death, but we know that we will die. Clearly, it must be possible to live ethically – with a genuine concern for the happiness of other sentient beings – without presuming to know things about which we are patently ignorant. Consider it: every person you have ever met, every person you will pass in the street today, is going to die. Living long enough, each will suffer the loss of his friends and family. All are going to lose everything they love in this world. Why would one want to be anything but kind to them in the meantime? ... There need be no scheme of rewards and punishments transcending this life to justify our moral intuitions or to render them effective in guiding our behavior in the world. The only angels we need invoke are those of our better nature: reason, honesty, and love. The only demons we must fear are those that lurk inside every human mind: ignorance, hatred, greed, and faith, which is surely the devil's masterpiece.<sup>627</sup>

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## Part II: Criticisms and Rebuttals

In his aptly-entitled “Long Response to Harris’ *The End of Faith*,” Neil Shenvi writes:

*The End of Faith*... is not actually a reasoned argument, as one might expect from the title. Instead, the book is a very well-constructed polemic, a careful cutting diatribe against the very idea of a personal, communicative God and the abuses that Harris feels such an idea necessarily entails.... Rather than achieve some purely intellectual

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<sup>626</sup> Ibid., 217-19.

<sup>627</sup> Ibid., 226.

refutation of God's existence, Harris mounts an emotional attack against the havoc that religion has wreaked against the average person in terms of emotional and physical suffering.<sup>628</sup>

Shenvi's rejection of Harris' thesis seems to hang primarily on two basic misconceptions regarding the roles that "intuition" and "authority" play in the overall framework of Harris' arguments. Observe the following passage:

We have to ask the question: if we disallow any appeal to faith, then exactly which sources are allowed as valid sources of knowledge? Certainly, Harris affirms that reason and observation must be accepted as sources of truth. But what about intuition? ... Even at our least generous, we have to admit that what is truly intuitive to one person may be wildly counterintuitive to another. What might seem obviously true to me might seem unclear or even obviously false to you. So should we allow intuition as a valid means to knowledge or should it be dismissed along with faith as irrational and subjective?<sup>629</sup>

Even a cursory examination of Harris' thoughts on the subject will demonstrate that Shenvi has misunderstood them entirely. As Harris explains in Chapter Six, even something as inherently subjective as intuition can be put to the same sort of evidentiary test as any other hypothesis. He writes:

Is it reasonable to believe, as many Chinese apparently do, that tiger-bone wine leads to virility? No, it is not. Could it *become* reasonable? Indeed it could. We need only be confronted with a well-run, controlled study yielding a significant correlation between tiger bones and human prowess. Would a reasonable person expect to find such a correlation? It does not seem very likely. But if it came, reason would be forced to yield its present position, which is that the Chinese are destroying a wondrous species of animal for no reason at all.<sup>630</sup>

In other words, for Harris, intuition (on both the individual and cultural levels) represents only the beginning of the process, not the end, as Shenvi suggests. So long as it is

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<sup>628</sup> Neil Shenvi, "A Long Response to Harris' *The End of Faith*," Neil Shenvi Apologetics, accessed 6 September 2016, <http://www.shenvi.org/Essays/HarrisResponse.htm>.

<sup>629</sup> Ibid.

<sup>630</sup> Harris, *The End of Faith*, 184.



subsequently subjected to the rigors of science and logic, intuition can remain a most valuable, indeed indispensable, tool in the skeptic's analytical handbag.

Much the same can be said of Shenvi's criticisms of authority. He states:

History has shown us time and again that any appeal to the authority of experts is necessarily limited by the prevalent scientific understanding of a given culture. The geocentric universe, the four elements, and the moral influence theory of disease have all been in agreement with the overwhelming consensus of experts. The fact that these ideas were all eventually overturned is terrifying, not reassuring.<sup>631</sup>

Except for the final point on whether such history is terrifying or reassuring, I think Shenvi and Harris would find themselves very much in agreement for most of the preceding paragraph. There is just one problem: "The geocentric universe, the four elements, and the moral influence theory of disease," were all theories first formed well before the dawn of modern science (and the adoption of the scientific method as its evidentiary foundation). And in each instance, it was science, not appeals to some unknown or unknowable authority, which ultimately came to demonstrate that each previously-held assumption was indeed false. It seems, therefore, that science is particularly well-positioned in its authoritative posture, precisely because it requires either a falsifiable hypothesis or a reproducible result.

In seeming anticipation of this rebuttal, Shenvi argues that

As human beings, we are always left appealing to some standard of truth with which there can be no argument. This standard could be the testimony of experts, our own intuition, or our own sensory perceptions, but in the end it all comes down to bare belief. Even an appeal to reason itself depends on an ultimately unreasoned assurance in the validity of reasoning... When push comes to shove, there may not be a strict, rigorous, philosophical difference between believing in gravity and believing in the Tooth Fairy. Both might ultimately depend on our appeal to some infallible source.<sup>632</sup>

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<sup>631</sup> Shenvi, "A Long Response to Harris' *The End of Faith*."

<sup>632</sup> Ibid.

To anyone who would argue that the practice of placing a tooth under one's pillow and awaiting monetary reward implies the same sort of reliance on "intuition" or "the testimony of experts" that leaping from one's roof does, I can only shake my head in amazement and ask that one not take my word for it, but rather test that hypothesis for themselves.<sup>633</sup>

Shenvi's comments concerning the supposed conflict between the search for truth and the desire for happiness are also particularly revealing. He writes:

For a Christian, the very real temporal conflict between truth and happiness is ultimately resolved only by the existence of a good, personal God. Not only is a personal knowledge of our Creator the ultimate good which can be experienced by even the most abject and miserable of human beings, but God promises that a personal relationship with Him is ultimately eternal. So even in the present, Christians who suffer will find real comfort and real happiness in knowing that they are rightly related to their Creator. What is more, because God is eternal, a Christian can know that no amount of present suffering can ever be compared to the future and eternal glory that God has promised to those He has forgiven (see Romans 8:18-39 or the famous C.S. Lewis sermon *The Weight of Glory*). Thus, a Christian can always choose the truth knowing that truth and happiness will never ultimately conflict. But this affirmation depends absolutely on the real existence of the Christian God. How such an affirmation can be made by an atheist is a mystery to me.<sup>634</sup>

Although Shenvi seems to think this tension between truth and happiness represents a fundamental flaw in Harris' thinking, I would argue that it is actually a perfect example of the sort of faith that Harris references in Chapter Two: "it is the search for knowledge on the installment plan: believe now, live an untestable hypothesis until your dying day,

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<sup>633</sup> For more on the scientific history of gravity, one should consult Galileo's *Dialogues Concerning Two New Sciences*, or Chapter 12 of Steven Weinberg's *To Explain the World*, in which the author painstakingly details the major achievements of Galileo's tome as well as the empirical evidence and mathematical mechanisms upon which it is founded. I am sorry to say that I have no similar suggestions for investigating the truths and tenets of fairyism (tooth or otherwise).

<sup>634</sup> Shenvi, "A Long Response to Harris' *The End of Faith*."

and you will discover that you were right.”<sup>635</sup> In other words, by setting itself up to be ultimately undisprovable, faith in the eventual reconcilability between truth and happiness proves that it is founded upon nothing more than the shifting sands of wishful thinking and thus does not merit any serious attention from those concerned with reasonableness of any sort or stripe.

Shenvi also describes what he believes to be an insurmountable semantic problem with Harris’ overall thesis: the “is-ought” distinction, sometimes referred to as the “naturalistic fallacy.” He writes:

The tragic failure of Harris’ worldview is this inability to reckon with the unavoidable “ought”. By redefining morality in objective terms, Harris can certainly bring “good” and “evil” into the realm of the observable. But he still cannot tell us why we “ought” to seek the good and abhor the evil. Any true free thinker, any Nietzschean Superman willing to flout Harris’ definitions and ask the truly difficult questions will find no answer. We “ought” to seek the global happiness of our neighbor at the expense of our own happiness simply because everyone else does or because it will make society run smoothly or because it is encoded in our genes. By disposing of any transcendental basis for the “ought” of moral value, Harris destroys moral value as a category altogether. Again, this is the same obstacle that has been approached time and again by great atheist thinkers of the past. Nihilism, existentialism, and postmodernism are all valid materialistic responses to this problem. To me, it is fairly clear that Harris ultimately makes no more progress than they do.<sup>636</sup>

Although a seemingly difficult challenge to Harris’ framework, a look at the way in which Shenvi “solves” this problem through the lens of his own faith will, I believe, serve to demonstrate that religion hardly provides a more satisfying explanation. Shenvi argues:

The tripersonality of God clarifies the nature of moral obligation. Obviously the doctrine of the Trinity is difficult and mysterious, but for our purposes, it is sufficient to observe that the Bible says that God is intrinsically relational. In a general theistic conception of God, personal

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<sup>635</sup> Harris, *The End of Faith*, 66.

<sup>636</sup> Shenvi, “A Long Response to Harris’ *The End of Faith*.”

relationship did not exist until God created other beings. However, the Bible indicates that God, within Himself, is personal so that the personal antecedes the impersonal. This fact explains why all of the common moral imperatives and certainly all of the biblical moral injunctions are deeply personal. The Ten Commandments begin not with the rules themselves but with the reminder that Yahweh brought the Israelites out of Egypt. All real moral imperatives function in the same way; the commands to love the poor, care for the helpless, and respect property are all interpersonal commands that come from an interpersonal God.<sup>637</sup>

I would contend that any appeal to the tripartite nature of God as instructive (of anything) creates more problems and raises more questions than it could ever remedy or resolve.

What's more, a brief historical investigation into just how this doctrine eventually came to be affirmed by the church demonstrates the many self-induced contradictions that such a belief entails, as well as the many condemnations of unorthodox views that resulted along the way.

Nevertheless, when attempting to establish the singular virtues of Christianity, Shenvi makes the following case:

Every other religion would urge us to keep the moral law with the hope of satisfying or pacifying or appeasing or pleasing God. The Bible says we are hopeless. We have already broken the moral law a million times in a million ways and God is now our judge. At the same time, every other religion says that God must be satisfied or pacified or appeased by us keeping the moral law to the best of our ability. Even Harris' Spiritual Atheism would tell us that our ability to live a happy and fulfilled life depends on our ability to live up to our moral standards. But the Bible says otherwise. It says that God will accept us simply on the basis of what He did for us in Christ and make us good and holy and happy simply for His own sake. The Bible is both more radically pessimistic and more radically optimistic than any other book in history – radically pessimistic about us and radically optimistic about God.<sup>638</sup>

This is where Shenvi's argument truly unravels. The Bible does indeed say otherwise.

And it is certainly "radically pessimistic" of humans and "radically optimistic" about

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<sup>637</sup> Ibid.

<sup>638</sup> Ibid.

God. But isn't this precisely Harris' point? Rather than holding mankind to a higher moral standard, religion actually provides the means of effectively circumventing its moral teachings altogether.<sup>639</sup> Perhaps Shenvi is right: perhaps both systems are ultimately inimitable. But either way, it seems that Shenvi's notion of religion opens the door to far more regressive and inhumane behavior on the part of its adherents than Harris' more secular formulation could ever allow or forgive.<sup>640</sup>

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In his article for *The Nation*, entitled "The Gods Must Be Crazy," Daniel Lazere doesn't so much take aim at the tenets of Harris' arguments as take issue with its tone. He writes:

Harris is a doctoral student in neuroscience at UCLA, yet the nice thing is that there is still something of the undergraduate about him. Everyone knows the type, the smart aleck in the back of the room who isn't afraid to raise questions that everyone else is too polite to ask, questions like: If bad ideas lead to bad acts, then why should we allow individuals to entertain ideas that are incorrect? If a friend mistakenly believes he is dying of cancer, shouldn't we disabuse him of the notion so that he doesn't do something drastic, like throw himself under a train? If he believes, similarly, that unbelievers are destined for hell, shouldn't we disabuse him of that so he isn't tempted to speed the process by shooting or blowing them up?<sup>641</sup>

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<sup>639</sup> Here, it might be useful to recall Hitchens' arguments concerning the Christian acceptance of vicarious redemption. "We cannot, like fearridden peasants of antiquity, hope to load all our crimes onto a goat and then drive the hapless animal into the desert. Our everyday idiom is quite sound in regarding 'scapegoating' with contempt. And religion is scapegoating writ large. I can pay your debt, my love, if you have been imprudent, and if I were a hero like Sidney Carton in *A Tale of Two Cities* I could even serve your term in prison or take your place on the scaffold. Greater love hath no man. But I cannot absolve you of your responsibilities. It would be immoral of me to offer, and immoral of you to accept. And if the same offer is made from another time and another world, through the mediation of middlemen and accompanied by inducements, it loses all its grandeur and becomes debased into wish-thinking or, worse, a combination of blackmailing with bribery" (*god is not Great*, 211).

<sup>640</sup> After all, personal responsibility is paramount in Harris' (and Hitchens') conception of ethics in a way and to a degree that the tenets of "original sin" and "divine grace" simply do not permit in the traditional (and still mainstream) interpretation of Christianity which Shenvi seemingly wishes to support.

<sup>641</sup> Daniel Lazere, "The Gods Must Be Crazy," *The Nation*, 28 October 2004, accessed 6 September 2016, <https://www.thenation.com/article/gods-must-be-crazy/>.

Notice how this criticism in no way refutes any of Harris' main points. And since it seems that Lazere can make no substantive claims against him, the only recourse open to him is to label Harris' entire treatise as sophomoric (as evidenced by his "something of an undergraduate about him" remark).

He continues:

Harris is well informed in some areas, but embarrassingly bereft in others. While he knows a fair amount about religion and philosophy, he has little feel for politics and even less for the ironies of historical development. Religion, as he sees it, is a bad idea that has lodged itself under the human skull and must be driven out. "It is difficult to imagine a set of beliefs more suggestive of mental illness than those that lie at the heart of many of our religious traditions," he writes. Perhaps. Yet he fails to understand the process by which ancient thinkers, struggling to understand the cosmos, would come up with hypotheses that seem ludicrous in our day but were nonetheless a significant advance in their own. Citing the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation, he wisecracks that not only can Jesus be "eaten in the form of a cracker" as a consequence, but that "a few Latin words spoken over your favorite Burgundy, and you can drink his blood as well." Yet transubstantiation was an attempt to make sense of Jesus' death, an event that Christians mistakenly believed had transformed the cosmos but that we now know merely helped to transform Western society. If Harris had any idea of the blood and passion expended over such doctrines, he might hesitate before engaging in low-brow, frat-house humor.<sup>642</sup>

But let's examine Lazere's claim that Harris "doesn't understand the process by which ancient thinkers" thought. His preferred example of the doctrine of transubstantiation is particularly telling. Although Lazere ultimately seems to share Harris' opinion that Christians were mistaken to believe in such *unsubstantiated* speculation, he nevertheless defends their efforts as worthy of reverence and respect. In so doing, he condemns Harris' critique as factually true, but expressively callous. When he implores Harris to remember the "blood and passion expended over such doctrines," one marvels at the irony that Lazere appears not to recognize that such undue reverence and respect are far

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<sup>642</sup> Ibid.

more to blame for those human losses and intellectual expenditures than the critic whose seemingly unsophisticated claims belie an ultimately obvious truth.

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Nevertheless, Lazere's criticisms are echoed in Stephanie Merrit's article, "Faith No More." In it, she writes:

Unfortunately, Harris too often allows his anger at this continued deference to unreason to colour his tone, slipping into an incredulous sarcasm which might appeal to readers who agree with him, but could only succeed in alienating those who need to be persuaded... Sadly for the forces of reason, it is not one that a born-again President or a Prime Minister singing the praises of faith schools is likely to heed.<sup>643</sup>

In his review of *The End of Faith*, Michael Orthofer concurs:

One understands Harris' frustration with the prevalence and influence of something as far-fetched (indeed, ridiculous) as faith in what is found in the Bible or the Koran. But stating the obvious – these are bad, bad ideas, leading people to do bad, bad things – unfortunately doesn't really get you very far. Those who recognize religion for what it is – literally: nonsense – can nod in agreement and enjoy the fact that someone writes so freely about it. Those who have faith will shake their heads at how misguided poor Harris is, sad for him that he can't accept what to them is obvious; it seems extremely unlikely that this book could in any way shake their beliefs.<sup>644</sup>

What neither Merrit nor Orthofer seems to realize is that even their comparatively congenial tones toward religion betray their inner contempt for much of its history and many of its doctrines.<sup>645</sup> As a result, their words would likely gain precious little traction that Harris' could not. This is not only patently obvious in Orthofer's remarks, but also

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<sup>643</sup> Stephanie Merrit, "Faith No More," *The Guardian*, 6 February 2005, accessed 6 September 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/theobserver/2005/feb/06/society>.

<sup>644</sup> Michael Orthofer, "The Complete Review's Review: Sam Harris' *The End of Faith*." CompleteReview.com, accessed 6 September 2016, <http://www.complete-review.com/reviews/religion/harriss.htm>.

<sup>645</sup> Though Orthofer's and Merrit's tone hardly seems more congenial than Harris', one assumes they would have taken a different tack were they targeting the same sort of audience Harris presumably intended.

contained within Merrit's review as well, as she subsequently (and perhaps subconsciously) admits:

Yet his central argument in *The End of Faith* is sound: religion is the only area of human knowledge in which it is still acceptable to hold beliefs dating from antiquity and a modern society should subject those beliefs to the same principles that govern scientific, medical or geographical inquiry - particularly if they are inherently hostile to those with different ideas. It's easy to laugh at the man who believes aliens are sending him messages through his hairdryer, but we don't let him run schools or make public broadcasts as if his view were anything other than a delusion. It's less amusing that international policy is decided by men who believe that the book beside their bed was written by an invisible deity and is above doubt or questioning.<sup>646</sup>

In other words, both Merrit and Orthofer admit that Harris' criticisms are correct; they simply wish he would tone down his rhetoric to more respectful levels in order to reach a wider and more receptive religious audience. Such a plea, though ostensibly reasonable, ignores the fact that, for the vast majority of its history, organized religion could compel the sort of unquestioning respect it would now politely request. As the inspiration and aftermath of various ecumenical councils, excommunications, and crusades can attest (not to mention the incalculable lives lost to the victimless crimes of heresy, blasphemy, witchcraft, and apostasy), religion's appeals to affability and mutual respect must be swallowed not only with a grain of salt but also with the bitter pill of personal accountability that science and reason have at long last forced down its throat.

When viewed in this light, the arguments of David Segal, in his article, "Atheist Evangelist," fall equally flat because he, too, confuses respect for individuals with respect for ill-founded ideology.<sup>647</sup> He writes of:

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<sup>646</sup> Merrit, "Faith No More."

<sup>647</sup> To delineate this distinction, I would repurpose a religious phrase originally posited by Augustine in his Letter 211 – "with due love for the persons and hatred of the sin" – into the more humane "with due love for the persons and unapologetic identification of their error."



another problem with Harris's work often cited by critics: He can preach only to those who have left the choir. As a critique of faith, "You people are nuts" isn't likely to change a lot of minds. There is the broader question, too, of whether religious moderates really are enablers for extremists. Maybe moderates are a bulwark against fanatics. If this is really a war of ideas, it is probably not a war between no religion (which is what Harris would like) and extremism. It's a war between moderation and extremism, which is a war one needs moderates to fight.<sup>648</sup>

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In his review of Harris' subsequent *Letter to a Christian Nation*, John Wilson writes, with similar conviction that

If Harris is right, there can't be any genuine engagement between reasonable people (people like Sam Harris) and Christians or other religious believers. As Douglas Wilson observes, "It is one thing to say that we ought to move away from politically-correct euphemisms (which I agree with), and then to go on to say that everyone in the history of the world outside your little atheistic society is a raving psychopathic wackjob."<sup>649</sup>

Of course, one could reasonably argue that were such an earthly alliance between moderates and secularists ever to succeed in wiping out religious extremism in all its myriad forms, the ideological conflict would likely evolve into a struggle between moderate believers and nonbelievers themselves, or else the source of that animosity, belief itself, would likewise find itself either summarily extinguished or violently triumphant.

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In his article, "Good and Bad in All," David Honigmann argues that Harris' problem is not that it alienates fundamentalists, but rather that he himself is one.

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<sup>648</sup> David Segal, "Atheist Evangelist," *The Washington Post*, 26 October 2006, accessed 6 September 2016, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/10/25/AR2006102501998.htm>.

<sup>649</sup> John Wilson, "Can You Reason with Christians: A Response to Sam Harris' *Letter to a Christian Nation*." Books and Culture, A Christian Review, May 2007, accessed 6 September 2016, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/books/features/bookwk/070507.html>.

Fundamentalism-bashing is common enough. But Harris, who is completing a doctorate in neuroscience at UCLA, goes further than this. He extends his condemnation even to believers who do not subscribe to the full panoply of fundamentalist dogma. Such people often regard themselves on many issues as allies of liberal humanists against the fundamentalists. (The novelist Marilynne Robinson, for example, recently bewailed the embarrassment she feels as a liberal Protestant among her academic friends when her faith lumps her with the resurgent Christian Right.) Not so, says Harris. Anyone who admits to any religious belief at all - anyone who argues for respect for religious belief - creates the space in which fundamentalism flourishes. He who is not with us is against us. This is a grave charge – and Harris’s argument takes a leaf from the fundamentalists’ book. In essence, he takes religions at their own valuation: they are belief systems which logically can be either accepted wholly or rejected utterly. Half-believing, picking and choosing, make no sense, he says. On this point at least, he can expect a loud chorus of amens from his opponents.<sup>650</sup>

This charge of fundamentalist atheism is perhaps the most common (and least credible) critique leveled against Harris. In arguing for a worldview based principally upon science, reason, and personal responsibility, Harris has somehow been conflated or equated with those whose ideologies neither delight in nor depend upon any of them. As a result, his arguments are seen by many to represent a dichotomy of sorts between unqualified religious belief and absolute disbelief. This is hardly his intention. Harris merely wishes to demonstrate that the perceived chasm between religious liberalism and inquisitorial orthodoxy is nowhere near as wide or as deep as is commonly believed and asserted.

To use Mr. Honigmann’s example: if Marilynne Robinson is truly embarrassed that her liberal Protestantism has been lumped in with the “resurgent Christian Right,” Harris would likely ask that she reconsider the source of that embarrassment. Is it truly a result of his arguments, or is it instead that, for all their professed differences, the

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<sup>650</sup> David Honigmann, “Good and Bad in All,” *The Financial Times*, 11 February 2005, accessed 6 September 2016, <https://www.ft.com/content/3f4584f8-7bd4-11d9-9af4-00000e2511e8>.

foundational beliefs of liberal Protestants and conservative Evangelicals are, at their center, actually one and the same? Any distinctions drawn between the two, regardless of by whom and for what purpose, must be supported from outside the pages of scripture and freestanding from the tenets and traditions of the faith.<sup>651</sup> (What's more, Honigmann's attempt to create a false dichotomy in order to refute a similar charge seems a somewhat duplicitous, if not downright disingenuous enterprise.)

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In a vein similar to Honigmann's, James Jones argues, in his article, "Growing Criticism by Atheists of the New Atheism Movement," that

many of today's "New Atheists" reprise a nineteenth century argument about the "warfare of science with theology" (to use the title of one of the most well-known books of this genre by A.D. White published in the 1870s). There is a great deal of evidence that this cliché has little historical validity. For example... many of the early pioneers of natural science were deeply religious; Copernicus' theory was not immediately rejected by the Catholic Church (Copernicus held minor orders in the church and a cardinal wrote the introduction); and certain theologically based concepts like "natural law" were crucial for the development of science in the west. While some religious positions conflict with science... there is little evidence to support a grotesquely over-generalized "conflict myth" regarding the larger story of the interaction of science and religion.<sup>652</sup>

However, what Jones neglected to mention was that, despite its initial acceptance of Copernicus' heliocentric theory, the Catholic Church eventually condemned it as

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<sup>651</sup> For instance, while Evangelical conservatives might argue for the literal truth of New Testament miracles, liberal Protestants might advocate a more metaphorical meaning instead. However, liberals do not discount the existence or significance of miracles entirely because of their foundational importance to both traditions (as evidence of God's transformative power) and the antipathy that would likely result between the two groups should the liberals ever decide to do so. One might similarly point out that liberal theology itself developed only as a consequence of the European Enlightenment of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, and the differences that serve to distinguish it from its more conservative counterparts are almost entirely secular (not spiritual) in nature. As Harris noted earlier, "The doors leading out of scriptural literalism do not open from the *inside*" (*The End of Faith*, 18-19).

<sup>652</sup> James Jones, "Growing Criticism by Atheists of the New Atheism Movement," Oxford University Press Blog, 10 March 2016, accessed 6 September 2016, <http://blog.oup.com/2016/03/growing-criticism-by-atheists-of-the-new-atheism-movement/>.

heretical, whilst also consigning two of its most gallant proponents (Giordano Bruno and Galileo Galilei) to similarly unpleasant fates. As Steph Solis explains in her article,

“Copernicus and the Church: What the History Books Don’t Say”:

One possible reason for the misconceptions about Copernicus is the execution of Giordano Bruno, a philosopher who was known as a heretic and an advocate of Copernican theory. While he was condemned for other reasons, Bruno became known as “the first martyr of the new science” after he was burned at the stake in 1600. However... Copernicus gained ridicule from poets and Protestants, who condemned it [his heliocentric theory] as heresy. While the Catholic Church initially accepted heliocentricity, Catholics eventually joined the wave of Protestant opposition and banned the book in 1616. The Protestant churches accepted Copernicus’ findings after more evidence emerged to support it. The Catholic Church, however, remained ground[ed] in its anti-Copernican beliefs until the 19th century. The ban on Copernicus's views was lifted in 1822... the ban on his book [not] until 1835.<sup>653</sup>

This is important for two reasons. First, it goes to Harris’ point that

it is a truism to say that people of faith have created almost everything of value in our world, because nearly every person who has ever swung a hammer or trimmed a sail has been a devout member of one or another religious culture. There has been simply no one else to do the job. We can also say that every human achievement prior to the twentieth century was accomplished by men and women who were perfectly ignorant of the molecular basis of life. Does this suggest that a nineteenth-century view of biology would have been worth maintaining? There is no telling what our world would now be like had some great kingdom of Reason emerged at the time of the Crusades and pacified the credulous multitudes of Europe and the Middle East. We might have had modern democracy and the Internet by the year 1600.<sup>654</sup>

Secondly, even if it appears that very little conflict has historically existed between science and religion, this suggests that there are good reasons for suspecting otherwise.

Given religion’s centuries-long stranglehold on almost all aspects of Western life, it

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<sup>653</sup> Steph Solis, “Copernicus and the Church: What the History Books Don’t Say,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, 19 February 2013, accessed 6 September 2016, <http://www.csmonitor.com/Technology/2013/0219/Copernicus-and-the-Church-What-the-history-books-don-t-say>.

<sup>654</sup> Harris, *The End of Faith*, 108-9.

seems to me far more likely that controversial and potentially heretical claims, such as those made by Copernicus, Bruno, and Galileo, were dealt with quickly and severely, and are thus the norms of this period, not the exceptions they are so routinely professed to be. That we know their names at all is a testament to the scientific scruples of their work, not the (eventual) benevolent acceptance of the Church.<sup>655</sup>

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Citing the work of C.J. Werleman, David Hoelscher, in his article, “New Atheism, Worse Than You Think,” writes that

“It’s time for pluralistic and humanistic atheists to take atheism back from” the likes of Harris, Dawkins, and Ayaan Hirsi Ali, antitheists “who peddle fear, suspicion, and hate.” Because Muslims are, by dint of demagogic propaganda, such central targets of that toxic combination, he wisely advises atheist organizations to reject the ugly rhetoric of the New Atheists and to “seek opportunities to work together with other discriminated-against minorities, like Muslim Americans.” “The road to broader public acceptance,” Werleman writes “does not travel through the persecution of another minority” – a belief that, while not always descriptively true, is certainly the right ethical position.<sup>656</sup>

I would ask that one pay special attention to the first and last sentences of Hoelscher’s statement: “It’s time for *pluralistic and humanistic atheists* to take atheism back,” and “the road to broader public acceptance,” Werleman writes “does not travel through the persecution of another minority”—*a belief that, while not always descriptively true, is certainly the right ethical position.*” Does this mean that Harris and those like him, are by comparison, exclusive and inhumane? The last sentence proves that the answer to such a question must be no. For if a belief in pluralism and respective tolerance is not

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<sup>655</sup> For some lesser known scholars who received similar treatment from religious authorities, please see Lance David LeClaire’s “10 Original Thinkers Persecuted As Heretics,” ListVerse, 21 February 2015, accessed 9 October 2018, <https://listverse.com/2015/02/21/10-original-thinkers-persecuted-as-heretics/>.

<sup>656</sup> David Hoelscher, “New Atheism, Worse than you Think,” CounterPunch.org, 29 January 2016, accessed 6 September 2016, <http://www.counterpunch.org/2016/01/29/new-atheism-worse-than-you-think/>.

descriptively true, then it is not true in any way that *truly* matters.<sup>657</sup> In fact, one should not even claim that it is the right ethical position, only that it is currently the most acceptable one.<sup>658</sup>

But Hoelscher continues:

As the writer Phil Rockstroh argues, it's a politics of the most putrid and profligate kind, "the same old, odious White Man's Burden palaver that Western imperialists have been churning out since the Plundering Class got its start during the Age of Discovery." Referring to Harris and Hitchens, he goes on:

Their casuistry goes thus: "Those foreign jungles and deserts are seething with savages, heathens, cannibals, and headhunters. You just cannot reason with those heartless primitives; therefore it is our duty, as reasonable, civilized men to subdue them, dress and educate them in our manner, and, of course, kill them when we must — and the fact that the wealth of their native regions is flowing westward and enriching the already bloated coffers of our ruling and economic elite has absolutely nothing to do with it."<sup>659</sup>

In other words, Rockstroh (and presumably Hoelscher) are arguing that any position other than one of abject acceptance for universally equivalent cultures is, by default, imperialistic and self-serving. Consider the implications of such a position. Unquestioned acceptance of general equality and the championing of such values as relativism,

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<sup>657</sup> One need look no further than the seven ecumenical councils of the early Christian Church for evidence of numerous instances in which intolerance led to the eventual establishment of orthodoxy, as various competing doctrines were, one after another, labeled as heretical and their proponents either exiled, excommunicated, or executed in order to silence their conflicting perspective and ensure the subsequent consensus of those that remained.

<sup>658</sup> As for the ethical correctness of the pluralistic position, Harris has already demonstrated the logical incoherence of such a relativist sentiment. "The general retort to relativism is simple, because most relativists contradict their thesis in the very act of stating it. Take the case of relativism with respect to morality: moral relativists generally believe that all cultural practices should be respected on their own terms, that the practitioners of the various barbarisms that persist around the globe cannot be judged by the standards of the West, nor can the people of the past be judged by the standards of the present. And yet, implicit in this approach to morality lurks a claim that is not relative but absolute. Most moral relativists believe that tolerance of cultural diversity is better, in some important sense, than outright bigotry. This may be perfectly reasonable, of course, but it amounts to an overarching claim about how all human beings should live. Moral relativism, when used as a rationale for tolerance of diversity, is self-contradictory" (*The End of Faith*, 179).

<sup>659</sup> Hoelscher, "New Atheism, Worse than you Think."

pluralism, multiculturalism, etc., necessarily results in a self-contradiction; after all, what is one free to do if and when another culture does not share one's belief in pluralism and instead seeks to supplant it with its own ideology? The true multiculturalist must either submit or resist, but to choose either would be to demonstrate that their own ideology is itself culturally grounded and thus not universally applicable.

But even in the absence of such extreme examples, pluralism already permits undue and untold suffering of the very minorities it professes to respect. Callous and cowardly acceptance of such practices as foot binding, genital mutilation, honor killing, sati, and sexual slavery all are (or have until recently been) permitted under the shameful guise of relativism. As you may recall, Harris addressed this very notion in Chapter Six.

Can we say that Middle Eastern men who are murderously obsessed with female sexual purity actually love their wives, daughters, and sisters *less* than American or European men do? Of course, we can. And what is truly incredible about the state of our discourse is that such a claim is not only controversial but actually *unutterable* in most contexts.<sup>660</sup>

Note that this in no way absolves the West of its many crimes against the outside world and its inhabitants. Nor has Harris ever claimed it should. What it does, however, is allow us to dispense with the notion of original sin (as it perhaps genuinely applies to humanity's seemingly-ingrained tendency to tolerate practices in others cultures it would never permit in its own) and instead focus on elevating and enlightening those in much more present and pressing predicaments.

Hoelscher eventually concludes that "to insist, as the New Atheists do, that religion must be thrown onto the scrapheap of history forthwith, while at the same time mostly ignoring the problems of poverty and inequality, is the height of irrationality. As a

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<sup>660</sup> Harris, *The End of Faith*, 189.

matter of pure logic, it's really no different than believing in the existence of angels."<sup>661</sup>

Despite its author's intentions, I would argue that this statement actually serves to invalidate a great portion of Hoelscher's overall critique, once one realizes that so long as belief in angels and an afterlife is allowed to continue unabated, the internal impetus for alleviating "the problems of poverty and inequality" will never be given the earthly prominence nor reasonable attention it deserves.<sup>662</sup> One need look no further than the "nasty, brutish, and short" lives of so many who suffered throughout the Middle Ages for proof of this fact and the resultant religiosity it engendered.

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In an interview with Cenk Uygur of "The Young Turks," Reza Aslan argued that

the problem with not just Sam but with the New Atheists in general is that they give atheism a bad name. My greatest intellectual heroes are all atheists, whether I'm talking about [Arthur] Schopenhauer, or [Sigmund] Freud, or Marx, or [Ludwig] Feuerbach. These were the people who gave birth to the modern world. They were the people who gave birth to the enlightenment. But they were experts in religion. They understood religion and then criticized it from a place of expertise, and there is lots to criticize about religion as you have rightly said.

But what is happening now is that a guy sort of sitting in his room watching television with a blog has now become a self-described expert on religion and espouses the most basic, uninformed, and unsophisticated views about religion from a position of, you know, intellectualism. And I think that that's dangerous, because I understand your animosity towards religions, but even you understand that religion is not going anywhere. On

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<sup>661</sup> Hoelscher, "New Atheism, Worse than you Think."

<sup>662</sup> For evidence of this otherworldly phenomenon, I would reference an individual often credited with leading the Catholic Church's global fight against poverty in the 20<sup>th</sup> century: Mother (now Saint) Teresa. In a 2003 article for *Slate* entitled "Mommie Dearest," Christopher Hitchens explained that "MT [Mother Teresa] was not a friend of the poor. She was a friend of poverty. She said that suffering was a gift from God. She spent her life opposing the only known cure for poverty, which is the empowerment of women and the emancipation of them from a livestock version of compulsory reproduction." The following is excerpted from page 11 of his 1995 *The Missionary Position*, in which Hitchens notes that when once asked whether she taught that the poor should endure their circumstance. This is how Mother Teresa responded: "I think it is very beautiful for the poor to accept their lot, to share it with the passion of Christ. I think the world is being much helped by the suffering of the poor people." Consequently, I would contend that, as long as this life is perceived as merely a means to an end (and not an end of itself), obstacles are likely to remain to serve as either stumbling blocks for the unworthy or as hurdles for the righteous to clear.



the contrary, religion is a growing force in the world. It's a growing force in the United States. The most recent Pew poll showed that a majority of Americans want more religion in public life, not less.

So this idea that religion is just “bad science,” “failed science,” that it’s just superstition, it’s silly belief in Gods, despite the fact that a third of the major religions in the world don't actually believe in God, that is not just a misunderstanding and mischaracterization of religion, but it's dangerous. Because what it does is it keeps us from having some very important and necessary conversations about the role of religion in society, about the problem of extremism in religious communities, and about how to reconcile the realities of the modern world with these contextual scriptures that so many people nowadays view incorrectly as literal and inerrant.<sup>663</sup>

There are several issues I would like to raise against Professor Aslan’s remarks. Firstly, when providing his list of intellectual heroes (who all happen to be atheists themselves), Aslan argues that they, unlike Harris and his fellow New Atheists, criticized religion “from a place of expertise.” Although I would argue that their collective works demonstrate a more than passing familiarity with religion, let us grant his assertion and presume there indeed exists a significant scholarly discrepancy between Aslan’s heroes and the New Atheists. What a coincidence, then, that they seem to have harbored such comparable disdain and drawn such remarkably similar conclusions about religion’s undeserved and all-but-unquestioned place in society.<sup>664</sup>

In the second paragraph, Aslan argues that Harris criticizes religion from a position of intellectualism. And while I would tend to agree, I am uncertain as to why this

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<sup>663</sup> Reza Aslan, “Sam Harris’ Criticism Of Islam Is ‘Fundamentalism’ And Needs To Be Rejected,” RealClearPolitics.com, 14 October 2014, accessed 6 September 2016, [http://www.realclearpolitics.com/video/2014/10/14/reza\\_aslan\\_sam\\_harris\\_criticism\\_of\\_islam\\_is\\_fundamentalism\\_and\\_needs\\_to\\_be\\_rejected.html](http://www.realclearpolitics.com/video/2014/10/14/reza_aslan_sam_harris_criticism_of_islam_is_fundamentalism_and_needs_to_be_rejected.html).

<sup>664</sup> Perhaps a passage from Freud’s *The Future of an Illusion* will serve to demonstrate the similarity of both style and substance between Aslan’s so-called heroes and the New Atheists whom he intends to disparage as their unworthy successors. On page 31, Freud writes “let us return once more to the question of religious doctrines. We can now repeat that all of them are illusions and insusceptible of proof. No one can be compelled to think them true, to believe in them. Some of them are so improbable, so incompatible with everything we have laboriously discovered about the reality of the world, that we may compare them – if we pay proper regard to the psychological differences – to delusions.” Had I implied that the preceding passage came from Dawkins instead of Freud, I imagine most would have accepted my subterfuge without hesitation.

is dangerous or even how it is, in fact, a criticism? From what position should Harris grapple with the tenets of religious faith? If the answer comes from anywhere other than from a place of reason, I'm afraid Aslan's argument is dead on arrival. What's more, he notes that "religion is a growing force in the world," and that a recent poll suggests that Americans want "more religion in public life, not less." How does either of these claims, regardless of their veracity, in any way invalidate Harris' arguments? If, in fact, faith is poised to exert even more influence on the world stage in the years to come, then it would seem that Harris' call for a more reasonable examination of all religions and their mutually incompatible claims to inerrancy and truth should be heeded sooner rather than later. For in a world where religion is on the increase, clashes between its myriad manifestations seem all but inevitable.<sup>665</sup>

Finally, Aslan argues that, unbeknownst to the New Atheists, "a third of the major religions in the world don't actually believe in God." Presumably he is referring either to religious liberalism (within the Christian tradition) or to the Eastern traditions of Buddhism, Hinduism, and/or Jainism. But regardless, this claim is both simplistic and deceptive. For if, as all the New Atheists maintain, a religion exists without professing

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<sup>665</sup> Aslan's resigned acceptance of religion's heretofore central role in shaping human society might be compared, albeit unflatteringly, to an antebellum social reformer advocating for more humane treatment of slaves by promoting a dialogue between only benevolent and severe slave owners. Unless and until the underlying ideology (the inherent injustice of the slave system itself) is addressed, palpable progress against extremism is likely to remain frustratingly elusive and/or impossible to enforce. (Aggressive) abolitionism was required to argue that the distinction between humane and harsh slavery was a false one, with both behaviors ultimately based on an unfounded belief in white supremacy. This is the essential role that atheism must play in any conversation concerning the differences between religious moderation and fundamentalism. Neither mere mediation nor "disagreeing while not being disagreeable" will suffice.

belief of any kind in the supernatural, then it does not merit its designation as a religion. It is merely an ideology or philosophy, not a religious faith.<sup>666</sup>

Nevertheless, Aslan goes on to contend that what such antipathy does “is it keeps us from having some very important and necessary conversations about the role of religion in society, about the problem of extremism in religious communities, and about how to reconcile the realities of the modern world with these contextual scriptures that so many people nowadays view incorrectly as literal and inerrant.” I have shown that the New Atheists are very much interested in having the first two of these “necessary conversations,” and their willingness to engage in such efforts speak for themselves.<sup>667</sup> (What’s more, I would hazard that such issues are only relevant within communities that house the other two thirds of the world’s religions that do hold supernatural beliefs.) As for the last, one sees no reason why Harris should strive to reconcile the realities of the modern world with the ancient, ill-informed words of scripture. One certainly cannot envision Aslan’s heroes doing so either, no matter how loftily above Harris they may indeed be perched.<sup>668</sup>

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<sup>666</sup> Here again, it might be useful to recall Keith Augustine’s definition of metaphysical naturalism as a type of “nonreductive physicalism [which] maintains that everything that exists within nature is either physical or supervenient upon the physical and solely influenced by physical causes or causes which are supervenient upon physical causes.” The New Atheists’ commitment to this principle more than justifies the ostensibly broad brush with which Aslan believes they gloss over the world’s religions.

<sup>667</sup> For more, see Dawkins’ eighth chapter, Dennett’s ninth, tenth, and eleventh chapters, Hitchens’ thirteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth chapters, and/or Harris’ fifth chapter (or for a more concise overview, my discussion of their respective contents in the preceding pages of this work).

<sup>668</sup> After all, in practically every other aspect of life, it is the realities of the modern world that serve to supplant the specious (occasionally well-intentioned) claims to knowledge that preceded them. For instance, there is simply no need to reconcile the atomic theory of matter with that of Thales’ single substance theory or the heliocentric model(s) of the solar system with that of the geocentric model proposed by Ptolemy. The same should hold true when comparing Darwin’s theory of evolution with that of the creationist account found in Genesis, but for obvious reasons it does not. Where religion is concerned, the power of the text isn’t always (or even often) directly tied to the demonstrable nature of its claims.

But as misguided as these comments are, Aslan somehow manages to surpass them in an article for *Salon.com* entitled, “Sam Harris and ‘New Atheists’ Aren’t New, Aren’t Even Atheists.” In it, he writes:

Atheists often respond that atheism should not be held responsible for the actions of these authoritarian regimes, and they are absolutely right. It wasn’t atheism that motivated Stalin and Mao to demolish or expropriate houses of worship, to slaughter tens of thousands of priests, nuns and monks, and to prohibit the publication and dissemination of religious material. It was anti-theism that motivated them to do so. After all, if you truly believe that religion is “one of the world’s great evils” – as bad as smallpox and worse than rape; if you believe religion is a form of child abuse; that it is “violent, irrational, intolerant, allied to racism and tribalism and bigotry, invested in ignorance and hostile to free inquiry, contemptuous of women and coercive toward children” – if you honestly believed this about religion, then what lengths would you not go through to rid society of it?... There is, of course, nothing wrong with an anti-theistic worldview, though I personally find it to be rooted in a naive and, dare I say, unscientific understanding of religion – one thoroughly disconnected from the history of religious thought. Every major religion has, at one time or another, been guilty of the crimes that these anti-theists accuse religion of. But do not confuse the dogmatic, polemical, militant anti-theism of Dawkins, Harris, Hitchens and their ilk with atheism. The former rejects religious claims; the latter is “actively, diametrically and categorically opposed to them.”<sup>669</sup>

Notice what Aslan is attempting here. First, he suggests that Stalin and Mao weren’t simply atheists; they were anti-theists. What’s more, it was their anti-theism that motivated them in their quests to rid society of religion. Setting aside for the moment the various problems and glaring omissions within that statement (recall Christopher Hitchens’ seventeenth chapter, “An Objection Anticipated: The Last-Ditch Case Against Secularism”), not to mention his attempt to associate the actions of Stalin and Mao with those of Hitchens and Harris, Aslan then proceeds to announce that “there is, of course,

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<sup>669</sup> Reza Aslan, “Sam Harris and ‘New Atheists’ Aren’t New, Aren’t Even Atheists,” *Salon.com*, 21 November 2014, accessed 6 September 2016, [http://www.salon.com/2014/11/21/reza\\_aslan\\_sam\\_harris\\_and\\_new\\_atheists\\_arent\\_new\\_arent\\_even\\_atheists/](http://www.salon.com/2014/11/21/reza_aslan_sam_harris_and_new_atheists_arent_new_arent_even_atheists/). (One assumes Aslan confused the former and latter labels in his concluding sentence.)

nothing wrong with an anti-theistic worldview, though I personally find it to be rooted in a naïve and, dare I say, unscientific understanding of religion.” In other words, Aslan is arguing that it was anti-theism, not atheism, that was directly responsible for the violent, repressive, totalitarian regimes of Stalin and Mao.<sup>670</sup> Nevertheless, he believes that it is a perfectly acceptable worldview to hold, albeit a little naïve and unscientific with regard to religion.

I find it difficult to reconcile these two statements. As Douglas Hagler struggles to articulate in his article, “Sam Harris and the Motherlode of Bad Ideas”:

Wanting to castigate a single vast religion, and call it the “mother-lode of bad ideas”, is no more justifiable than the situation Sam Harris decries in the United States, where there is widespread distrust of atheists, such that it is essentially impossible to rise to high government office unless one is at least outwardly religious. Sam Harris wants us to be able to criticize bad ideas, but not his bad idea, which is that “Islam” is a singular entity, and is entirely evil and to be feared. *That claim makes as much sense as me denigrating Sam Harris because Stalin killed a lot of innocent people, and both of them are atheists.*<sup>671</sup>

Although Hagler considers both Stalin and Harris to be atheists, the analogy holds for Aslan’s characterization of both as anti-theists. In other words, if Stalin’s and Mao’s

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<sup>670</sup> Unfortunately, this argument is self-contradictory. As Christopher Hitchens, who frequently described himself as an antitheist, once remarked “once you assume a creator and a plan, it makes us objects, in a cruel experiment, whereby we are created sick and commanded to be well.... And over us to supervise this, is installed a celestial dictatorship; a kind of divine North Korea. Exigent, I would say, more than exigent... greedy for uncritical praise from dawn until dusk. And swift to punish the original sins with which it so tenderly gifted us in the very first place. An eternal, unalterable, judge, jury and executioner, against whom there could be no appeal. And who wasn’t finished with you even when you died. However! Let no one say there’s no cure! Salvation is offered! Redemption, indeed, is promised, at the low price, of the surrender of your critical faculties,” (Skep Tical, “Christopher Hitchens – Antitheist Anthem,” *YouTube* Video, 3:51, 6 September 2014, 11 October 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a0ot00779RM>). In other words, antitheism’s ire toward religion is first and foremost a reaction against the totalitarian impulse it implicitly entails and enforces. To suggest that authoritarian leaders such as Stalin share this ire with antitheists is to misrepresent the ideologies and intentions of both. After all, substituting one’s own person as the object of worship can hardly be considered a refutation of the religious impulse itself. It is, instead, merely a repurposing of the plot and a recasting of the characters in what is otherwise a very old story.

<sup>671</sup> Douglas Hagler, “Sam Harris and the Motherlode of Bad Ideas,” emphasis mine, TwoFriarsandaFool.com, 7 October 2014, accessed 6 September 2016, <https://twofriarsandafool.com/2014/10/sam-harris-and-the-motherlode-of-bad-ideas/>.

motivations were essentially anti-theistic, then it seems anti-theism can be considered to bear significant if not sole responsibility for the numerous atrocities committed in its name. In which case, it would hardly seem an acceptable worldview (thus, his condemnations of New Atheism appear reasonable). If, however, the actions of Stalin and Mao are attributable to motivations other than anti-theism alone (as I have repeatedly argued), then it would seem that Aslan's attempt to separate the two (atheism and anti-theism) has resulted in little more than a distinction without a difference (which causes his criticisms of the New Atheists suddenly to seem not only ill-considered, but also unfounded). I would argue that Aslan must decide which of these scenarios he thinks is correct, for it certainly cannot be both. Either way, he shows the inherent contradiction contained within his thesis.<sup>672</sup>

Seeming to contradict himself again, Aslan continues:

Like religious fundamentalism, New Atheism is primarily a reactionary phenomenon, one that responds to religion with the same venomous ire with which religious fundamentalists respond to atheism. What one finds in the writings of anti-theist ideologues like Dawkins, Harris and Hitchens is the same sense of utter certainty, the same claim to a monopoly on truth, the same close-mindedness that views one's own position as unequivocally good and one's opponent's views as not just wrong but irrational and even stupid, the same intolerance for alternative explanations, the same rabid adherents (as anyone who has dared criticize Dawkins or Harris on social media can attest), and, most shockingly, the same proselytizing fervor that one sees in any fundamentalist community.<sup>673</sup>

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<sup>672</sup> For the record, I would also be very interested to know Dr. Aslan's thoughts on what a *more scientific, less naïve* sort of atheism might look like.

<sup>673</sup> Aslan, "Sam Harris and 'New Atheists' Aren't New, Aren't Even Atheists."

With one fell swoop of his pen, Aslan has managed not only to equate anti-theism with totalitarianism, but also to conflate fundamentalism with its ideological antithesis.<sup>674</sup>

After all, it is this sense of utter certainty, the claim to a monopoly on truth, and an unshakable conviction in the superiority of one's own faith that the New Atheists first set out to challenge. And no matter how much their opponents may wish otherwise, *absence of belief is not a belief*. (One simply cannot be fundamentalist in one's critique of fundamentalism.) Presumably, Aslan believes that religious moderates are the ideological solution to the zealotry of both New Atheists and evangelicals. However, the perceptible difference between moderates and fundamentalists can only ever be outward expression, not inner belief. For as Harris notes, "if a Christian made no tacit claims of knowledge with regard to the literal truth of scripture, he would be just as much a Muslim, or a Jew – or an atheist – as a follower of Christ."<sup>675</sup>

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In his article, "Sam Harris Uncovered," Theodore Sayeed writes:

It is sometimes alleged of Harris that no amount of data and facts will budge his doggedly anti-Muslim atavism. I think this is unjust; Harris does

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<sup>674</sup> The totalitarian impulse is, after all, quite akin to the religious one. The principle difference lies not in the rejection or acceptance of absolute authority (both necessarily accept the premise), but rather in determining one's role in the relationship between worshipper and worshipped, saved and savior. The structure of the relationship itself remains largely unaltered.

<sup>675</sup> Harris, *The End of Faith*, 68. This is not an attempt by Harris to mislabel the obvious poetic passages and parables contained within scripture, but rather only to say that if absolutely *every passage, person, and proffered principle* contained within the Bible is meant to be understood allegorically, what tangible tenets remain with which to tether oneself to the faith? Some portions of the text are clearly understood in their most literal sense. As Got Questions Ministries explains "although we take the Bible literally, there are still figures of speech within its pages. An example of a figure of speech would be that if someone said 'it is raining cats and dogs outside,' you would know that they did not really mean that cats and dogs were falling from the sky. They would mean it is raining really hard. There are figures of speech in the Bible which are not to be taken literally, but those are obvious.... When we make ourselves the final arbiters of which parts of the Bible are to be interpreted literally, we elevate ourselves above God. Who is to say, then, that one person's interpretation of a biblical event or truth is any more or less valid than another's? The confusion and distortions that would inevitably result from such a system would essentially render the Scriptures null and void. The Bible is God's Word to us and He meant it to be believed – literally and completely." "Can/Should we Interpret the Bible as Literal?" Got Questions Ministries, accessed 10 October 2018, <https://www.gotquestions.org/Bible-literal.html>.

evolve with the facts. But like the ever moving goal post, he does so with stealth so as to mask his contradictions. A case in point: For years he hotly denied the reality of Christian suicide bombers in the Middle East, defying critics to name “Where are the Christian suicide bombers?” until a public encounter with the distinguished anthropologist Scott Atran forced him into a collision with just such a lot of Christians, namely the PLFP. And since then he’s quietly dropped this denial and switched to carping at their small numbers: “Palestinian Christians suffer the same Israeli occupation. How many have blown themselves up on a bus in Tel Aviv? One? Two?”

Wrong. The PFLP has conducted ten suicide bombings. And that’s just Palestinian Christians, not counting Lebanese or German.<sup>676</sup>

Though Sayeed’s intentions in the above passage are clear – he wishes to demonstrate that Muslims should not be maligned as the only suicide bombers – it would seem that he has inadvertently lent strength to Harris’ overarching position (that religion causes otherwise intelligent and compassionate people to behave in a manner that is neither), all the while extending the scope of his original critique. Essentially, Sayeed seems to be arguing not that Harris is wrong to generalize about Muslims; it’s that he’s wrong to do so about Christians: after all, they commit these atrocities too. His point, unintentional though it may be, is well-taken.

Echoing the dispute between Harris and Chomsky, Sayeed goes on to accuse Harris of believing that

there is no moral distinction between cluster bombs and Disneyland. Death is death, so what’s the problem? The claim amounts to holding that there is no difference between choking on a pretzel and sustaining a nuclear attack because, well, in both cases people die. The act of raining down “Shock & Awe” bears no likeness to the far less perilous and unlikely accidents of theme parks which, on the rare occasion they occur, do not make rubble of homes and infrastructure and uproot millions of refugees. And rollercoasters invite the willing patronage of thrill seekers, as opposed to Tomahawk missiles, whose victims do not volunteer for the risk of being shredded. The distinction is both in scale and human agency, between a minuscule risk undertaken freely in the knowledge that one is

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<sup>676</sup> Theodore Sayeed, “Sam Harris Uncovered,” Mondoweiss.net, 25 June 2012, accessed 6 September 2016, <http://mondoweiss.net/2012/06/sam-harris-uncovered>.



strapped in by “rigorous safety precautions”, and mass lethality thrust upon one by a hostile foreign power.<sup>677</sup>

Again, Sayeed’s point is valid. To presume no moral distinction between cluster bombs and Disneyland would be to fundamentally misrepresent the very *raison d’être* of ethics. The intentions of those who build rollercoasters and those who construct Tomahawk missiles are most assuredly different. That was the entire purpose of Harris’ argument with Chomsky. It appears that both Sayeed and Chomsky have failed to grasp this point. What Harris was arguing was that to make no distinctions between the intentional horrors of terrorism with the unavoidable collateral damage of one’s response to it, is to be equally guilty of misrepresenting the entire ethical enterprise. As Harris says, “Where ethics are concerned, intentions are everything.”<sup>678</sup>

So when Chomsky himself responds to Harris that “since you profess to be concerned about ‘God-intoxicated sociopaths,’ perhaps you can refer me to your condemnation of the perpetrator of by far the worst crime of this millennium because God had instructed him that he must smite the enemy,” he is absolutely right.<sup>679</sup> The eschatological longing and irrational certainty of George W. Bush were/are a problem. So, too, were those of Osama bin Laden. As long as religious faith is allowed to play such a pivotal role in development and implementation of our foreign policy, we can continue to expect both similarities of thought and parallels of action to regularly occur between those on all sides of almost every future conflict.

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<sup>677</sup> Ibid.

<sup>678</sup> Harris, *The End of Faith*, 147.

<sup>679</sup> Noam Chomsky, in Eugene Walters, “Sam Harris Awkwardly Debates with Noam Chomsky.” Critical-Theory.com, 2 May 2015, accessed 6 September 2016, <http://www.critical-theory.com/sam-harris-awkwardly-debates-with-noam-chomsky/>.

Hoping to support Chomsky's position, Glen Greenwald writes, in his article for *The Guardian*, entitled, "Sam Harris, the New Atheists, and anti-Muslim animus":

I find extremely suspect the behavior of westerners like Harris (and Hitchens and Dawkins) who spend the bulk of their time condemning the sins of other, distant peoples rather than the bulk of their time working against the sins of their own country. That's particularly true of Americans, whose government has brought more violence, aggression, suffering, misery, and degradation to the world over the last decade than any other. Even if that weren't true – and it is – spending one's time as an American fixated on the sins of others is a morally dubious act, to put that generously.... The reason this is particularly suspect and shoddy behavior from American commentators is that there are enormous amounts of violence and extremism and suffering which their government has unleashed and continues to unleash on the world. Indeed, much of that US violence is grounded in if not expressly justified by religion, including the aggressive attack on Iraq and steadfast support for Israeli aggression (to say nothing of the role Judaism plays in the decades-long oppression by the Israelis of Palestinians and all sorts of attacks on neighboring Arab and Muslim countries). Given the legion human rights violations from their own government, I find that Americans and westerners who spend the bulk of their energy on the crimes of others are usually cynically exploiting human rights concerns in service of a much different agenda.<sup>680</sup>

Like Chomsky, Greenwald undoubtedly has a point that only he without sin should cast the first stone. However, in making this point, Greenwald is forced to concede that "much of that US violence is grounded in if not expressly justified by religion." But even if this is true, and there are ample reasons to believe it is, it simply serves to raise our own moral awareness of the fact that faith continues to play a deceptively pernicious role within our own society as well.

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In an article for *The Independent*, Jerome Taylor adds fuel to the fire. Referencing the work of Nathan Lean and Glen Greenwald, he argues that

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<sup>680</sup> Glenn Greenwald, "Sam Harris, the New Atheists, and Anti-Muslim Animus," *The Guardian*, 3 April 2013, accessed 6 September 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/apr/03/sam-harris-muslim-animus>.

“conversations about the practical impossibility of God’s existence and the science-based irrationality of an afterlife slid seamlessly into xenophobia over Muslim immigration or the practice of veiling,” wrote Lean. “The New Atheists became the new Islamophobes, their invectives against Muslims resembling the rowdy, uneducated ramblings of backwoods racists rather than appraisals based on intellect, rationality and reason.”... “When criticism of religion morphs into an undue focus on Islam - particularly at the same time the western world has been engaged in a decade-long splurge of violence, aggression and human rights abuses against Muslims, justified by a sustained demonization campaign - then I find these objections to the New Atheists completely warranted,” Greenwald concludes. “In sum, [New Atheism] sprinkles intellectual atheism on top of the standard neocon, right-wing worldview of Muslims.”<sup>681</sup>

But once again, even if such criticisms are merited, the result is hardly an endorsement for any other stripe of organized religion. The oft-repeated claim that “they’re bad too!” is insufficient to refute the heart of Harris’ position: that what is ultimately required is an end to all faith, not just the faith of others, no matter how much more pressing the repercussions of those other faiths may presently be. What Lean and Greenwald (and Taylor) seem to have done is to mistake Harris’ most pressing current concern for the entirety of his argument.

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Perhaps an about-face admission of guilt from a former Muslim apologist will serve to show how specious the charge of Islamophobe truly is when applied to critics such as Harris. In his article, “The Critics of Islam Were Right,” Mike Dobbins writes:

I read the Quran, many Hadith, the biography of Muhammad, the history of Jihad, and Islamic law. This is what I learned: The critics of Islam are right. Islam is intrinsically, alarmingly violent, hateful and oppressive on a scale greater than all other major religions combined. To say that radical

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<sup>681</sup> Jerome Taylor, “Atheists Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens and Sam Harris Face Islamophobia Backlash,” *The Independent*, 12 April 2013, accessed 6 September 2016, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/atheists-richard-dawkins-christopher-hitchens-and-sam-harris-face-islamophobia-backlash-8570580.html>.

Islamists are motivated to commit atrocities and embrace oppression based on religious doctrine is the understatement of the century.

I, like most defenders of Islam, was ignorant, naïve, and in denial. I wrongly assumed all holy books have enough good messages to offset the bad. I wrongly assumed that, like Jesus, Muhammad promoted peace, love, and non-violence. I wrongly assumed criticism of Islam equates to criticism of all Muslims.

While I apologize to those wrongly labeled Islamophobes, my biggest apology is owed to Muslims. Muslims have needlessly suffered under oppressive Islamic religious and political doctrines as thousands of uninformed smearests like myself rushed to judge and silence critics of Islam. By not acknowledging the Islamic link to radical violence and hate, smearests have unwittingly allowed it to spread. The smearests, denialists, and the naïve have, unknowingly, turned their back on moderate Muslims and a reformed, peaceful Islam.

We who have carelessly thrown around the Islamophobe label including Glen Greenwald, Reza Aslan, and Karen Armstrong should lower our heads in shame and guilt. Few things are as morally depraved as attacking someone who criticizes Islam (Ayaan Hirsi Ali) rather than attacking the Islamic apostasy and blasphemy laws teaching Muslims they should kill her. We must now live with the knowledge that we've abandoned and betrayed our principles. Though we claim the mantle of human rights, free speech and equality, we lack the courage of our convictions when it offends someone. We make the cowardly lion look like Churchill.

In reality, those who criticize Islam, especially reform minded Muslims, are the bravest of the brave. They are literally putting their lives at risk by the simple act of criticizing the Quran, Muhammad, and Sharia. It is the critics of Islam who are working steadfastly for equality and human rights for Muslims as apologists wallow in denial.

Criticizing the Quran and Muhammad is not criticizing or stereotyping the Muslim minority just as criticizing The Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith is not criticizing or stereotyping the Mormon minority. When people criticize the Mormon holy book or prophet, rightfully, there is no attempt to shield Mormonism from criticism or smear the critics as Mormonophobes.

Now, we smearests must make up for lost time and lost chances. We must double our efforts to criticize oppressive Islamic practices, doctrines, and regimes and demand reform. We must embrace Muslims who truly are moderate, acknowledge the faults in Islam, and are striving for

coexistence, peace, equality, human rights, and freedom of expression and worship. All non-Muslims can support Muslims best by doing the same.

It would be one thing if Islamic doctrines said Muslims should love non-Muslims and love their enemy. It would be one thing if the prophet Muhammad preached non-violence. It would be one thing if Islamic Laws supported equality for women, minorities, freedom of expression, and valued human rights. It would be one thing if the Quran taught the golden rule. It is because they do the complete opposite that I am now speaking out.<sup>682</sup>

Of course, even such a forthright and self-effacing apology is itself tainted by its implicitly Christian biases, but at the very least, Dobbins' piece demonstrates the false equivalencies that are bound to result from this incessant appeal to cultural relativity.

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This admission notwithstanding, Vox Day, in "An Atheist Critique Against Sam Harris," argues that

despite his atheism, Harris himself appears to be subject to a tribalism that is older than either Christianity or Islam, the two religions he primarily criticizes. And it is potentially significant to note how little he criticizes either Judaism or Israel, despite the fact that there is considerable criticism of the latter from secular Europeans who share his atheism. Now, I don't dislike Sam. Unlike Dawkins and Myers, I don't think he's an intrinsically dreadful individual. But his primary problem, aside from his apparent tribalism, is that he is simply not sufficiently detail-oriented or logical enough to be capable of successfully addressing the intellectual challenges he sets himself.<sup>683</sup>

In other words, Harris' opposition to Christianity and Islam is not the result a sustained scientific and historical inquiry into the tenets and traditions of those two faiths. It is instead primarily the result of his own Jewish heritage. What's worse, this sense of tribalistic loyalty is so ingrained in Harris that not only is he unable to refute it, but he

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<sup>682</sup> Mike Dobbins, "The Critics of Islam Were Right," *The Christian Post*, 13 April 2015, accessed 6 September 2016, <http://www.christianpost.com/news/the-critics-of-islam-were-right-an-apology-to-ayaan-hirsi-ali-sam-harris-bill-maher-and-other-so-called-islamophobes-137416/>.

<sup>683</sup> Vox Day, "An Atheist Critique of Sam Harris," Vox Day BlogSpot, 18 August 2012, accessed 8 September 2016, <https://voxday.blogspot.com/2012/08/an-atheist-critique-of-sam-harris.html>.

cannot even consciously acknowledge it. Despite the obvious ridiculousness of such a claim, let us presume that Mr. Day is, in fact, correct in his characterization. Would this not serve as confirmation of Harris' and Hitchens' central theses that what is needed is "the end of faith," and that "religion poisons everything?"

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In his article for *The Nation*, Jackson Lears' critique of Harris represents, if nothing else, a refreshing change in focus, even if the same cannot be said for tactics. Lears argues that it is not so much that Harris misrepresents religion (though Lears will presently make it clear that he believes Harris is guilty of this as well), but rather that he distorts science. He writes:

To define science as the source of absolute truth, Harris must first ignore the messy realities of power in the world of Big Science. In his books there is no discussion of the involvement of scientists in the military-industrial complex or in the pharmacological pursuit of profit. Nor is any attention paid to the ways that chance, careerism and intellectual fashion can shape research: how they can skew data, promote the publication of some results and consign others to obscurity, channel financial support or choke it off. Rather than provide a thorough evaluation of evidence, Harris is given to sweeping, unsupported generalizations. His idea of an argument about religious fanaticism is to string together random citations from the Koran or the Bible. His books display a stunning ignorance of history, including the history of science. For a man supposedly committed to the rational defense of science, Harris is remarkably casual about putting a thumb on the scale in his arguments.<sup>684</sup>

Though this is certainly a valid criticism concerning the existence of second-rate scientists, it hardly serves to devalue the overall scientific enterprise, which by their own actions, these bad actors have either circumvented or betrayed outright.<sup>685</sup>

Nevertheless, Lears goes on to argue that

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<sup>684</sup> Jackson Lears, "Same Old New Atheism: On Sam Harris," *The Nation*, 27 April 2011, accessed 8 September 2016, <https://www.thenation.com/article/same-old-new-atheism-sam-harris/>.

<sup>685</sup> After all, if Harris' arguments are ultimately proven to be as sweeping and unsupported as Lears claims, then it is science itself that will ultimately demonstrate their speciousness.

[Harris'] critique of religion is a stew of sophomoric simplifications: he reduces all belief to a fundamentalist interpretation of sacred texts, projecting his literalism and simple-mindedness onto believers whose faith may foster an epistemology far more subtle than his positivist convictions. Belief in scriptural inerrancy is Harris's only criterion for true religious faith. This eliminates a wide range of religious experience, from pain and guilt to the exaltation of communal worship, the ecstasy of mystical union with the cosmos and the ambivalent coexistence of faith and doubt.<sup>686</sup>

And as proof of his more multicultural leanings, Lears even offers the following example:

[Harris] is ignorant of the relevant anthropological literature on the subjects that vex him the most, such as Hanna Papanek's study of Pakistani women, which described the burqa as "portable seclusion," a garment that allowed women to go out into the world while protecting them from associating with unrelated men. As the anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod writes, the burqa is a "mobile home" in patriarchal societies where women are otherwise confined to domestic space. Harris cannot imagine that Islamic women might actually choose to wear one; but some do. Nor is he aware of the pioneering work of Christine Walley on female genital mutilation in Africa. Walley illuminates the complex significance of the practice without ever expressing tolerance for it, and she uses cross-cultural understanding as a means of connecting with local African women seeking to put an end to it.<sup>687</sup>

Once again, I am at a loss to explain how this, in any way, shape, or form, represents a critique of Harris' argument. That some women should seek to find both solace and solitude within the confines of a burqa in order to avoid the unwanted attentions of unrelated men (in a dogmatically patriarchal society which might put them to death should those unwanted attentions ultimately find them) is hardly a ringing endorsement for the practice. It is merely justification for a physically and psychologically repressive status quo. Lears' comments on female genital mutilation are even more telling in this regard. Were one to remove religious imperatives from the conversation, then absolutely

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<sup>686</sup> Lears, "Same Old New Atheism: On Sam Harris."

<sup>687</sup> Ibid.

no justification for the continuation of such a barbarous practice could ever, in good conscience, be elucidated.<sup>688</sup>

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But perhaps one of the most shocking allegations made against Harris is that his particular brand of atheism is inherently sexist. In his article, “Sam Harris, The Criticism of Bad Ideas, and Sexist Appeals to Biology,” Daniel Fincke identifies Harris’ crime in an off-the-cuff remark Harris once made, trying to determine why more men appear to be drawn to his argumentative tone.<sup>689</sup>

His impulse was to reach for a biologizing solution to what should clearly be seen as a question of social injustice and proactive need for social change. It was his ignorance (or indifference) to how statements about the supposedly intrinsic masculinity of critical thinking have an ugly,

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<sup>688</sup> In other words, were it not for the repressive religious realities of women living under such regimes, then such enterprising efforts as those instigated by Abu-Lughod and Walley would not have been necessary in the first place. So while Lears’ calls for Harris to broaden his horizons in search of action-oriented allies is well-taken, to ignore the underlying commonality of their cause (the religious oppression of women) is to miss Harris’ entire point. Reconceiving of burqas as “mobile homes” might provide some perceptual solace for those women forced or otherwise persuaded to wear them, but Harris would seek to demonstrate that the underlying motivation for them – that women’s bodies are inherently lustful, luring otherwise noble men to sin – is the real problem which must eventually be addressed. As the Quran unfortunately confirms “And tell the believing women to lower their gaze (from looking at forbidden things), and protect their private parts (from illegal sexual acts, etc.) and not to show off their adornment except only that which is apparent (like palms of hands or one eye or both eyes for necessity to see the way, or outer dress like veil, gloves, head-cover, apron, etc.), and to draw their veils all over Juyubihinna (i.e. their bodies, faces, necks and bosoms, etc.) and not to reveal their adornment except to their husbands, their fathers, their husband’s fathers, their sons, their husband’s sons, their brothers or their brother’s sons, or their sister’s sons, or their (Muslim) women (i.e. their sisters in Islam), or the (female) slaves whom their right hands possess, or old male servants who lack vigour, or small children who have no sense of the shame of sex. And let them not stamp their feet so as to reveal what they hide of their adornment. And all of you beg Allah to forgive you all, O believers, that you may be successful. (Quran 24:31 (Mohsin Khan translation).)

<sup>689</sup> Journalist Michelle Boorstein once asked Harris ““why the vast majority of atheists – and many of those who buy his books – are male, a topic which has prompted some to raise questions of sexism in the atheist community.’ Harris’ answer was both silly and then provocative. It can only be attributed to my ‘overwhelming lack of sex appeal,’ he said to huge laughter. ‘I think it may have to do with my person[al] slant as an author, being very critical of bad ideas. This can sound very angry to people... People just don’t like to have their ideas criticized. There’s something about that critical posture that is to some degree intrinsically male and more attractive to guys than to women,’ he said. ‘The atheist variable just has this – it doesn’t obviously have this nurturing, coherence-building extra estrogen vibe that you would want by default if you wanted to attract as many women as men.’” For Harris’ explanation/defense of these comments and Fincke’s criticisms more generally, please see Sam. Harris, “I’m Not the Sexist Pig You’re Looking For,” SamHarris.org (blog), 15 September 2014, accessed 10 October 2018, <https://samharris.org/im-not-the-sexist-pig-youre-looking-for/>.



millennia old, legacy in our culture. Those conscientious about empowering women are educated about that history and loathe to repeat it and eager to actively change it. It was his ignorance (or indifference) to how stereotype threat serves to make false ideas about women's inferiority with respect to rational endeavors into self-fulfilling prophecies. Girls have empirically been shown to perform equally to boys when not exposed to prejudicial messaging about which are the "masculine" and which are the "feminine" kinds of reasoning and horrifyingly worse when exposed to such messaging.<sup>690</sup>

Fincke continues:

His language uncritically expresses a whole set of false and disempowering ideas that humanists and educated people everywhere should be fighting. He can't set himself up as a humanist advocate for women's rights if he has contempt for all the philosophical and social science scholarship behind feminist ideas. I'm not saying he has to agree with it all. I'm saying he has to actually treat it seriously enough that he realizes that it is a better testing ground for his ideas than the opinions of whatever women happen to be in his inner circle. I'm also pointing out that he's incredibly out of touch with the numerous discussions in the atheist movement that have brought these issues to the fore. Many women have had powerfully valuable contributions to the discussion and there have been many tangible steps towards improvement. Either he's too ignorant of the movement's internal discussions to be a spokesperson for this movement or he's been too dismissive of the feminist arguments made in the movement to even do them the justice of a nuanced reply or let them make the slightest dent on his language use.

His lazy appeal to biology also evinced an implicit indifference to figuring out how to get more women to make such criticisms of religion. Even if he was non-culpably ignorant for some reason of all the women leaders in the atheist movement, he didn't seem vexed at all about that supposed problem. He didn't say "we need to do better". He chalked it up to biology. Which won't motivate anyone to fix the problem but instead send the message to countless low information readers of *The Washington Post* that atheism's not for women. Rather than starting with a baseline assumption – not a mere "feminist desire" but a rational presumption – women are as capable critical thinkers as men by nature, instead he looks at women not engaging in one field of critical thought as visibly to the media or to his own myopic vision as much as they should be and he says

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<sup>690</sup> Daniel Fincke, "Sam Harris, The Criticism of Bad Ideas, and Sexist Appeals To Biology," Patheos.com, 15 September 2014, accessed 8 September 2016, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/camelswithhammers/2014/09/sam-harris-the-criticism-of-bad-ideas-and-sexist-appeals-to-biology/>.

essentially that it is just biology and that it must be intrinsically male to criticize bad ideas.

And regardless of his intent, that sounds way too indistinguishable from “it’s intrinsically male for the man to run the household with his superior reasoning skills given by God, or any of countless other reflexive rationalizations for gender inequality.”<sup>691</sup>

Notice the rather transparent bait-and-switch Fincke is attempting to pull off. Because Harris suggested that women might not be as biologically or historically accustomed to public argumentation and outright aggressiveness, Fincke believes that he has proven himself unfit to speak on any issues of concern to women. Where again, I would ask is the criticism of any of Harris’ central ideas? Nevertheless, if one were to read a little further, one could not help but notice the way that Fincke, by suggesting that female philosophers most commonly pursue subjects specifically related to their gender, arguably opens himself to the same sort of inadvertent sexism for which he would so callously condemn Harris.

I currently think a lot of women do philosophy not only under the explicit banner of *Feminist Philosophy* but also under the auspices of *Women’s Studies*, *Feminist Literary Studies*, and *Sociology*. In those fields they’re working with genuine philosophical distinctions and making genuine advances, despite sometimes being outside the institutional reach of the Gatekeepers Of Philosophy. Many professional philosophers readily prove themselves embarrassingly more philosophically ignorant and outright retrograde about gender than the average feminist on the blogosphere who has no particular academic philosophical credentials. That’s not to say more women doing feminism in philosophy wouldn’t be necessary also (or that no explicit feminist philosophy is not being done that is crucially aiding feminist work outside philosophy departments). And it’s not to say women intrinsically have no interests in, or need for, philosophy beyond feminism and that there shouldn’t be more women in all specializations (ditto all these caveats for blacks). Rather, my point is that just as I, as an ex-Christian, am more passionate about doing philosophy in the atheist context that reflects my personal frustration with a particular set of harmful bad ideas and mass deceptions, I think it would be perfectly logical if academics who personally belong to marginalized groups are

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<sup>691</sup> Ibid.

disproportionately interested in addressing issues related to their oppression in their scholarship. There's nothing wrong with that at all.<sup>692</sup>

I trust his rapid backpedaling and numerous qualifications in the preceding paragraph – (i.e. “it’s not to say women intrinsically have no interests in, or need for, philosophy beyond feminism and that there shouldn’t be more women in all specializations (ditto all these caveats for blacks)” – are sufficient evidence of just how easily such a “mistake” can be made and how it should in no way obscure or distract from the author’s overall message: neither Fincke’s nor Harris’.

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In his article, “Problematic Thoughts 06 - A Criticism of Sam Harris and the New Atheist's Response to the Syrian Refugee Crisis,” Lindsay Oden argues that

Sam Harris’s own views on religion are clearly the same kind of material delusion that constricts the energies of many religious people. His blind hatred for Muslims prevents him from recognizing the historical and material circumstances that have produced terrorism and violence. US military attacks against civilians are used as recruitment propaganda for al-Qaeda and ISIS, so we shouldn’t be surprised when people become terrorists. Moreover, Harris has more in common with the civilians in Sudan and Afghanistan than he does with the military apparatus that is dead-set on killing them. At the heart of the matter is survival in the face of terrorism, whether it is state-sponsored or religious. This is not to say that Harris is some kind of alienated proletarian yearning for connection to his brethren; rather that the interests of civilians and Harris are conspicuously aligned: end terrorism, end violence, end oppression. But Harris is too focused on his fear of Muslims to realize that Muslims across the globe also want to end those things.<sup>693</sup>

Although few of these criticisms are original, Oden’s concluding thoughts are particularly interesting. He claims that, rather than recognizing that “the interests of civilians and

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<sup>692</sup> Ibid. Emphases mine.

<sup>693</sup> Lindsay Oden, “Problematic Thoughts 06 - A Criticism of Sam Harris and the New Atheist's Response to the Syrian Refugee Crisis,” Handsy Comprehensive Exam, 7 December 2015, accessed 8 September 2016, <http://www.handsycomprehensiveexam.com/podcast/2015/12/5/problematic-thoughts-06-a-criticism-of-sam-harris-and-the-new-atheists-response-to-the-syrian-refugee-crisis>.

Harris are conspicuously aligned,” Harris is “too focused on his fear of Muslims to realize that Muslims across the globe also want to end those things.” As Oden points out, “at the heart of the matter is survival in the face of terrorism.” On this, at least, I agree. One wonders, however, which worldview represents a greater threat to that survival: the scientific or the religious? In other words, do those women in burqas or without a clitoris, of whom Jackson Lears spoke, have more to fear from the oppressive regimes under which they live,<sup>694</sup> or from those who are fighting to put an end to the inhumanity and irrationalities of both?

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In his article, “Detestable Crusade,” Omer Aziz argues that

Long before atheism went vogue in the West, the 9th-century atheist al-Ma’ari was irking the ruling classes in Syria with his vitriolic, anti-theist poems. (When al Qaeda swept through northern Syria in 2012, they beheaded statues of al-Ma’ari)... Muslims, Christians, Jews and other minorities lived together in Muslim-governed territories for long stretches of time. Relations between these communities were not always harmonious — this is the past we are talking about — but co-existence was woven into the fabric of Muslim society and polity. As the historian Jason Goodwin writes, “Islam was generally not spread by the sword....In both North Africa and Spain, ordinary people sometimes converted, hoping for access to wealth and status. Often the conversions were sincere. They were welcomed within limits, but they were very rarely forced.” True, apostasy was still a crime, though let’s remember that translating the Bible into the local language got one burned at the stake during the contemporary period in Christendom. Even in Britain, Oxford and Cambridge did not begin admitting non-Anglicans until the late 19th century.... Muslim empires were bloody, seduced by power and expansion, and their caliphs and sultans, like all imperialists from time immemorial, wanted ever more control. But Harris is no multitasker; holding a complicated picture and talking at the same time seems impossible to him, so he reduces history to mottos and engages in

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<sup>694</sup> Here again, it seems that at least some blame must be attributed to those various foreign powers who maintain a steadfast belief in the autonomy and justifiable authority of cultural relativism, thus allowing their continued subjugation.

sloganeering to mask his ignorance.... Why Sam Harris feels the need to take sides in the fanatical squabbles of our barbaric ancestors eludes me.<sup>695</sup>

But with all due respect to Aziz, I would argue that it is not the “fanatical squabbles of our barbaric ancestors,” with which Harris seeks to engage. That indeed would be pointless. However, in order to confront the barbarisms of our own time, to which he himself just alluded (the destruction of iconic art; the inherently tense situation of minorities forced to live under the religious rule of others; the consistently harsh punishment for apostasy; the various, often unsuccessful, challenges to the authority of the religious elite, etc.), Harris must engage with the traditions of the faithful and the histories they so painstakingly wrought. To do otherwise, would be to invite the criticisms of willful ignorance that his opponents, however unjustly, already make.

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But lest one believe reform must come from outside (as Harris maintains), Anwar Omeish explains why this is not necessarily so:

As Suzanne Schneider details in her article “The Reformation Will Be Televised: On ISIS, Religious Authority and the Allure of Textual Simplicity,” Islamic jurisprudence, or *fiqh*, is incredibly complex. She describes it as follows:

“Yet even more important than [other] factors is the tradition of jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and the principles it long ago established for how to interpret the Qur’an’s sometimes enigmatic passages. These include foundational principles (*usul al-fiqh*) that govern the acts of Qur’anic exegesis, without which no authoritative legal rulings can be generated. For instance, one cannot issue a judgment on a particular issue without consulting all of what has been said about it within the Qur’an and the hadith (sayings attributed to Muhammad). Because the Qur’an, like the Hebrew Bible

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<sup>695</sup> Omer Aziz, “Sam Harris’ Detestable Crusade,” Salon.com, 27 December 2015, accessed 8 September 2016, [http://www.salon.com/2015/12/28/sam\\_harriss\\_detestable\\_crusade\\_how\\_his\\_latest\\_anti\\_islam\\_tract\\_reveals\\_the\\_bankruptcy\\_of\\_his\\_ideas/](http://www.salon.com/2015/12/28/sam_harriss_detestable_crusade_how_his_latest_anti_islam_tract_reveals_the_bankruptcy_of_his_ideas/).

and New Testament, contains passages that seem wildly contradictory, this means that jurisprudence has traditionally entailed acts of textual reconciliation that are far more complex than a simple reading of any single verse might suggest. The Islamic hermeneutic tradition also requires familiarity with the “conditions for revelation” (*asbab al-nazul*) for each verse, as some are considered historically limited to Muhammad’s Arabia rather than general commands for all times and places.”

Beyond these interpretive guidelines, there is a tradition of abrogation in Qur’anic exegesis in which certain verses are understood to overrule others. And we haven’t even mentioned the centuries of commentary that established judicial precedents that impact how contemporary rulings are decided. Oh, and by the way, these commentators don’t necessarily agree with one another on any given matter. If this sounds awfully complicated, that’s because it is. To suggest otherwise is not just foolish, it’s actually quite dangerous.<sup>696</sup>

In other words, Omeish is arguing that outside assistance is not required for reform.

Islamic jurisprudence and the tradition of abrogation will suffice to correct the many contradictions, miscommunications, and otherwise obscure passages within the holy texts themselves. Though the centuries in which they have already engaged in this process have yet to bear informative *and reformative* fruit, Omeish ostensibly remains confident that they eventually will. I am considerably less so. I am instead reminded of Harris’ comments on how this process of scriptural analysis and revisionism actually unfolded in the West. He writes that “the only reason anyone is ‘moderate’ in matters of faith these days is that he has assimilated some of the fruits of the last two thousand years of human thought (democratic politics, scientific advancement on every front, concern for human

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<sup>696</sup> Anwar Omeish, “Sam Harris, Maajid Nawaz, and the Illusion of Knowledge,” Harvard Political Review, 6 October 2015, accessed 8 September 2016, <http://harvardpolitics.com/harvard/sam-harris-maajid-nawaz-illusion-knowledge/>.

rights, an end to cultural and geographic isolation, etc). The doors leading out of scriptural literalism do not open from the *inside*.<sup>697</sup>

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In an interview with Neil deGrasse Tyson, Harris once asked:

Do you feel that you need to walk a razor's edge between political passions and polls on questions of religion or hot button issues – culture-war science, evolution, etc. – because you're trying to preserve a trust from both sides insofar as that's possible?<sup>698</sup>

Brian Gallagher records Harris' response in his article, "Why Neil deGrasse Tyson Shuns Sam Harris' Swamp of Controversy":

"Initially," Tyson said, "I thought I was walking a razor's edge, because I'm not out here to offend anybody. I just want to enlighten people, as an educator." But then Tyson realized, he said, that this – enlightening people – was a strong position in itself. "That position is: There are objective truths out there that you ought to know about! And as an educator, I have a duty to alert you of those objective truths," Tyson said. "What you do politically, in the face of those objective truths, is your business, not my business. I have opinions on many things, but they're not the kind of opinions where I give a rat's ass if you agree with my opinion. That's why it's my opinion. That's the difference, I think, between me and many others who are scientifically astute, or are scientists themselves, and take up a platform that involves trying to get people to see the world the way they do – even politically. I have no such interest in doing that."<sup>699</sup>

I would argue, however, that such a position, admirable though it may seem, is ultimately untenable, or at the very least unsustainable, insofar as matters of empirical science are concerned (evolution, global warming, etc.). For example, Tyson ultimately concludes that

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<sup>697</sup> Harris, *The End of Faith*, 19.

<sup>698</sup> Sam Harris, in Brian Gallagher's "Why Neil deGrasse Tyson Shuns Sam Harris' Swamp of Controversy," *Nautilus*, 3 June 2016, accessed 8 September 2016, <http://nautil.us/blog/why-neil-degrasse-tyson-shuns-sam-harris-swamp-of-controversy>.

<sup>699</sup> Neil deGrasse Tyson, in Gallagher's "Why Neil deGrasse Tyson Shuns Sam Harris' Swamp of Controversy."

I, as an educator, could go around hitting politicians in the head, but then there's the matter of all the people who wanted to vote for them. So, for me, my target is not the politician. My target is the population following statements that are objectively false. I see it as my duty to train the electorate how to think about this information. Once they're trained, they can vote for who they want.<sup>700</sup>

But such open-minded objectivity implies that, once Tyson had finished educating the electorate on the intricacies of Darwin's theory of natural selection, or the abundant evidence confirming not only the existence of global warming, but also humanity's undeniable role in exacerbating it, he must allow that it might still be logically and/or scientifically reasonable to refute either position (as many politicians and a majority of the voting public presently do). But of course, it wouldn't and he couldn't without completely abandoning science (as currently understood and consistently confirmed) and kowtowing to the populist whims of ignorance and superstition. If nothing else, science has shown us that there are not always two (equally plausible and evidentially supported) sides to every story.<sup>701</sup>

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<sup>700</sup> Ibid.

<sup>701</sup> In other words, there are scientific reasons for believing in climate change (and man's role in exacerbating it). There are none for believing that "God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth'" (Genesis 1:28). And yet, scripture is often offered as a rebuttal to this international scientific consensus, as Alex Spillius explains in his 2010 article for *The Telegraph*: "John Shimkus, an evangelical Christian representing Illinois, quoted the Bible in a congressional hearing last year on a proposed 'cap and trade' legislation designed to limit carbon emissions. Reading from God's post-Flood promise to Noah in Genesis 8:21, he said: 'Never again will I curse the ground because of man, even though all inclinations of his heart are evil from childhood and never again will I destroy all living creatures as I have done.' Mr. Shimkus added: 'I believe that's the infallible word of God, and that's the way it's going to be for his creation. The Earth will end only when God declares it's time to be over. Man will not destroy this Earth. This Earth will not be destroyed by a Flood. I do believe that God's word is infallible, unchanging, perfect.'" (Alex Spillius, "Congressman Says God Will Save us from Climate Change," *The Telegraph*, 10 November 2010, accessed 10 October 2018, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/us-politics/8123790/Congressman-says-God-will-save-us-from-climate-change.html>.)



But perhaps the last word on the matter should be Harris'. In an interview with Claire Coffman of *Los Angeles Magazine*, Harris admits:

I don't write warm and fuzzy books.... And I'm not especially warm and fuzzy as a person. I'm deeply committed to unraveling these intellectual problems that relate to our well-being and our failures to achieve it. As far as tone is concerned, I think impatience and a kind of prickly-seeming criticism is appropriate, given how far afield we are in this bamboozlement of religion. It's just that 83 percent of the population of the United States thinks Jesus literally rose from the dead. And will be coming back. And half of those people think that he'll be coming back in the next 50 years.<sup>702</sup>

Coffman and Harris conclude:

After three hours of conversation, I turn off my tape recorder, which is around the time I can't help myself: I push back. When I tell Harris I'm an agnostic, he tells me I'm just confused about the term. (Which according to the dictionary and/or my master's degree in religious studies, I'm not – but whatever.)

“It's a safe thing to say,” he tells me, his voice gentle yet cold, “but it's usually ill considered. You aren't agnostic about Zeus or Apollo or any of the thousands of dead gods who are no longer worshiped. The atheist says, ‘Bullshit.’ The agnostic says, ‘I don't know. How could we possibly know about the validity of these claims?’ That is bullshit. If we're talking specifically about Jesus being resurrected from death, or born of a virgin, or able to hear prayers, this entails a host of scientific claims – about biology, about telepathy, about human flight without the aid of technology. Are these claims that an agnostic wants to accept? Agnosticism is just a way of being polite in the face of people's unjustified religious convictions. But if you maintained that attitude on other topics, you'd be considered an imbecile.”

Did he just call me stupid?<sup>703</sup>

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<sup>702</sup> Sam Harris, in Claire Coffman's “Sam Harris is Still Railing Against Religion,” *Los Angeles Magazine*, 2 September 2014, accessed 8 September 2016, <http://www.lamag.com/culturefiles/sam-harris-is-still-railing-against-religion/>.

<sup>703</sup> Coffman, “Sam Harris is Still Railing Against Religion.” Here again, it might be helpful to recall Dawkins' scale for the so-called spectrum of theistic probability, with 1 being a “Strong Theist,” 7 being a “Strong Atheist,” and Dawkins situating himself as a 6 or “de facto Atheist.” Harris' point is that Coffman, in suggesting she adheres to open-minded, middle-of-the-road agnosticism, is more interested in being inoffensive than in truly elucidating her actual position on the spectrum which most likely leans towards one end or the other. Thus, Harris isn't calling Coffman stupid. He is merely asking her to be more specific (and thus more honest) in her claims.

## CHAPTER FIVE: A PRELIMINARY POSTMORTEM ON POSTMODERNISM

### Introduction/Disclosure

My fifth and final chapter, though structurally similar to the previous four, is nevertheless quite different in terms of both content and perspective. The first half of the chapter consists primarily of a critical analysis of the foundational texts and central themes of deconstructive and poststructuralist postmodernism (as embodied in the works of Jean Baudrillard, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, and others). At the onset (and in the interest of academic integrity and ideological transparency), I wish to openly and unequivocally acknowledge that my efforts in this chapter are of a deliberately prosecutorial nature and that their intended consequence is nothing less than an indictment of the postmodernist tradition itself, at least as it exists in its present form. Once I have outlined my arguments and pleaded my cause, I will then conclude with what I consider (or at least hope) to be two prescriptive essays, in which I will attempt to reconcile the Modernists and those who came after them so that the initially honorable intentions of each tradition might be upheld in a manner that is potentially palatable to both and/or ultimately useful to all.

But before I begin, I believe it is incumbent upon me to briefly distinguish between the original impetus for postmodernism, which I greatly admire (i.e. the questioning of the various tenets and/or perceived failures of Enlightenment philosophy as well as of the apparent epistemological limitations of natural science) and the proposed

methodologies employed and ultimate conclusions drawn from doing so, with which I very much wish to contend. After all, a healthy skepticism of accepted ideologies and established approaches lies at the heart of the Modernist *modus operandi* as well. As is the case with all such proposed paradigm shifts, nascent Modernism cut its metaphorical teeth on the existing orthodoxies of its day (Aristotelian philosophy and metaphysics, Catholic doctrine and ecumenical authority, etc.). It challenged the intellectual status quo in order to determine whether the tenets and teachings of the age were worthy of the adulation so unquestionably heaped upon them; it was undoubtedly right to do so. And Modernism's collective and respective conclusions – that science and reason were in every way superior to the blind faith and ignorant superstition(s) that preceded them – are, in principle, no more sacrosanct than the conventions which they themselves sought to question and eventually overturn. Thus, it would be the very height of hypocrisy for one to cry foul merely because one's own methods of inquiry and analysis are now being used against them.

Unfortunately, in questioning (and ultimately rejecting) Modernism's ostensible affinity for science and reason, Postmodernism performed what I consider to be an overcorrection of sorts – the denunciation of classical logic and the denial of objective reality, and in their place, the adoption of cultural and epistemological relativism – which was both completely unnecessary and from which it has never recovered. First, it was unnecessary because science and logic (unlike their Aristotelian and Catholic counterparts) have built-in mechanisms within their methodologies that allow for introspective analysis and, when necessary, self-correction. They are, by design, much less vulnerable (if not outright immune) to the trappings of authority and tradition that so

plagued their ideological precursors (and descendants). Thus, an unsound scientific theory or illogical argument need not result in the negation of science and/or logic (as many Postmodernists would argue), but rather can be caught, critiqued, and corrected from within their respective traditions, resulting not in a repudiation of their foundational tenets but rather in a reaffirmation of the methods upon which they are ultimately grounded and secured. This, in essence, is the case I wish to make.

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*So long as authority inspires awe, confusion and absurdity enhance conservative tendencies in society. Firstly, because clear and logical thinking leads to a cumulation of knowledge (of which the progress of the natural sciences provides the best example) and the advance of knowledge sooner or later undermines the traditional order. Confused thinking, on the other hand, leads nowhere in particular and can be indulged indefinitely without producing any impact upon the world.*

- Stanislaw Andreski, *Social Sciences as Sorcery* (1972, p. 90)<sup>704</sup>

*Everyone can see what's going on  
They laugh 'cause they know they're untouchable  
Not because what I said was wrong  
Whatever it may bring  
I will live by my own policies  
I will sleep with a clear conscience  
I will sleep in peace  
Maybe it sounds mean  
But I really don't think so  
You asked for the truth and I told you  
Through their own words  
They will be exposed  
They've got a severe case of  
The emperor's new clothes*

- Sinéad O'Connor<sup>705</sup>

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<sup>704</sup> Alan Sokal & Jean Bricmont, *Fashionable Nonsense* (New York: Picador USA, 1998), 1.

<sup>705</sup> Sinéad O'Connor, "The Emperor's New Clothes," 1990, *I Do Not Want What I Haven't Got*, Ensign Records, CD.

## Part I: An (Un)Timely Dissection

In 1994, American mathematician and physicist Alan Sokal submitted an article for publication to the cultural-studies journal *Social Text*. This article, entitled “Transgressing the Boundaries: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity,” was not only accepted for publication, it was also selected to appear in a 1996 special edition of the journal “devoted to rebutting the criticisms levelled against postmodernism and social constructivism by several distinguished scientists.”<sup>706</sup> Though initially well-received, Sokal’s subsequent admission that the entire essay had been a hoax – a deliberate attempt to expose the pedantry and pomp of postmodernism and its adherents – was decidedly less so. The firestorm of denigration (and, to a lesser extent, praise) that the so-called “Sokal Hoax” sparked within the academic community, coupled with Sokal’s and Jean Bricmont’s ensuing exposé, *Fashionable Nonsense*, should more than suffice to acquaint the reader with this, my final topic of study.

As Professor Steven Weinberg explains:

The targets of Sokal’s satire occupy a broad intellectual range. There are those “postmoderns” in the humanities who like to surf through avant-garde fields like quantum mechanics or chaos theory to dress up their own arguments about the fragmentary and random nature of experience. There are those sociologists, historians, and philosophers who see the laws of nature as social constructions. There are cultural critics who find the taint of sexism, racism, colonialism, militarism, or capitalism not only in the practice of scientific research but even in its conclusions.<sup>707</sup>

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<sup>706</sup> Sokal & Bricmont, *Fashionable Nonsense*, 2.

<sup>707</sup> Steven Weinberg, “Sokal’s Hoax,” *The New York Review of Books*, Volume XLIII, No. 13 (8 August 1996): 11-15, accessed 14 September 2016, <http://www.physics.nyu.edu/sokal/weinberg.html>.

Or, as Gary Kamiya unreservedly writes in his article, “Transgressing the Transgressors: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Total Bullshit”:

Anyone who has spent much time wading through the pious, obscurantist, jargon-filled cant that now passes for “advanced” thought in the humanities knew it was bound to happen sooner or later: some clever academic, armed with the not-so-secret passwords (“hermeneutics,” “transgressive,” “Lacanian,” “hegemony,” to name but a few) would write a completely bogus paper, submit it to an *au courant* journal, and have it accepted....

Sokal’s piece uses all the right terms. It cites all the best people. It whacks sinners (white men, the “real world”), applauds the virtuous (women, general metaphysical lunacy) and reaches the usual “progressive” (whatever that word is supposed to mean) conclusion. And it is complete, unadulterated bullshit -- a fact that somehow escaped the attention of the high-powered editors of *Social Text*, who must now be experiencing that queasy sensation that afflicted the Trojans the morning after they pulled that nice big gift horse into their city.

Oops.<sup>708</sup>

Predictably, Jacques Derrida, a foundational figure and, by the late twentieth century, “grand old man” of postmodernism, had a rather different take on the matter. His response, while consciously skirting the actual issue(s) of coherence and comprehensibility in academic writing, was itself surprisingly accessible. He writes:

This is all rather sad, don’t you think....

It would have been interesting to make a scrupulous study of the so-called scientific “metaphors” – their role, their status, their effects in the discourses that are under attack. Not only in the case of “the French”! and not only in the case of these French writers! That would have required that a certain number of difficult discourses be read seriously, in terms of their theoretical effects and strategies. That was not done....

I am always sparing and prudent in the use of scientific references, and I have written about this issue on more than one occasion. Explicitly.... There is every reason to think that they have not read what they should

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<sup>708</sup> Gary Kamiya, “Transgressing the Transgressors: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Total Bullshit,” The Institute of Mathematical Sciences, accessed 14 September 2016, <http://www.imsc.res.in/~jayaram/Sokal/kamiya.txt>.

have read to measure the extent of these difficulties. Presumably they couldn't. At any rate they haven't done it....

As for the "relativism" they are supposed to be worried about – well, even if this word has a rigorous philosophical meaning, there's not a trace of it in my writing. Nor of a critique of Reason and the Enlightenment. Quite the contrary. But what I do take more seriously is the wider context – the American context and the political context – that we can't begin to approach here, given the limits of space: and also the theoretical issues that have been so badly dealt with.

These debates have a complex history: libraries full of epistemological works! Before setting up a contrast between the savants, the experts, and the others, they divide up the field of science itself. And the field of philosophical thought. Sometimes, for fun, I also take seriously the symptoms of a campaign, or even of a hunt, in which badly trained horsemen sometimes have trouble identifying the prey. And initially the field....

In whose interest was it to go for a quick practical joke rather than taking part in the work which, sadly, it replaced? This work has been going on for a long time and will continue elsewhere and differently, I hope, and with dignity: at the level of the issues involved.<sup>709</sup>

Though an ostensibly reasonable plea, difficulties arise when one actually attempts to take Derrida at his word and is then immediately confronted with his own penchant for imprecise, often inscrutable language. For instance, when once asked simply to define *deconstructionism*, an idea, incidentally, that he himself introduced, Derrida proved either unable or unwilling to do so. Witness the following exchange from the 2002 documentary film *Derrida*:

Interviewer/Narrator: You're very well known in the States for deconstruction. Can you talk a little bit about the origin of that idea?

Derrida (in his native French): Before responding to this question, I want to make a preliminary remark on the completely artificial character of this situation. I don't know who's going to be watching this, but I want to underline rather than efface our surrounding technical conditions, and not

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<sup>709</sup> Eugene Walters, "Read Derrida's Response to the Sokal Affair," *Critical-Theory.com*, 27 August 2013, accessed 14 September 2016, at <http://www.critical-theory.com/read-derridas-response-sokal-affair/>.

feign a “naturalness” which doesn’t exist. I’ve already in a way started to respond to your question about deconstruction because one of the gestures of deconstruction is not to naturalize what isn’t natural – to not assume that what is conditioned by history, institutions, or society is natural.

Narrator (continuing the translation): The very condition of a deconstruction may be at work in the work, within the system to be deconstructed. It may already be located there, already at work, not at the center but in an eccentric center, in a corner whose eccentricity assures the solid concentration of the system, participating in the construction of what it, at the same time, threatens to deconstruct. One might then be inclined to reach this conclusion: deconstruction is not an operation that supervenes afterwards, from the outside, one fine day. It is always already at work in the work. Since the disruptive force of deconstruction is always already contained within the very architecture of the work, all one would finally have to do to be able to deconstruct, given this “always already,” is to do memory work. Yet since I want neither to accept or to reject a conclusion formulated in precisely these terms, let us leave this question suspended for the moment.<sup>710</sup>

But if you find Derrida’s (non)response to be as evasive and unsatisfying as I do, don’t worry... NYU Professor of Social & Cultural Analysis Edward Hubbard can explain:

For Derrida, truth is based on language, and language is not a fixed system (the way structuralists conceive of it). Language is chaotic – words not only have many different meanings and uses, but words (*signifiers*) themselves do not simply correspond with their definitional meanings (*word-concepts* or *signifieds*). These meanings are dependent on other signifiers.... Words are constantly threatened by the encroachment of new or unexpected meanings, words constantly evoke other words and meanings (rather than merely reflecting their own, exclusive meanings) – for example, the sign *The Joshua Tree* does not simply reflect one (or three) stable signifier(s)...the signifier(s) can reflect the meaning affixed to them in the dictionary: *Yucca brevifolia*, a monocotyledonous tree confined mostly to the Mojave Desert...or those same words can make us think of the Cahuilla Native Americans who used the tree for making sandals, baskets and meals...or it can make us think of the Mormons who crossed the Mojave Desert in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, saw the tree and gave it that name...or those words can evoke for us the meaning it had for the Mormons that gave it the name: the tree resembled the biblical Joshua

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<sup>710</sup> Madoyan, Gor. “Jacques Derrida: Full Documentary Film,” *YouTube* Video, 5 February 2016, accessed 14 February 2016, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K\\_ujk4vld9A](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K_ujk4vld9A).



raising his hands to the sky...this kind of tree is frequently used to construct the expansive, arid and forlorn desert aesthetic of the American southwest in films and visual art...yet still, those same words can evoke the Grammy-award winning U2 album of the same name, the classic album cover art no doubt referencing the desert aesthetic in which this tree plays a signifying role – this monocotyledonous tree in the Mojave Desert, that was prized by the Cahuilla, and named by the Mormons after a physical act of Joshua in the Holy Bible.... Instead of having a simple, stable signified (a clear, finite meaning) that corresponds to the words *The Joshua Tree*, this original signified is merely another signifier reaching for yet another meaning. This is the Derridean vision of language: this slipping and sliding of signifiers over each other without ever reaching a signified – a ground or an end-point for stable thought or for the emergence of Truth.<sup>711</sup>

Regrettably for Derrida, this would seem to at least undermine, if not outright contradict, many of his previously referenced statements to Sokal and Bricmont on relativism, reason, and the principles of the Enlightenment. But even more unfortunate for us, it would seem that any and all attempts to define *postmodernism* itself have proven ultimately as frustrating and as fruitless. As Gary Aylesworth explains:

That postmodernism is indefinable is a truism. However, it can be described as a set of critical, strategic and rhetorical practices employing concepts such as difference, repetition, the trace, the simulacrum, and hyperreality to destabilize other concepts such as presence, identity, historical progress, epistemic certainty, and the univocity of meaning.<sup>712</sup>

Thus, given that no ironclad definition for the term has yet been agreed upon by its advocates or opponents, perhaps the opening three paragraphs of Professor Sokal's original article should serve as our own introduction to the many ambiguities and apparent logical contradictions of postmodern thought. In what follows, I would ask that

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<sup>711</sup> Edward Akintola Hubbard, "Notes on Deconstruction: Claude Levi-Strauss's 'A Writing Lesson,' and Jacques Derrida's 'Of Grammatology,'" From ANTHRO 1795: Language and Politics in Latin America. Harvard University, accessed 14 September 2016, [http://isites.harvard.edu/fs/docs/icb.topic146051.files/Derrida\\_Overview.doc](http://isites.harvard.edu/fs/docs/icb.topic146051.files/Derrida_Overview.doc).

<sup>712</sup> Gary Aylesworth, "Postmodernism," The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Spring 2015 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta. 15 February 2015, accessed 14 September 2016, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2015/entries/postmodernism>.

the reader pay special attention to the italicized portions, as they comprise the heart of Sokal's satire, and thus facetiously capture the ideological thrust of the movement he in fact ultimately intends to ridicule. He begins:

There are many natural scientists, and especially physicists, who continue to reject the notion that the disciplines concerned with social and cultural criticism can have anything to contribute, except perhaps peripherally, to their research. Still less are they receptive to the idea that the very foundations of their worldview must be revised or rebuilt in the light of such criticism. Rather, *they cling to the dogma imposed by the long post-Enlightenment hegemony over the Western intellectual outlook, which can be summarized briefly as follows: that there exists an external world, whose properties are independent of any individual human being and indeed of humanity as a whole; that these properties are encoded in "eternal" physical laws; and that human beings can obtain reliable, albeit imperfect and tentative, knowledge of these laws by hewing to the "objective" procedures and epistemological strictures prescribed by the (so-called) scientific method.*

But deep conceptual shifts within twentieth-century science have undermined this Cartesian-Newtonian metaphysics; revisionist studies in the history and philosophy of science have cast further doubt on its credibility; and, most recently, feminist and poststructuralist critiques have demystified the substantive content of mainstream Western scientific practice, revealing the ideology of domination concealed behind the facade of "objectivity". *It has thus become increasingly apparent that physical "reality", no less than social "reality", is at bottom a social and linguistic construct; that scientific "knowledge", far from being objective, reflects and encodes the dominant ideologies and power relations of the culture that produced it; that the truth claims of science are inherently theory-laden and self-referential; and consequently, that the discourse of the scientific community, for all its undeniable value, cannot assert a privileged epistemological status with respect to counter-hegemonic narratives emanating from dissident or marginalized communities.* These themes can be traced, despite some differences of emphasis, in Aronowitz's analysis of the cultural fabric that produced quantum mechanics; in Ross' discussion of oppositional discourses in post-quantum science; in Irigaray's and Hayles' exegeses of gender encoding in fluid mechanics; and in Harding's comprehensive critique of the gender ideology underlying the natural sciences in general and physics in particular.

Here my aim is to carry these deep analyses one step farther, by taking account of recent developments in quantum gravity: the emerging branch

of physics in which Heisenberg's quantum mechanics and Einstein's general relativity are at once synthesized and superseded. In quantum gravity, as we shall see, the space-time manifold ceases to exist as an objective physical reality; geometry becomes relational and contextual; and the foundational conceptual categories of prior science – among them, existence itself – become problematized and relativized. This conceptual revolution, I will argue, has profound implications for the content of a future postmodern and liberatory science.<sup>713</sup>

In the first passage, it appears that Sokal is not only casting aspersions on the “so-called” scientific method, but also expressing some serious doubts about the existence of an external, observable universe, as well as of the presence of a set of universal physical constants upon which such a universe would be foundationally dependent. As a mathematician and scientist himself, Sokal's claims should have immediately raised a few eyebrows on the editorial board of *Social Text*, but because he was advocating a perspective that had already gained widespread traction within the postmodern community, his statements (outrageous as they are) were apparently taken at face value, without serious deliberation or reservation. Even more incredibly, his subsequent assertions that “physical ‘reality’, no less than social ‘reality’, is at bottom a social and linguistic construct,” that scientific objectivity does not exist, and thus that scientific discourse is no more deserving of “a privileged epistemological status with respect to counter-hegemonic narratives emanating from dissident or marginalized communities,” were likewise unquestionably accepted primarily as a result of their reflecting an already established viewpoint (albeit a presumptive one) within the tradition.

So what precisely is Sokal (satirically) suggesting? Apart from his pronouncements that even physical reality is inescapably subjective and that, consequently, science's attempts to objectify it are necessarily doomed to fail, Sokal goes

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<sup>713</sup> Alan Sokal, “Transgressing the Boundaries: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity,” in Sokal and Bricmont's *Fashionable Nonsense*, 212-214, emphasis mine.

on to suggest, as a solution to this epistemological uncertainty, a sort of egalitarian relativism, in which any and all subjective views should be considered as equally valid and worthy of mutual and sustained respect. These basic concepts, though not exhaustive, nevertheless collectively serve to capture the heart of the postmodernist worldview, and thus explain not only how Sokal's article was able to clear all of the journal's editorial hurdles on its way to publication, but also why the author felt compelled to compose it in the first place (and why I feel the same sense of urgency in relating it to you now).<sup>714</sup>

Interestingly enough, even after confessing his pretention, Sokal still found a number of individuals either unable or unwilling to accept his admission as genuine. As Weinberg incredulously recounts:

After Sokal exposed his hoax, one of the editors of *Social Text* even speculated that "Sokal's parody was nothing of the sort, and that his admission represented a change of heart, or a folding of his intellectual resolve." I am reminded of the case of the American spiritualist Margaret Fox. When she confessed in 1888 that her career of séances and spirit rappings had all been a hoax, other spiritualists claimed that it was her confession that was dishonest.<sup>715</sup>

Or, as Andrew Ross, the editor quoted above, would later say of his colleagues:

Another, while willing to accept the story, was less sure that Sokal knew very much about what or whom he thought he was kidding. A third was pleasantly astonished to learn that the journal is taken seriously enough to be considered a threat to anyone, let alone to natural scientists. At least two others were furious at the dubious means by which he chose to make his point. All were concerned that his actions might simply spark off a new round of caricature and thereby perpetuate the climate in which science studies has been subject recently to so much derision from conservatives in science.<sup>716</sup>

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<sup>714</sup> Incidentally (as we have seen), these viewpoints – particularly the charge of scientism and the proposed solution of relativism – have also manifested themselves time and again in the various critiques levelled against the New Atheists.

<sup>715</sup> Weinberg, "Sokal's Hoax."

<sup>716</sup> Andrew Ross, "The Sokal hoax: Response by \*Social Text\* (fwd.)," Message to Multiple recipients of list DERRIDA, 24 May 1996, email, accessed 14 September 2016, <https://www.math.tohoku.ac.jp/~kuroki/Sokal/sokaltxt/00005.txt>.

Admitting of this possibility and sincerely wishing to avoid it, Sokal subsequently suggests:

Media hype notwithstanding, the mere fact the parody was published proves little in itself; at most it reveals something about the intellectual standards of one trendy journal. More interesting conclusions can be derived, however, by examining the content of the parody. On close inspection, one sees that the parody was constructed around quotations from eminent French and American intellectuals about the alleged philosophical and social implications of mathematics and the natural sciences. The passages may be absurd or meaningless, but they are nonetheless authentic. In fact, [my] only contribution was to provide a “glue” (the “logic” of which is admittedly whimsical) to join these quotations together and praise them.<sup>717</sup>

This, in essence, is the task that Sokal and Bricmont set for themselves in *Fashionable Nonsense*. As scientists, they are careful to limit themselves to the various misappropriations of science perpetrated by members of that “pantheon of contemporary ‘French theory’” referenced above. The following excerpts, though brief, should suffice to outline the dangers of which Sokal and Bricmont speak as well as the spirit and success of their efforts to combat them.

In a chapter dedicated to the work of psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, Sokal and Bricmont unearth several pseudo-scientific gems. In the following passage, Lacan attempts to relate mathematical concepts to the structural configuration of mental disease.

This diagram [the Mobius strip] can be considered the basis of a sort of essential inscription at the origin, in the knot which constitutes the subject. This goes much further than you may think at first, because you can search for the sort of surface able to receive such inscriptions. You can perhaps see that the sphere, that old symbol for totality, is unsuitable. A torus, a Klein bottle, a cross-cut surface, are able to receive such a cut. And this diversity is very important as it explains many things about the structure of mental disease. If one can symbolize the subject by this fundamental cut, in the same way one can show that a cut on a torus corresponds to the neurotic subject, and on a cross-cut surface to another sort of mental disease.

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<sup>717</sup> Sokal and Bricmont, *Fashionable Nonsense*, 3.

(Lacan 1970, pp. 192-193)<sup>718</sup>

Sokal and Bricmont delightedly declare “perhaps the reader is wondering what these different topological objects have to do with the structure of mental disease. Well, so are we; and the rest of Lacan’s text does nothing to clarify the matter. Nevertheless, Lacan insists that his topology ‘explains many things.’”<sup>719</sup> They ultimately conclude:

Lacan’s defenders (as well as those of the other authors discussed here) tend to respond to these criticisms by resorting to a strategy that we shall call “neither/nor”: these writings should be evaluated neither as science, nor as philosophy, nor as poetry, nor... One is then faced with what could be called a “secular mysticism”: mysticism because the discourse aims at producing mental effects that are not purely aesthetic, but without addressing itself to reason; secular because the cultural references (Kant, Hegel, Marx, Freud, mathematics, contemporary literature...) have nothing to do with traditional religions and are attractive to the modern reader. Furthermore, Lacan’s writings became, over time, increasingly cryptic – a characteristic common to many sacred texts – by combining plays on words with fractured syntax; and they served as a basis for the reverent exegesis undertaken by his disciples. One may then wonder whether we are not, after all, dealing with a new religion.<sup>720</sup>

In his review of their book, Richard Dawkins offers the following praise/support:

The feminist ‘philosopher’ Luce Irigaray is another who gets whole-chapter treatment from Sokal and Bricmont. In a passage reminiscent of a notorious feminist description of Newton’s *Principia* (a “rape manual”), Irigaray argues that  $E=mc^2$  is a “sexed equation”. Why? Because “it *privileges* the speed of light over other speeds that are vitally necessary to us” (my emphasis of what I am rapidly coming to learn is an ‘in’ word). Just as typical of this school of thought is Irigaray’s thesis on fluid mechanics. Fluids, you see, have been unfairly neglected. “Masculine physics” *privileges* rigid, solid things. Her American expositor Katherine Hayles made the mistake of re-expressing Irigaray’s thoughts in (comparatively) clear language. For once, we get a reasonably unobstructed look at the emperor and, yes, he has no clothes:

The privileging of solid over fluid mechanics, and indeed the inability of science to deal with turbulent flow at all,

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<sup>718</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>719</sup> Ibid.

<sup>720</sup> Ibid., 37. Here again, the comparison to the New Atheists and their critics should be obvious.

she attributes to the association of fluidity with femininity. Whereas men have sex organs that protrude and become rigid, women have openings that leak menstrual blood and vaginal fluids... From this perspective it is no wonder that science has not been able to arrive at a successful model for turbulence. The problem of turbulent flow cannot be solved because the conceptions of fluids (and of women) have been formulated so as necessarily to leave unarticulated remainders.

You do not have to be a physicist to smell out the daffy absurdity of this kind of argument (the tone of it has become all too familiar).<sup>721</sup>

But lest one argue that Dawkins (or even Hayles) has misunderstood or misrepresented Irigaray's thought, witness the following passage, in which Irigaray "claims to unmask also the sexist biases at the heart of 'pure' mathematics":

*the mathematical sciences*, in the theory of wholes [*theorie des ensembles*], concern themselves with closed and open spaces, with the infinitely big and the infinitely small. They concern themselves very little with the question of the partially open, with wholes that are not clearly delineated [*ensembles flous*], with any analysis of the problem of borders [*bords*], of the passage between, of fluctuations occurring between the thresholds of specific wholes. Even if topology suggests these questions, it emphasizes what closes rather than what resists all circularity.

(Irigaray 1985b, p. 315; Irigaray 1987a, pp. 76-77)<sup>722</sup>

Sokal and Bricmont's criticism is at once piercing and incredulous. They write:

This theory is startling, to say the least: Does the author really believe that menstruation makes it more difficult for young women to understand elementary notions of geometry? This view is uncannily reminiscent of the Victorian gentlemen who held that women, with their delicate reproductive organs, are unsuited to rational thought and to science. With friends like these, the feminist cause hardly needs enemies.<sup>723</sup>

The writings of sociologist Jean Baudrillard are even more representative of the sort of pseudo-intellectual drivel that passes for scholarship and profundity within the

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<sup>721</sup> Richard Dawkins, "Postmodernism Disrobed," *Nature*, Vol. 394 (9 July 1998): 141-3, accessed 14 September 2016, <http://www.physics.nyu.edu/faculty/sokal/dawkins.html>.

<sup>722</sup> Sokal and Bricmont, *Fashionable Nonsense*, 120.

<sup>723</sup> *Ibid.*

postmodern tradition. The following passages are taken from Baudrillard's *The Illusion of the End* and *The Transparency of Evil*. (Sokal and Bricmont's comments immediately ensue.)

Our complex, metastatic, viral systems, condemned to the exponential dimension alone (be it that of exponential stability or instability), to eccentricity and indefinite fractal scissiparity, can no longer come to an end. Condemned to an intense metabolism, to an intense internal metastasis, they become exhausted within themselves and no longer have any destination, any end, any otherness, any fatality. They are condemned, precisely, to the epidemic, to the endless excrescences of the fractal and not to the reversibility and perfect resolution of the fateful [*fatal*]. We know only the signs of catastrophe now; we no longer know the signs of destiny. (And besides, has any concern been shown in Chaos Theory for the equally extraordinary, contrary phenomenon of *hyposensitivity* to initial conditions, of the inverse exponentially of effects in relation to causes—the potential hurricanes which end in the beating of a butterfly's wings?)

(Baudrillard 1994, pp. 111-114, italics in the original)

The last paragraph is Baudrillardian par excellence. One would be hard pressed not to notice the high density of scientific and pseudo-scientific terminology –inserted in sentences that are, as far as we can make out, devoid of meaning.

These texts are, however, atypical of Baudrillard's oeuvre, because they allude (albeit in a confused fashion) to more-or-less well-defined scientific ideas. More often one comes across sentences like these:

There is no better model of the way in which the computer screen and the mental screen of our brain are interwoven than Moebius's topology, with its peculiar contiguity of near and far, inside and outside, object and subject within the same spiral. It is in accordance with this same model that information and communication are constantly turning round upon themselves in an incestuous circumvolution, a superficial conflation of subject and object, within and without, question and answer, event and image, and so on. The form is inevitably that of a twisted ring reminiscent of the mathematical symbol for infinity.

(Baudrillard 1993, p. 56)



As Gross and Levitt remark, “this is as pompous as it is meaningless.”

In summary, one finds in Baudrillard’s works a profusion of scientific terms, used with total disregard for their meaning and, above all, in a context where they are manifestly irrelevant. Whether or not one interprets them as metaphors, it is hard to see what role they could play, except to give an appearance of profundity to trite observations about sociology or history. Moreover, the scientific terminology is mixed up with a nonscientific vocabulary that is employed with equal sloppiness. When all is said and done, one wonders what would be left of Baudrillard’s thought if the verbal veneer covering it were stripped away.<sup>724</sup>

The work of philosopher and urbanist Paul Virilio receives similar treatment. The following passages are taken from his 1984 *L’Espace critique* and from his 1991 *The Lost Dimension*:

When depth of time replaces depths of sensible space; when the commutation of interface supplants the delimitation of surfaces; when transparence re-establishes appearances; then we begin to wonder whether that which we insist on calling *space* isn’t actually *light*, a subliminary, para-optical light of which sunlight is only one phase or reflection. This light occurs in a duration measured in instantaneous time exposure rather than the historical and chronological passage of time. The time of this instant without duration is “exposure time”, be it over – or underexposure. Its photographic and cinematographic technologies already predicted the existence and the time of a continuum stripped of all physical dimensions, in which the quantum of energetic action and the punctum of cinematic observation have suddenly become the last vestiges of a vanished morphological reality. Transferred into the eternal present of a relativity whose topological and teleological thickness and depth belong to this final measuring instrument, this speed of light possesses one direction, which is both its size and dimension and which propagates itself at the same speed in all radial directions that measure the universe.

(Virilio 1984, p. 77; Virilio 1991, pp. 63-64; italics in the original)

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<sup>724</sup> Ibid., 152-3.

This paragraph – which in the French original is a single 193-word sentence, whose “poetry” is unfortunately not fully captured by the translation – is the most perfect example of diarrhea of the pen that we have ever encountered. And as far as we can see, it means precisely nothing.<sup>725</sup>

Although Sokal and Bricmont’s treatise contains dozens more examples of this sort of pseudo-scientific posturing, I offer only one final instance of this intellectual chicanery as a means of transitioning away from their general criticisms and toward my own individual encounters with postmodernist literature/scholarship. In a chapter dedicated entirely to the writings of philosopher Gilles Deleuze and psychoanalyst Felix Guattari, Sokal and Bricmont offer as evidence the following passage, taken from the Deleuze’s *The Logic of Sense*:

In the first place, singularities-events correspond to heterogeneous series which are organized into a system which is neither stable nor unstable, but rather “metastable,” endowed with a potential energy wherein the differences between series are distributed. (Potential energy is the energy of the pure event, whereas forms of actualization correspond to the realization of the event.) In the second place, singularities possess a process of auto-unification, always mobile and displaced to the extent that a paradoxical element traverses the series and makes them resonate, enveloping the corresponding singular points in a single aleatory point and all the emissions, all dice throws, in a single cast. In the third place, singularities or potentials haunt the surface. Everything happens at the surface in a crystal which develops only on the edges. Undoubtedly, an organism is not developed in the same manner. An organism does not cease to contract in an interior space and to expand in an exterior space – to assimilate and to externalize. But membranes are no less important, for they carry potentials and regenerate polarities. They place internal and external spaces into contact, without regard to distance. The internal and the external, depth and height, have biological value only through this topological surface of contact. Thus, even biologically, it is necessary to understand that “the deepest is the skin.” The skin has at its disposal a vital and properly superficial potential energy. And just as events do not occupy the surface but rather frequent it, superficial energy is

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<sup>725</sup> Ibid., 174-5.

not *localized* on the surface, but is rather bound to its formation and reformation.

(Deleuze 1990, pp. 103-104, italics in the original)<sup>726</sup>

As Sokal and Bricmont observe: “once again, this paragraph – which prefigures the style of

Deleuze’s later work written in collaboration with Guattari – is stuffed with technical terms; but, apart from the banal observation that a cell communicates with the outside world through

its membrane, it is devoid of both logic and sense.”<sup>727</sup> However, this “banal observation” serves to distinguish this particular passage from those that came before it: at least it contains a kernel of truth, and thus a hint of value. The problem is that this worth is buried beneath a mountain of meaningless jargon and deliberate obfuscation in order to make the obvious appear profound. This is the essence of my experience with (and thus the source of my hostility toward) postmodernism, and it appears to be an objection I share with Noam Chomsky, who once argued:

As for the “deconstruction” that is carried out... I can’t comment, because most of it seems to me gibberish. But if this is just another sign of my incapacity to recognize profundities, the course to follow is clear: just restate the results to me in plain words that I can understand, and show why they are different from, or better than, what others had been doing long before and have continued to do since without three-syllable words, incoherent sentences, inflated rhetoric that (to me, at least) is largely meaningless, etc....

But instead of trying to provide an answer to this simple requests, the response is cries of anger: to raise these questions shows “elitism,” “anti-intellectualism,” and other crimes – though apparently it is not “elitist” to stay within the self- and mutual-admiration societies of intellectuals who talk only to one another and (to my knowledge) don’t enter into the kind of world in which I’d prefer to live....

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<sup>726</sup> Ibid., 165-6.

<sup>727</sup> Ibid., 166.

There has been a striking change in the behavior of the intellectual class in recent years. The left intellectuals who 60 years ago would have been teaching in working class schools, writing books like “mathematics for the millions” (which made mathematics intelligible to millions of people), participating in and speaking for popular organizations, etc., are now largely disengaged from such activities, and although quick to tell us that they are far more radical than thou, are not to be found, it seems, when there is such an obvious and growing need and even explicit request for the work they could do out there in the world of people with live problems and concerns.... There’s a huge gap that once was at least partially filled by left intellectuals willing to engage with the general public and their problems. It has ominous implications, in my opinion.<sup>728</sup>

Like Chomsky, I would ask that such so-called “brilliance” be shared with as wide an audience as possible. Thus while the postmodernists’ failure to meaningfully participate either in dialogue or in action with the public is the foundational source of my antipathy towards them, it also serves to contrast and thus to ground my respect and appreciation for the New Atheists’ accessible scholarship and deliberate engagement with the general public. Theirs are the types of conversations, with just the sort of contributors, that we as a society need to be having. Unfortunately, except for a handful of scholars whose works attempt to shout across the interdisciplinary and interpersonal void – academic-activists such as Professor Chomsky, Howard Zinn, Stephen Hawking, Neil DeGrasse Tyson, Jared Diamond, Ayaan Hirsi Ali – most of our words and works fall silent, often times even to each other. To illustrate this, in what follows, I will share episodes from my own graduate experience in a humanities doctoral program. These will include my own exposure to postmodernist, deconstructionist, and postcolonial writings, many of which were quite similar (in spirit and style, if not always in content) to those that Sokal and Bricmont so wittily dissected. Additionally, I will include excerpts of my

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<sup>728</sup> “Noam Chomsky: Chomsky On Postmodernism,” in *Readings on Postmodernism and Identity: A Selection of Critical Articles on Post-Modernism, Identity Politics, and Related Topics*, 4-9, Compiled by Ulli Diemer, Connexions, 2009, accessed 14 September 2016, <http://www.connexions.org/CxLibrary/Docs/PomoBook.pdf>.

own responsive and recursive writings toward these texts which, unintentionally but unavoidably, ended up resembling many of those previously lambasted by the authors in the passages above. These end results, however, were not criticized for their obscurantism and meaninglessness; rather, they were well-received, even praised, for their insightfulness and fidelity to the postmodernist tradition. This miscarriage of intellectual justice simply cannot go unnoticed or unanswered.

We shall begin with Suzan-Lori Parks' "The America Play," a work that I was assigned on not one but two occasions as being particularly representative of postmodernism's successes in challenging the existence and acceptance of meta (i.e. master) narrative in all its myriad forms (historical, religious, sociological, etc.). Samuel French, Inc. summarizes the play thusly:

Once upon a time there was a theme park called the Great Hole of History. It was a popular spot for honeymooners who, in search of "post-nuptial excitement," would visit this hole and watch the daily historical parades. One of these visitors was a man who has now come to call himself The Foundling Father. He was a digger by trade – a grave digger – and he was struck by the size of the Hole and the pageantry of the place. He returns home with his wife, Lucy, a woman who keeps secrets for the dead, and together they start a mourning business. Unfortunately, our hero can't get the Great Hole pageantry out of his head; the echoes of history speak to him and call him to greatness. At rise we meet this Foundling Father. He has left his wife and child and gone out west to dig a huge replica of the Great Hole of History. In the hole sits our hero. He is dressed like Abraham Lincoln, complete with beard, wart, frock coat and stove pipe hat. He tells us the story of his own life (in the third person) and tells us that he has become a very successful Abraham Lincoln impersonator! He's so successful that people actually pay a penny to re-enact Lincoln's assassination, using our impostor-hero and a phony gun. Eventually the Father dies, and the second act sees his wife Lucy and thirty-five-year-old son, Brazil, a professional weeper, visit the hole to dig for his Father's remains. Listening to the past through her deaf-horn, Lucy hears echoes of gunshots and lurid stage-shows. When they dig up the Foundling Father's body (he's alive) they decide they have to lay him to rest for good. In the play's last image, his son is trying to climb a ladder out of the Hole of

History while the Foundling Father sits starkly on his own coffin, refusing burial.<sup>729</sup>

If that synopsis left you feeling somewhat confused, don't worry. That was precisely

Parks' intention. As Haike Frank explains:

Suzan-Lori Parks's *The America Play* (1990-1993) is a complex, multilayered play about history. Both the history and the play itself refuse to be pinned down; and appropriately, the play is devoid of clear linear plot movement, and thus hard to follow. For both viewers and readers of *The America Play*, just when a part begins to make sense, a slightly altered version of the same story generates doubts about what is really going on.... The play uniquely resists linear logic. Not only do the spectators try to track down the meaning of the work, but the play also chases its own meaning. Although this makes *The America Play* confusing at first, one eventually realizes that this is exactly the point. Parks consciously approaches the postmodern topic of "what is history" via the instability complexity and layered-ness of meaning....

The fact that Parks focuses on the staging of new and alternative interpretations of historical situations emphasizes her awareness of the subjectivity and bias of traditionally white historiography. By reworking events that have only received a thorough documentation from the white perspective, she not only calls into question the validity of this traditional historiography, but also destabilizes and deconstructs the content of this documentation. By claiming that the staging of an historical event makes it "actually happen," she thus creates a way to challenge our perception of reality and history. In accordance to postmodernism's claim that history equals our narrative of past events, she seems to suggest that reality is based on subjective representation and that an objective version of reality, including historical reality, can only be achieved by a multiplicity of perspectives. Thus, by offering a re-reading of history, she automatically redefines our, both black and white, ideas of the world, filling them with new signification. In *The America Play*, Parks does this by staging a black Abraham Lincoln look-alike who disturbs and challenges the white-defined Lincoln myth that plays an essential part in American history and modern American identity construction.<sup>730</sup>

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<sup>729</sup> "Suzan-Lori Parks' *The America Play*," Samuel French, Inc., 2016, accessed 15 September 2016, <http://www.samuel french.com/p/14334/the-america-play>.

<sup>730</sup> Haike Frank, "The Instability of Meaning in Suzan-Lori Parks' *The America Play*," American Drama Institute, The Free Library, 22 June 2002, accessed 15 September 2016, <https://www.thefreelibrary.com/The+instability+of+meaning+in+Suzan-Lori+Parks%27s+The+America+Play.-a095198794>.

What, then, can we surmise about Parks' intentions? Aside from the rather obvious observation that "traditionally white historiography" is subjective and inherently biased, I would suggest very little. What's worse, by omitting or otherwise obscuring such historical/literary norms as coherence, chronology, logic, narrative, and plot, one is left not with the impression that additional historical narratives are needed to balance out an admittedly prejudiced account, but rather that all such attempts at "doing history" are themselves doomed to the same hopelessly subjective and irredeemable bias. In other words, because Truth doesn't exist in this one particular instance of historical narrative, it cannot exist in any... or even in all. Here, I am reminded of Sokal and Bricmont's rebuttal to philosopher Paul Feyerabend's relativistic charge that "all methodologies have their limitations and the only 'rule' that survives is 'anything goes.'"<sup>731</sup> They respond:

This is an erroneous inference that is typical of relativist reasoning. Starting from a correct observation – "all methodologies have their limitations" – Feyerabend jumps to a totally false conclusion: "anything goes". There are several ways to swim, and all of them have their limitations, but it is not true that all bodily movements are equally good (if one prefers not to sink). There is no unique method of criminal investigation, but this does not mean that all methods are equally reliable (think about trial by fire). The same is true of scientific methods.<sup>732</sup>

I would suggest that the same holds true for historical investigations, philosophical propositions, and indeed any and all intellectual undertakings. As a result, Parks' and the postmodernists' crime is not their intention to criticize (that is perfectly warranted), but rather their dubious conclusion to throw the baby out along with the admittedly soiled bathwater. Or as Sokal and Bricmont argue:

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<sup>731</sup> Sokal and Bricmont, *Fashionable Nonsense*, 80.

<sup>732</sup> *Ibid.*

For us, the scientific method is not radically different from the rational attitude in everyday life or in other domains of human knowledge. Historians, detectives, and plumbers – indeed, all human beings – use the same basic methods of induction, deduction, and assessment of evidence as do physicists or biochemists. Modern science tries to carry out these operations in a more careful and systematic way, by using controls and statistical tests, insisting on replication, and so forth. Moreover, scientific measurements are often much more precise than everyday observations; they allow us to discover hitherto unknown phenomena; and they often conflict with “common sense”. But the conflict is at the level of conclusions, not the basic approach.

The main reason for believing scientific theories (at least the best-verified ones) is that they explain the coherence of our experience. Let us be precise: here “experience” refers to *all* our observations, including the results of laboratory experiments whose goal is to test quantitatively (sometimes to incredible precision) the predictions of scientific theories....

This agreement between theory and experiment, when combined with thousands of other similar though less spectacular ones, would be a miracle if science said nothing true – or at least *approximately true* – about the world. The experimental confirmations of the best-established scientific theories, taken together, are evidence that we really have acquired an objective (albeit approximate and incomplete) knowledge of the natural world.<sup>733</sup>

For another example, I would reference the capstone project in one of my foundational doctoral level courses, in which I was asked to complete the following task:

Expand some aspect of your extant work – your Area of Interest Presentation, a conference paper, a paper from another class, an article-in-progress, a short story, a performance text, etc. by way of one or more of the critical readings in this class, or an equivalent one in your scholarly field or artistic genre (please e-mail the professor in advance to clear any equivalent readings). *Rather than add on to the paper, etc., ‘bloom’ it from inside, locating points at which it could use more elaboration, investigation, depth, breadth, etc.*<sup>734</sup>

The italicized portion of the assignment instructions should, if nothing else, reiterate and confirm the superfluous role that critical theory (i.e. postmodernist literature) truly plays

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<sup>733</sup> Ibid., 56-57.

<sup>734</sup> Shelley Salamensky, Proseminar Syllabus (HUM 635). Spring 2014. Department of Comparative Humanities, University of Louisville, Louisville, KY, Microsoft Word File, emphasis mine.



in the genesis and evolution of many our disciplines' ideas and expositions. Far from essential, they are simply inserted, piecemeal and often after the conceptual work has been largely completed (much as they were in Sokal's Hoax), in order to conform to and appease the nebulous tradition in whose gravitational wake the humanities appear to have been captured.

For my project, I chose to "bloom" an essay I had previously written on theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer as part of my master's thesis. In each of the succeeding passages, I will produce a portion of the text as it originally appeared in my thesis, followed by the modified version with works of critical theory inserted (and italicized for easy identification). While humbly noting that my efforts earned not only an "A" for the project, but indeed an "A" for the entire course, I would ask the reader what, if anything, the supplementary material actually adds to my original essay.<sup>735</sup>

Example 1:

The Nazi Party desperately sought the approval and support of the German Church in its quest to restore the nation to its former greatness. Whether enticed by its rhetoric or simply afraid of Bolshevik rule, many German clergymen pledged their support to the Nazi Party. However, Bonhoeffer and several other prominent churchmen viewed Hitler's proposed reforms as a "definite interference with the church and a molding of its theology." As a result, they refused to support the Nazi Party and forced a schism in the German Church. Those who remained loyal to the Nazi Party became known as the German Christians, while Bonhoeffer and those who supported the church's need for dogmatic and theological independence from the political process became members of what was to be known as the Confessing Church.

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<sup>735</sup> For those who are interested, the postmodernist works featured below are: Louis Althusser's "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," Jean-Francois Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), and Vincent B Leitch, William E. Cain, Laurie A. Finke, et al.'s *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, 2nd Edition. (W.W. Norton and Company, 2010).

Almost immediately, the Nazi Party desperately sought the approval and support of the German Church in their quest to restore the nation to its former greatness, for *reasons best described by Louis Althusser in his highly influential examination/explication of contemporary political thought, Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*. “The structure of every society [is] constituted by ‘levels’ or ‘instances’ articulated by a specific determination: the infrastructure, or economic base (the ‘unity’ of the productive forces and the relations of production) and the superstructure, which itself contains two ‘levels’ or ‘instances’: the politico-legal (law and the State) and ideology (the different ideologies, religious, ethical, legal, political, etc.)...the upper floors could not ‘stay up’ (in the air) alone, if they did not rest precisely on their base.”<sup>736</sup> Though primarily arguing for the structural necessity of an economic base in achieving and maintaining societal stability, Althusser is also implying a symbiotic relation or sorts between the two “levels” or “instances” of the superstructure as well. In other words, in order to implement the various political and economic reforms they had previously promised, the National Socialist Party realized the importance of securing either the sanction, or at the very least, the silent obedient consent of the traditional German social/religious authorities. And whether enticed or intimidated by their rhetoric, or simply afraid of Bolshevik rule, many clergymen did indeed pledge their support to the Nazi Party. However, Bonhoeffer and several other prominent churchmen viewed Hitler’s proposed reforms as a “definite interference with the church and a molding of its theology.”<sup>737</sup> As a result, they refused to support the Nazi Party and forced a schism in the German Church. Those who remained loyal to the Nazi Party became known as the German Christians, while Bonhoeffer and those who supported the church’s need for dogmatic and theological independence from the political process became members of what was to be known as the Confessing Church.<sup>738</sup>

#### Example 2:

After the close of the Finkenwalde seminary in 1937, life became increasingly difficult for Bonhoeffer as more and more of his personal liberties were slowly being pierced by the Gestapo’s ever-watchful gaze. Persuaded by his friends’ fears that to remain in Germany would cost him his life and rob the movement of one of

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<sup>736</sup> Vincent B., Leitch, William E. Cain, Laurie A. Finke, et al., *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, 2nd Edition (W.W. Norton and Company, 2010), 1338.

<sup>737</sup> E. H. Robertson, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1966), 7.

<sup>738</sup> *Ibid.*

its greatest voices, Bonhoeffer traveled to America briefly in 1939. Although he had acquiesced to his friends' wishes, upon arriving in the New World, he knew immediately that his departure had been a mistake, and sought to return to Germany straight away. Despite knowing this decision could bring to bear terrible consequences for Bonhoeffer, he argued that were he to abandon his parishioners in their struggle against the Nazis, he would be entitled no say in their path to redemption. Upon his return, Bonhoeffer allied himself fully with the political resistance to Hitler and the Nazi Party.<sup>739</sup> No longer believing that his theological battles could remain separate from the political war now raging, Bonhoeffer adopted new tactics with which to fight. Since he was no longer permitted to lecture or publish anywhere within the growing German sphere of influence, he began an underground relationship with a group of officers within the German Military Intelligence Service who opposed Hitler and were making preparations for an assassination attempt. Disregarding his abhorrence for violence in all its forms, Bonhoeffer, no longer able to see any alternative, cast his lot with the dissenters. He would later justify his actions thusly: "It is not only my task to look after the victims of madmen who drive a motor-car in a crowded street, but to do all in my power to stop their driving at all."<sup>740</sup>

After the close of the Finkenwalde seminary in 1937, life became increasingly difficult for Bonhoeffer as more and more of his personal liberties were slowly being pierced by the Gestapo's ever-watchful gaze. Persuaded by his friends' fears that to remain in Germany for would cost him his life and rob the movement of one of its greatest voices, Bonhoeffer traveled to America briefly in 1939 (Robertson 8-9). Although he had acquiesced to his friends' wishes, upon arriving in the New World, he knew immediately that his departure had been a mistake, and sought to return to Germany immediately. Despite knowing this decision could bring to bear terrible consequences for Bonhoeffer, he argued that were he to abandon his parishioners in their struggle against the Nazis, he would be entitled no say in their path to redemption. *In other words, if "the task of the philosopher was to 'represent the class struggle in theory,' taking the side of the oppressed in ongoing ideological struggles with representatives of the ruling class," then it was the duty of the theologian to participate in those struggles firsthand.*<sup>741</sup> Upon his return, Bonhoeffer allied himself fully with

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<sup>739</sup> Ibid., 8-9.

<sup>740</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, trans. R. H. Fuller, rev. ed. (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1960), 22.

<sup>741</sup> Louis Althusser, in Vincent B., Leitch, William E. Cain, Laurie A. Finke, et al.'s *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, 1332.

the political resistance to Hitler and the Nazi Party.<sup>742</sup> No longer believing that his theological battles could remain separate from the political war now raging, Bonhoeffer adopted new tactics with which to fight. Since he was no longer permitted to lecture or publish anywhere within the growing German sphere of influence, he began an underground relationship with a group of officers within the German Military Intelligence Service who opposed Hitler and were making preparations for an assassination attempt. Disregarding his abhorrence for violence in all its forms, Bonhoeffer, no longer able to see any alternative, cast his lot with the dissenters. He would later justify his actions thusly: "It is not only my task to look after the victims of madmen who drive a motor-car in a crowded street, but to do all in my power to stop their driving at all."<sup>743</sup>

*Though few would have been able to justify or support such action within the confines of traditional Christian ethics, scripture, or theology, one is reminded of the words of Jean-Francois Lyotard. "A postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher: the text he writes, the work he produces are not in principle governed by preestablished rules, and they cannot be judged according to a determining judgment, by applying familiar categories to the text or to the work. Those rules and categories are what the work of art itself is looking for. The artist and the writer, then, are working without rules in order to formulate the rules of what will have been done. Hence the fact that work and text have the characters of an event; hence also, they always come too late for their author, or, what amounts to the same thing, their being put into work, their realization (mise un oeuvre) always begin too soon. Post modern would have to be understood according to the paradox of the future (post) anterior (modo)."*<sup>744</sup> *Though like Althusser, speaking to a different audience and in a different context, the truth of his words shines through. Bonhoeffer, too, was operating "without rules in order to formulate the rules of what will have been done." (And like the post-modern writer whose work is both too early and too late to be of any comfort and/or salvation to him, Bonhoeffer's words and actions ultimately were to resonate with the age but fell regrettably silent upon the man who had wrought and willed them into existence.)*

### Example 3:

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<sup>742</sup> Robertson, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 8-9.

<sup>743</sup> Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 22.

<sup>744</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 81.

Although an unintended martyr, he was able to draw strength from his beliefs and discern purpose from his hardships. “It is infinitely easier to suffer in obedience to a human command than to accept suffering as free, responsible men. It is infinitely easier to suffer with others than to suffer alone. It is infinitely easier to suffer as public heroes than to suffer apart and in ignominy. It is infinitely easier to suffer physical death than to endure spiritual suffering. Christ suffered as a free man alone, apart and in ignominy, in body and in spirit, and since that day many Christians have suffered with him.”<sup>745</sup> Throughout his life, Bonhoeffer had advocated “costly discipleship for Christ.” In the end, it was he who was to define this concept in the most inimitable fashion. A true proponent and follower of his own theology, Dietrich Bonhoeffer died as he had lived, leaving behind an undeniable legacy and cementing his place in history as one of the greatest theologians of the twentieth century.

Although an unintended martyr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was able to draw strength from his beliefs and discern purpose from his hardships. “It is infinitely easier to suffer in obedience to a human command than to accept suffering as free, responsible men. It is infinitely easier to suffer with others than to suffer alone. It is infinitely easier to suffer as public heroes than to suffer apart and in ignominy. It is infinitely easier to suffer physical death than to endure spiritual suffering. Christ suffered as a free man alone, apart and in ignominy, in body and in spirit, and since that day many Christians have suffered with him.”<sup>746</sup> *Once more, the words of Althusser seem appropriate. While arguing against the ideological apparatuses of both state and culture, he did recognize those brave few who refuse to acquiesce to the demands of their colleagues, contemporaries, and superiors. “I ask the pardon of those teachers who, in dreadful conditions, attempt to turn the few weapons they can find in the history and learning they ‘teach’ against the ideology, the system and the practices in which they are trapped. They are a kind of hero. But they are rare.”*<sup>747</sup> Indeed they are. Throughout his life, Bonhoeffer had advocated “costly discipleship for Christ.” In the end, it was he who was to define this concept in the most unmistakable fashion. A true proponent and follower of his own theology, Dietrich Bonhoeffer died as he had lived, leaving behind an undeniable legacy and cementing his place in history as one of the most important theologians of the

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<sup>745</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. Eberhard Bethge, trans. Reginald H. Fuller (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1953), 31.

<sup>746</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>747</sup> Louis Althusser, in Vincent B., Leitch, William E. Cain, Laurie A. Finke, et al.’s *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, 1347-1348.

twentieth century. *And if Christianity is to endure in our postmodern (narrativeless) age, then it must rebrand or perhaps even debrand itself to allow Bonhoeffer's notion of Religionless Christianity to blossom. Otherwise, the word (Christianity) and all it represents may be forever lost. But as Lyotard once said in defense of postmodernism, one could echo with equal conviction here. "Under the general demand for slackening and for appeasement, we can hear the mutterings of the desire for a return of terror, for the realization of the fantasy to seize reality. The answer is: Let us wage a war on totality; let us be witnesses to the unrepresentable; let us activate the differences and save the honor of the name."*<sup>748</sup>

Should one actually manage to derive meaning from the italicized portions above, he or she must do so with the knowledge that no such intention or design ever existed on the part of the author (i.e. myself). They were merely inserted (years after the initial composition, I might add) in order to add the unnecessary and superficial *gravitas* that postmodernist writing seems to require. And rather than enhance or "bloom" my essay, I would instead contend that they have caused it to wither away on the vine. Unfortunately, the bitter taste of this fruitless experience was to linger throughout the remainder of my studies.

For instance, about the same time that Sokal submitted his satirical essay to *Social Text*, Stanford Professor Sylvia Wynter published an article entitled, "1492: A New World View." (I was required to engage with it on multiple occasions.) The article begins:

The dispute over 1492 is in full spate. We are overwhelmed by an avalanche of arguments between the celebrants and the dissidents. The celebrants are intellectuals of Western European and Euroamerican descent, and the dissidents are intellectuals mainly of indigenous or Native American descent, joined by Euroamerican allies such as Hans Koning, the writer, and Kirkpatrick Sale, the environmentalist.

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<sup>748</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, 82.

How, the argument runs, is the 1492 event to be perceived? Should it be seen from the celebrant perspective – as a “glorious achievement,” a “heroic and daring deed,” of discovery and exploration, a triumph for the Christian West that was to liberate the indigenous peoples from their Stone Age, deprived existence without the wheel (Hart 1991)? Or, is it to be seen from the dissident perspective – as one of “history’s monumental crimes,” a brutal invasion and conquest that led to a degree of genocidal extinction and of still ongoing ecological disaster unprecedented in human history...?

But can there be, besides these two, a third perspective? Is it possible to go beyond what Gregory Bateson (1969) calls “the old conflicts in the old premises, in which we just go round and round without resolution,” that is, beyond the premises of both celebrants and dissidents? Can there emerge a new and ecumenically human view that places the events of 1492 within a new frame of meaning, not only of *natural* history, but also of a newly conceived *cultural* history specific to and unique to our species, because the history of those “forms of life” gives expression to a third level of hybridly organic, and – in the terms of the Chilean biologists Maturana and Varela (1987) – *linguaging* existence?<sup>749</sup>

With the exception of that last sentence (which gets a bit wordy), Wynter has framed her essay reasonably well: rather than embracing the false either/or dichotomy of unreservedly celebrating or unilaterally condemning Columbus and his voyage, she will examine whether it is possible to embrace a more harmonious both/and perspective in which the pros and cons of each original viewpoint can be weighed against the backdrop and historical brunt of the others. As a history professor myself, I can comfortably and confidently state that the answer to such an obvious question is yes. By reexamining our historical actions and attitudes from a broadened and more inclusive perspective, the present consequences of past actions can be more fully understood and appreciated, and the potential consequences of future decisions can be more thoughtfully considered, with conclusions more universally and empathetically reached. Unfortunately, Wynter

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<sup>749</sup> Sylvia Wynter, “1492: A New World View,” in *Race, Discourse, and the Origin of the Americas*, ed. Vera Lawrence Hyatt and Rex Nettleford (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995), 5,7.

believes the answer to be far more nuanced and complex, and as a result the prose quickly devolves into the same sort of pseudo-scientific babble found in Sokal and Bricmont's book.

For example, in the next two paragraphs, Wynter states:

Michel Foucault (1973) has argued that a history of the specifically human needs to take its point of departure from the differing ways in which each individual and the human group to which he or she belongs represent to himself or herself, and to themselves, the life that they live. The linguist Philip Lieberman (1991) has recently provided us with the outlines of how such a new history could be conceptualized. Lieberman points out that the biological evolution in early humans of the modern supralaryngeal vocal tract, together with the brain mechanisms necessary to produce human speech and syntax, generated a new type of evolution: we developed a cognitive capacity related to our new ability to construct linguistically encoded moral or ethico-behavioral systems. These developments enabled us to induce the mode of altruism that bond us together as groups. In consequence, as I propose here, in place of the genetic programs that regulate the behaviors of all organic species, we developed our own culture-specific programs by which our human behaviors – cognizing, affective, and actional – came to be role-governed and lawfully regulated.

Lieberman (1971: 172) further argues that, although “the development of human cultures of which moral sense is arguably the highest form, has obviously progressed in the last 100,000 years, with slavery, for example, although once universally common to all peoples, having now come to be universally outlawed” (in spite of being practiced *de facto* in a few remaining pockets), and although “we have populated and changed continents, harnessed the forces of nature, and subjugated every other form of life,” we ourselves have not yet attained those behavioral attitudes of altruism, empathy, and moral sense in our dealings with each other that he calls the “markers of fully modern human beings.” Can we place the event of 1492 – both its *undoubted* “glorious achievement” aspect and its equally documented atrocities aspects – within such a newly conceptualized moral evolutionary history? As Théophile Obenga (1987) and both molecular biologists and linguists (for example, Cavallo-Sforzi 1991; Vigilant et al. 1991) have pointed out, it is a history that began in Africa, with the emergence of humans out of the animal kingdom. Yet, it is also a history that can now be projected backward from the contemporary imperative of our global interhuman and environmental situation in which the attaining of Lieberman's markers of what should constitute fully modern human beings is now the necessary condition, at



this conjunction, both of our species survival and, concomitantly, of our interaltruistic co-identification as a species.<sup>750</sup>

What “profound” argument is Wynter making here? Simply that evolution originally conditioned human altruism to extend only to those with whom we shared an immediate geographical and/or social environment. However, as a result of modern human communication, transportation, and other technological progress which one might collectively call globalization, that altruism must now necessarily extend beyond culture, kinship, or nationality in order to encompass the species as a whole if we are to survive the self-inflicted consequences our advancement has wrought. As far as I can tell, the numerous references to molecular biologists, Egyptologists, and linguists adds precisely nothing to this rather simple, yet salient point.

What’s worse, just a few pages later, Wynter, while making another quite obvious observation, seems to subscribe to the same epistemological relativism that characterizes most postmodernist writing. She argues:

The central parallel here with 1492 is that Columbus was to be no less governed in his actions by a mode of “subject of understanding” than were the Aztecs. Consequently, the sequence, on the one hand, of admirable behaviors that led him to persevere over many long years in putting forward the intellectual rationale, in spite of the mockery and derision of the learned scholars of his time, and that led him to carry out his successful voyage “against,” as he later wrote, “the opinion of all the world” and the sequence, on the other hand, of ruthless behaviors that followed his landfall we’re both motivated by the same counter mode of “subjective understanding” oriented about the then-emerging statal-mercantile and this-worldly goal of rational redemption. The new ethico-behavioral system of “reasons-of-the-state” and its new mode of political rationality led him, on arriving, not only to take immediate possession of the new lands in the name of Spain, but also to deal with the peoples of these lands as a population group that could be justly made to serve three main purposes. One of these purposes was to expand the power of the Spanish state that had backed his voyage. The second was to repay his financial backers, as well as to enrich himself and his family with all the

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<sup>750</sup> Ibid., 7-8.

gold and tribute he could extort from the indigenous peoples, even from making some into *cabezas de indios y indias* (heads of Indian men and women), could be sold as slaves, in order to support the acquired noble status that was part of the contract he had drawn up with the Crown before the voyage (as a psychosocial status drive that was to also impel his behaviors). His third purpose was to help accelerate the spread of Christianity all over the world, in time for the Second Coming of Christ, which he fervently believed to be imminent.

Consequently, Columbus's behaviors were not unlike the ritual acts of sacrifice of the Aztecs. Their behaviors, too, were impelled by an ethico-behavioral system based on securing what seemed to them to be the imperative goal of "ensuring the good of the Commonwealth," and to do this by maintaining, as their founding supraordinate goal prescribed what they should do, "the flow of life." Columbus's equally Janus-faced behaviors were to be no less prescribed by the emergent religio-secular political and mercantile goal of the state, which Columbus would come to see as the vehicle both for the spread of the faith and for the advancement of his own status. So the Aztecs' "flow of life" imperative would become for Columbus and the Spaniards (to the Aztecs' horror and astonishment) the imperative of maintaining a "flow of gold." In an inextricably tangled web of motives, for him this flow would serve *not* only to secure the good of the state and his own personal enrichment, but also to finance the reconquest of Jerusalem from its Islamic occupiers, in order to prepare the world for the imminent Second Coming of Christ. It was a coming in which many members of the new socially mobile merchant/artisan-cum-mapmaker category (in a world in which the nobility was still hegemonic) fervently believed. This was the category to which Columbus belonged.<sup>751</sup>

Again, one might ask, what is Wynter's point? To the best of my understanding, it is simply that both Columbus' and the Aztecs' individual motivations for their actions, while complex and even self-contradictory at times, were nevertheless rationally grounded within their respective cultures. And understanding this can allow one to move beyond the simple reactionary (and ultimately fruitless) assignments of blame and victimhood in order to attain more empathy and understanding from and for both parties.

And I believe Wynter would agree with my summarization, for after sixteen arduous, abstract pages filled with superfluous name-dropping, an irrelevantly inserted

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<sup>751</sup> Ibid., 15-6.

map detailing Columbus' voyages, and a rather rambling discussion on poetics, even she seems to finally admit as much. She writes:

This can occur even in those cases where these modes of “subjective understanding” and the limits of the modes of altruism, or of the *propter nos* that they impose, have become dangerous and dysfunctional for the individual subjects of their orders.

This was to be true not only of Columbus and the Spaniards, but of the peoples whom they confronted. And it is this historical fact, one conceived in the terms of a new cultural history proposed earlier, that can enable us to interpret the Janus-face paradox of 1492 from a transcultural and therefore human point of view.<sup>752</sup>

Her argument thus made and her case effectively concluded, Wynter nevertheless ambles along yet another eighteen pages before officially closing the door on Columbus and his subjectively tendentious voyage. Those pages include such enigmatic and overelaborate passages as the following:

As the biologists Riedl and Kaspar (1984) point out, the cognitive mechanism specific to the human species, the mechanism to which we give the term “mind,” is only “the most recent superstructure in a continuum of cognitive processes as old as life on this planet.” Because these processes are therefore the “least tested and refined against the real world,” it is only with the natural sciences that any true “victory” has been won in the ongoing “testing and refining” of the human cognitive capacity against the real world. This point enables us not only to put forward an ecumenically human interpretation of 1492 – one that can place it as an event in the context of a “vaster notion of history” (Jameson 1991), one I shall propose, that can be conceived of as the history of the evolution of the human cognitive mechanism in the process of its “testing and refining itself against the real world” – but also to grasp the contours of the new path, as well as the dimensions of the challenge that now confronts us.

Therefore, in our new world view of 1492, both Columbus's and Copernicus's “root of expansions of thought” would, within the wider context of the political and cultural revolution of humanism, in time make possible that mutation at the level of human cognition that led to the rise of the natural sciences. This in turn led to the autonomy of such cognition (that is, outside its earlier role as an imperative function of verifying each order's mode of “subjective understanding”) with respect to the earth and

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<sup>752</sup> Ibid., 32.

physical reality in general. However, if the winning of this autonomy would gradually displace the notions of a nonhomogeneous earth and universe, both of whose *nec plus ultra* lines (*habitable/uninhabitable, celestial/terrestrial*) had served to encode the physico-spiritual notion of order on whose totemic “categorical models” the feudal order had mapped both the role allocating mechanisms of its order and the representations that served to stably induce the mode of interaltruistic symbolic conspecificity that integrated it, the new order of the secularizing modern state would make its own role-allocating mechanisms and unifying code of symbolic conspecificity onto a new notion of order. This new notion was to be based on a *by-nature difference* between Europeans, on the one hand, and peoples of indigenous and African descent, on the other. That difference was represented as having ostensibly been ordained by God’s intentions, as reflected in the Book of Nature, and specifically, in the ordered differential design of the organic species, from which, however, rational man was, as the effect of a separate divine creation, unbridgeably divided....

This was the case until the general upheaval of the 1960s made possible a new opening – that of the collective challenge made to the symbolic representational systems and their “stereotyped images” by which we have hitherto nonconsciously woven our innumerable modes of the Self and their innumerable Others.<sup>753</sup>

As far as I can tell, the first paragraph simply indicates that human beings have the intellectual ability to view historical events from a multiplicity of perspectives. The second merely explains that, in the West, it was not until the scientific revolution of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries that human beings finally came to realize our collective cognitive potential (when the stifling oppression of religious orthodoxy finally began to subside and was slowly replaced with a newfound and exponentially expanded form of humanism). Unfortunately, this realization carried with it an implicit bias, based largely upon racial, religious, and economic distinction, a regrettable reality that we have only recently begun to address in earnest. (This seems to have been her point in paragraph three.)

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<sup>753</sup> Ibid., 38.

And though this is but a taste of the veritable word salad that Wynter has created, I would conclude by informing the reader that this essay was raised up time and again as perhaps the finest example of postmodern prose in the last two decades; as a result, we students were strongly encouraged to consider it an archetypal model upon which our own future efforts should ideally be based. What follows is my one and only attempt at doing so. In the assignment prompt, I was asked to compare/contrast (and if possible reconcile) sociologist Avtar Brah's notion of "transnational identity" with feminist philosopher Nomi Braidotti's concept of "nomadic embodied subjectivity," and then to situate my analysis within the fictional confines of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's admittedly captivating novel *Purple Hibiscus*. Please allow me to apologize in advance for what you're about to read.

In "Diaspora, Border and Transnational Identities," Avtar Brah states that "the concepts of border and diaspora together reference the theme of location. This point warrants emphasis because the very strong association of notions of diaspora with displacement and dislocation means that the experience of location can easily dissolve out of focus."<sup>754</sup> In order to avoid this – and thus to articulate precisely what she means by "transnational identities" – Brah proposes a politics of location, which she describes as "locationality in contradiction."<sup>755</sup> This notion is analogous to, though not completely synonymous with, Frantz Fanon's concept of dual consciousness, in which a colonized subject is forced to attempt to simultaneously integrate two very different (often opposed and/or contradicting) cultural identities.<sup>756</sup> However, whereas the colonized subject's task may indeed prove a logical impossibility, the diasporic subject's need not necessarily be so. As Brah subsequently explains, "the identity of the diasporic imagined community is far from fixed or pre-given. It is constituted within the crucible of the materiality of everyday life; in the everyday stories we tell ourselves individually and collectively."<sup>757</sup> In other words, while the identities of the individual diasporic subject and the diasporic community at large are founded and

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<sup>754</sup> Avtar Brah, "Diaspora, Border and Transnational Identities," in *Feminist Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Reina Lewis and Sara Mills (New York: Routledge, 2003), 615.

<sup>755</sup> *Ibid.*, 628.

<sup>756</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (London: Pluto Press, 1986), 8-10.

<sup>757</sup> Brah, "Diaspora, Border and Transnational Identities," 617-618.

grounded upon such seemingly binary concepts as here/there, us/them, and belonging/ostracism, these notions are themselves dynamic and thus constantly in flux; therefore they need not be, indeed cannot be, mutually exclusive. “The point is that there are multiple others embedded within and across binaries, albeit one or more may be accorded priority within a given discursive formation.”<sup>758</sup>

In “The Paradox of Nomadic Embodied Subjectivity,” Rosi Braidotti echoes a similar sentiment. Though never addressing diaspora discourse per se, her repeated emphasis on the importance of embodied materialism in the de/reconstructed Post-Modernist, Post-Humanist subject speaks to this fundamental truth. Describing Postmodernity as a “spasmodic and slightly schizophrenic” age in which the repressed others of Modernity (women, racialized and/or ethnic others, and nature) have “returned with a vengeance,” Braidotti argues for a return to post-humanist philosophy in order to accommodate the necessary shift in both perspective and emphasis that must occur as a result.<sup>759</sup> According to Braidotti, such a philosophy would “break out of both anthropo- and andro-centrism, thus leaving masculine biases behind. I think it also de-centers the Euro-centric vision of this culture as the center of civilization and takes stock in a more sober manner of the mixed legacy of European history. This should result in a variety of cartographies or rather, in this case, ‘ethnoscapes’ for contemporary subjectivity and thus break the mould of ethnocentric subject positions.”<sup>760</sup> In advocating for a “variety of cartographies,” Braidotti is, in essence, making the same argument as Brah for the reconsidered subjectivity of the individual in an increasingly global age.

Despite these similarities, there is at least one ideological and/or methodological difference between Brah’s diasporic subject and Braidotti’s nomadic subject which must be addressed. Ostensibly, it seems as though both Brah and Braidotti are arguing for a type of grounded globalism (or “simultaneous situatedness” as Brah describes it) in which one’s subjective identity is firmly tethered to one’s physical embodiment whilst enough rope yet remains for a somewhat itinerant, intersubjective existence.<sup>761</sup> However, in this context, Braidotti’s notion of nomadism implies something decidedly different from Brah’s diaspora discourse. Though both seem quite leery of falling victim to the inherent pitfalls and presumptions of traditional either/or modes of thought, Braidotti’s disavowal of dualism – and of dichotomous thinking in general – is so complete as to destroy the line between self/other, here/there, us/them, etc., thus inviting the sort of individual and cultural schizophrenia to

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<sup>758</sup> Ibid., 618.

<sup>759</sup> Rosi Braidotti, “The Paradox of Nomadic Embodied Subjectivity,” *Textus XIII* (2000): 396, 394.

<sup>760</sup> Ibid., 395.

<sup>761</sup> Brah, “Diaspora, Border and Transnational Identifies,” 628.

which she alluded earlier. On the other hand, Brah's broadening of binary discourses is still sufficient to decenter and disassemble the Modernist/Humanist subject, without at the same time severing the ties that bind one to one's bodily existence and intersubjective reality. In other words, no matter how complicated or contextualized, the notion of diaspora Brah insists upon still connotes a sense of attachment to one's former, current, and/or future surroundings as well as an implied intention for the journey in-between; conversely, the continual wanderings and ideological aimlessness of Braidotti's nomadism do not. This distinction is most readily apparent in the supporting examples each author provides.

Perhaps Brah's best example is her problematization of the traditional majority/minority binary. Calling instead for a "multi-axial understanding of power," Brah argues that "a group constituted as a 'minority' along one dimension of differentiation may be constructed as a 'majority' along another.... Moreover, individual subjects may occupy 'minority' and 'majority' positions simultaneously."<sup>762</sup> In support of this point, Brah outlines the autobiographical accounts of two Feminist writers who grew up in Alabama during the American Civil Rights Era: Minnie Bruce Pratt and Angela Davis. As Brah notes, "Both women invoke the segregated South of their childhood, but their memories construct an experiential landscape charted from opposite sides of the racial divide."<sup>763</sup> For instance, Pratt, a "white, middle-class, lesbian feminist," is simultaneously situated within both the racial and economic majorities of her community and the gendered and sexual minorities of her culture.<sup>764</sup> Davis' account is likewise situated within the gendered and/or sexual minorities of her community, but it is also firmly rooted in the racial and economic minorities of her culture as well. As Brah rightly suggests, "a juxtaposition of these two narratives is helpful in offering related accounts of the operations of racism and class in the constitution of gendered forms of white and black subjectivity against the backdrop of a turbulent period in recent American history."<sup>765</sup> In other words, in Brah's formulation the binary mode of thinking is undoubtedly problematized and expanded, but not completely abandoned. Consequently, her diasporic subjects remain firmly grounded to themselves and their surroundings, all the while permitted a newly heightened sense of mobility and intersubjective perspective.

Braidotti offers her own critique of the traditional binary structuration as well. In describing the need for an impersonal or "post-personal" style of thought, Braidotti outlines the way(s) in which she believes the traditional writer/reader binary must be deconstructed and then recombined to allow

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<sup>762</sup> Ibid., 622.

<sup>763</sup> Ibid., 630.

<sup>764</sup> Ibid., 629.

<sup>765</sup> Ibid., 630.

for “a web of connections to be drawn, not only in terms of the author’s ‘intentions’ and the reader’s ‘reception’, but rather in a much wider more complexified set of possible interconnections.... It is all a question of what kind of rhizomatic connections we can draw among ourselves, here and now, in the act of exchanging our cartographies and comparing notes on our respective locations.”<sup>766</sup> Unfortunately, such “rhizomatic connections” are themselves completely opposed to, and thus incompatible with, any and all binary formulations of thought. As a result, Braidotti’s attempt to problematize binary discourse results not in its complication or expansion, but rather in its dissolution altogether. As she herself admits, “I would refigure such an embodied subject as a text by Gertrude Stein, set to music by Phillip Glass, performed by Diamanda Galas.”<sup>767</sup> No longer firmly grounded to such notions as self/other or here/there, her nomadic subject becomes not only decentered but destabilized as well. And though still free to wander, he/she is no longer able to justify the reason for or necessity of the journey.

For perhaps a more clear comparison of the notions of diasporic and nomadic subjectivity, let us turn our attentions to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus*. Set in post-colonial Nigeria in the uncertain aftermath of a two-year civil war, the novel follows the story of fifteen-year-old Kambili, torn between two worlds – that of her native Nigeria and the remnants of Western would-be colonizers and cultural usurpers. Arguably, the two most influential figures in Kambili’s life are those of her father Eugene and her “Aunty” Ifeoma. Though brother and sister, and thus in many ways sharers of the same geography and cultural heritage, they represent near-perfect instantiations of Brah and Braidotti’s ostensibly similar though substantively different theories. For her part, Aunty Ifeoma represents the grounded, yet mobile perspective of Brah’s diasporic subject, while Eugene embodies the sort of decentered, destabilized schizophrenia that, I would argue, results from Braidotti’s rhizomatic embrace of nomadism.

For instance, Aunty Ifeoma has managed to simultaneously integrate and embrace many aspects of both her native Nigeria and the West. As an independent, strong-minded, Catholic single mother of three, as well as lecturer at the local college, Ifeoma has undoubtedly adopted many of the characteristics and customs of the West, but her strong relationship with her father (who remains unapologetically pagan), her own hybridized understanding and practice of Catholicism, as well her communal ties to the land and community demonstrate that her Nigerian roots continue both to ground and to enrich her increasingly globalized existence. Conversely, Eugene epitomizes the dangers of losing oneself to the irreversible blurring of binary lines that must result from an embrace of nomadism. His identity and subjective experience(s) are forever fractured by his

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<sup>766</sup> Braidotti, “The Paradox of Nomadic Embodied Subjectivity,” 409.

<sup>767</sup> *Ibid.*, 408.



inability to physically and psychologically situate himself within a mongrelized world which he can no longer sufficiently define. For example, while his embrace of the West can never be complete (as both his geography and his embodiment serve to ground him elsewhere), his disavowal of the traditions and communal ties to his native Nigeria (including estrangement from his elderly father) at the same time ensures that his ancestral domain can no longer provide the comforts of home and hearth it once did. As a result, Eugene finds himself continually torn between the competing ideologies and responsibilities of East/West, work/family, and novelty/tradition. And with nothing and no one left to ground him sufficiently to any one place or experience, his intentional travels devolve into the aimless wanderings of the nomad. The end result is not only a decentering and destabilization of self, but also of his wife and children who seem forever caught in his wake.<sup>768</sup>

Although I was unable to organically incorporate it into the body of my essay, I was also tasked with presenting my personal reactions to Braidotti's piece during a subsequent classroom discussion session; this quote, excerpted from an assigned reading in another class in which I was concurrently enrolled, is how I chose to end that presentation. It is from a 1997 article entitled "Psychotic Experience and Disordered Thinking: A Reappraisal from New Perspectives," by Michael Schwartz, Osborne Wiggins, and Manfred Spitzer. While intended as an explanation/diagnosis of the schizophrenic tendency, I think the description (not to mention the title) works equally well in capturing the mainstream postmodernist mind. Make of it what you will.

The outcomes of expansion are somewhat paradoxical. On the one hand, there is an enlarged awareness of the interconnections that bind objects, events, and people together as more and more aspects of things emerge out of one another: the expansion. On the other hand, the individual's struggle to handle and control this overwhelming complexity leads him or her to focus on only a few of these manifold meanings: the reduction of complexity. Focusing on only a few of the meanings, however, disconnects these from the others. The individual thereby disregards those meanings in the horizon that tie him or her to the shared reality

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<sup>768</sup> Dave Buckner, "Short Essay 2, Prompt 3," (HUM 663: Global Perspectives on the Arts and Culture, University of Louisville, Spring 2015).

of other people. The person is thus unburdened of overwhelming complexity but only at the price of separation from the intersubjective world.<sup>769</sup>

Unfortunately, neither a catchy title nor a witty remark will go far towards alleviating this intellectual crisis that currently plagues so many of our departments. Substantive ideas and imitable approaches must be put forth in good faith by those who would see a commonsense shift within the humanities, back to the sort of relevancy of ideas, accessibility of prose, interdisciplinary dialogue, and public engagement that used to comprise the majority of our scholarship.

And regardless of one's perspective on their respective positions, I believe the New Atheist treatises with which I began this book represent four such efforts. As a means of concluding not only the chapter, but also the work itself, I humbly offer two examples of my own creation. Along with this current project, they embody precisely what I believe must occur in order to facilitate this paradigm shift. The first is addressed principally to academics, specifically those within the philosophical tradition of phenomenology who, for a variety of reasons, seem hesitant to embrace the sort of interpersonal and cross-disciplinary communication that I think is required between the natural and social sciences, as well as within the humanities more generally. The second is the final project from my final course as a humanities doctoral student. It represents my last, most complete, and most earnest attempt to reconcile postmodernist thought with the more modernist, Enlightenment tradition to which I personally belong and steadfastly adhere. But regardless of the ultimate success or failure of my efforts to bridge this gap, I sincerely hope that, at the very least, they will serve to reestablish a dialogue, however

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<sup>769</sup> Michael Schwartz, Osborne Wiggins, and Manfred Spitzer, "Psychotic Experience and Disordered Thinking: A Reappraisal from New Perspectives," *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* Vol. 185, No. 3 (1997): 182.

tentatively, between not only the humanities and the natural sciences, but also between the academy itself and the wider intellectual and cultural community to which it belongs. May we never allow either conversation to fall silent or upon deaf ears again.

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## Part II: A Prescriptive Postmortem

### In Defense of Dennett's "Strawmen": Heterophenomenology Reexamined<sup>770</sup>

In this section, I will examine the basic tenets of Daniel Dennett's notion of heterophenomenology. Following a brief outline of his proposed methodology, I will survey, in some detail, his arguments concerning the so-called "Intentional Stance," which, I would argue, affords him a means not only of getting his arguments off the ground, but also of balancing upon this philosophical tightrope that spans the conceptual chasm between physicalism and phenomenology. I plan, subsequently, to defend heterophenomenology against several of the most frequent critiques leveled against it by contemporary philosophers, such as those recently raised by Daniel Zahavi, Shannon Vallor, and Alva Noë. In doing so, I will argue that their criticisms – specifically those concerning Dennett's supposed misrepresentation(s) of Edmund Husserl, the issue of observer neutrality within his methodology, as well as the inherent biases and presumptions of the scientific method – actually support Dennett's understanding of the

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<sup>770</sup> Although the ideological connection between phenomenology and postmodernism might not be immediately obvious, in *Phenomenology, Modernism and Beyond*, Carole Bourne-Taylor and Ariane Mildenberg explain: "The phenomenological heritage has been laid out by many a critic: 'the phenomenological helped to make the postmodern thinkable' because of their common assiduous and fruitful cultivation of the epistemological doubt. Merleau-Ponty's texts certainly disclose new meanings within the postmodern context and the pertinence of many aspects of his thought to hermeneutics and postmodernism is undeniable. The questions he raises lie at the heart of (post)modernism: they are commensurate with, and attuned to, its own concerns: the decentered subject is their common denominator" (20).

authoritative and communicative limitations of classical phenomenology, and thus are not the game-changers or show-stoppers that his detractors believe them to be.

In the Introduction to his *Phenomenology of Perception*, Maurice Merleau-Ponty writes:

Phenomena are never absolutely unknown to scientific consciousness (which borrows all of its models from the structure of lived experience), it is just that scientific consciousness does not ‘thematize’ them, it does not make explicit the horizons of perceptual consciousness by which it is surrounded and whose concrete relations it seeks to express objectively.... The experience of phenomena... is the making explicit or the bringing to light of the pre-scientific life of consciousness that alone gives the operations of science their full sense and to which these operations always refer. This is not an irrational conversation, but rather an intentional analysis.<sup>771</sup>

Though here intending to distinguish between the Husserlian notion of a complete phenomenological epoché and his own understanding of the ontological necessity of embodied consciousness, Merleau-Ponty’s statement also effectively serves as the philosophical foundation of and the conceptual springboard for Daniel Dennett’s notion of heterophenomenology.

Essentially advocating for a third-person perspective on classical first-person or “auto” phenomenology, Dennett describes heterophenomenology as “nothing other than the method that has been used by psychophysicists, cognitive psychologists, clinical neuropsychologists, and just about everybody who has ever purported to study human consciousness in a serious, scientific way.”<sup>772</sup> This serious, scientific notion of which Dennett speaks should not, however, be construed as a complete rejection of either Husserlian or Merleau-Pontian phenomenology, nor of the contributive value(s) of a first-person perspective in our overarching search for knowledge. As Dennett himself

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<sup>771</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2012), 59.

<sup>772</sup> Daniel Dennett, “Who’s on First?” *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 10 (2003): 22.

subsequently explains, “heterophenomenology is the beginning of a science of consciousness, not the end. It is the organization of the data, a catalogue of what must be explained, not itself an explanation or a theory.”<sup>773</sup> In “Heterophenomenology Reconsidered,” Dennett is even more explicit:

Let me begin, then, with something of a bird’s-eye view of what I take heterophenomenology to be: a bridge – the bridge – between the subjectivity of human consciousness and the natural sciences.... It is precisely the point of heterophenomenology to honor that contrast, and preserve and protect the point of view of the subject, and then to convey the point of view of the subject, the cognitive system, to the scientific enterprise.<sup>774</sup>

In *Consciousness Explained*, Dennett outlines his methodology for constructing such a bridge. Initially dispensing with, or at the very least postponing, the question of just which entities (if any) actually have consciousness, Dennett proposes what he considers to be the most obvious and uncontroversial means of both accurately preserving and effectively communicating one’s conscious experience(s) to an outside observer: verbal interaction within a controlled setting. In this sort of investigative study, an experimenter would attempt to induce a particular type of experience in her subject, while the subject would, in turn, simply relate or describe (as best as she is able) what that experience is like, or more specifically, what it is like *for her*.<sup>775</sup>

Throughout the process, both the experimenter and subject would be allowed to ask for additional clarification from or to provide such elucidation for their counterpart, whenever either considers it to be necessary or profitable to the exchange. To ensure objectivity in so far as it is possible, these interactions would be recorded and then independently transcribed by at least three stenographers. Any unclear or irreconcilable

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<sup>773</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>774</sup> Daniel Dennett, “Heterophenomenology Reconsidered,” *Phenom Cogn Sci* 6 (2007): 249-50.

<sup>775</sup> Daniel Dennett, *Consciousness Explained* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1991): 72-77.

portions of the recordings that could not be comparatively rectified or collectively agreed upon would be subsequently disregarded, so as to safeguard the study against charges of ambiguity or observational bias.<sup>776</sup> If accomplished, the end result would be an account that is not only representative of the subject's own perception(s) of his or her conscious experience but also sufficiently vetted to be of scientific value for the outside observer and larger community as well.

But Dennett asks “just what kinds of things does this methodology commit us to? Beyond the unproblematic things all of science is committed to (neurons and electrons, clocks and microscopes,...) just to beliefs – the beliefs expressed by subjects and deemed constitutive of their subjectivity.”<sup>777</sup> Of course as a result, a number of his critics have claimed that Dennett's methodology fails to account for the differences between experience and one's beliefs *about* experience, and in reality preserves only the latter.<sup>778</sup> To this charge, Dennett has responded, “A catalogue of beliefs about experience is not the same as a catalogue of experiences themselves, and it has been objected (Levine, 1994) that ‘conscious experiences themselves, not merely our verbal judgments about them, are the primary data to which a theory must answer’. But how, in advance of theory, could we catalogue the experiences themselves?”<sup>779</sup> In other words, it is not that his opponents are wrong to make the distinction between one's beliefs about experience and the experiences themselves, for a conceptual and communicative gap between them

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<sup>776</sup> Ibid.

<sup>777</sup> Dennett, “Who's on First?” 20.

<sup>778</sup> See David Chalmers' 1996 *The Conscious Mind: In Search of a Fundamental Theory* and Thomas Nagel's 2012 *Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature is Almost Certainly False*.

<sup>779</sup> Dennett, “Who's on First?” 21.

does indeed exist, but rather it is that they are wrong to doubt that heterophenomenology is the most satisfying philosophical *and* scientific method for bridging them.

After all, this is a problem facing mainstream phenomenology as well, especially when one considers the preference for and the primacy of the “first-person plural presumption” contained within more traditional (i.e. Husserlian and Merleau-Pontian) veins of the philosophy.<sup>780</sup> Such a notion assumes not only a basic structural similarity of conscious experience between subjects, but also an inherent ability to accurately perceive and relate those experiences to others. Unfortunately, when combined with traditional phenomenology’s relative lack of consistency concerning observational and accumulative methodologies, it would seem that the gap between experience and one’s belief(s) about experience is not only far wider under traditional phenomenology, but perhaps even to the point where a bridge between them is no longer linguistically or scientifically possible. That is to say that, without some mediating structure in place, the subject and object of experience are necessarily one and cannot be distinguished, independently verified, or communicated; thus the potential for ambiguity and observational bias within the data set is increased exponentially.<sup>781</sup>

According to Dennett, this problem is further exacerbated by the fact that we (that is, the individual subjects of our own conscious experience) are not the authoritative voice(s) we so often *believe* ourselves to be. Or to return once more to the words of

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<sup>780</sup> Dennett, *Consciousness Explained*, 67.

<sup>781</sup> For more on the issue of intersubjectivity in traditional phenomenology, see Husserl’s 1931 *Cartesian Mediations*... specifically the fifth meditation, “Uncovering of the Sphere of Transcendental Being as Monadological Intersubjectivity,” in which Husserl attempts (albeit unsuccessfully) to answer the charge of methodological solipsism that has been so often leveled against him and his philosophy. I would suggest that Dennett’s proposed methodology merely offers Husserl the tools with which he might reasonably succeed.

Merleau-Ponty, “Nothing is more difficult than in knowing precisely *what we see*.”<sup>782</sup>

Consequently, Dennett has proposed adopting an attitude of neutrality concerning subjects’ beliefs about their conscious experience, not as a means of discounting them (as has so often been claimed), but rather as a means of preserving them and treating them as seriously as they can be taken. It is at this point that his arguments concerning the “intentional stance” come rather forcefully into play. Given his admittedly physicalist and ostensibly-eliminativist leanings, a majority of Dennett’s critics have argued that employing the intentional stance with regard to a subject’s beliefs about his or her own experiences is little more than a polite, unassuming way of brushing them aside entirely. However, by elaborating on precisely what this notion both entails and permits, I intend to demonstrate that such critics are themselves mistaken.

In “True Believers: The Intentional Strategy and Why it Works,” Dennett puts forth his arguments concerning the existence, nature, and (most importantly) the usefulness of belief.<sup>783</sup> While Eliminativists argue that our understanding of mental states (such as those commonly described by “folk psychology”)<sup>784</sup> is itself false and therefore likely to be replaced in the future by a more perfect physicalist understanding of the brain, Behaviorists appear to wish to avoid the question altogether, by denying that the internal mental states of individuals are of any consequence at all. As their name would suggest, they concern themselves only with the observable actions (or behaviors) of individuals in an attempt to understand, and therefore predict, how they will relate person

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<sup>782</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 59.

<sup>783</sup> Daniel Dennett, “True Believers: The Intentional Strategy and Why it Works,” in *Mind and Cognition: An Anthology*, 3rd Edition, eds. William G. Lycan and Jesse J. Prinz (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2008): 323-36.

<sup>784</sup> Folk psychology, or commonsense psychology as it is sometimes known, is here defined as the “ways of conceptualizing mind and the mental that are implicit in ordinary, everyday attributions of mental states to oneself and others.” “Folk psychology,” *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*, accessed 12 September 2015, <http://www.britannica.com/science/folk-psychology>.



and action one to another. At first glance, Dennett would seem to have little in common with either tradition, but there are, in fact, elements of both notions contained within his Intentional Strategy hypothesis. For instance, he too is primarily concerned with the usefulness of a particular event (whether it be an external action or internal belief is, for the moment, irrelevant) as a predictive agent in observable behavior. However, whereas the Eliminativist would argue that the falseness of “folk psychology” rules out its usefulness, Dennett would argue that it is actually its predictive success (or lack thereof) that should make that determination. His arguments concerning the fickleness yet pervasiveness of the astrological strategy in predicting behavior is perhaps the best evidence of this conviction. Because it is predictively impotent, he argues, the astrological strategy “is of interest only as a social curiosity.”<sup>785</sup> Consequently, one would be hard-pressed not to think of Dennett as at least metaphysically-committed to some form of partial Eliminativism. However, the general usefulness of “folk psychology” in describing, relating, and predicting one’s behavior rules it out as object for elimination (at least for now).

That said, before proceeding any further, it would seem that a more thorough examination of Dennett’s three interpretive “stances” is warranted. The first, often referred to as the physical stance or strategy, is quite simple to understand though, as Dennett himself later admits, not always as easy to employ. “Every physical thing, whether designed or alive or not, is subject to the laws of physics and hence behaves in ways that *in principle* can be explained and predicted from the physical stance.”<sup>786</sup> In essence, this stance is the basic platform of both physics and physicalism. But while the

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<sup>785</sup> Dennett, “True Believers,” in Lycan and Prinz’ *Mind and Cognition*, 325.

<sup>786</sup> Daniel Dennett, *Intuition Pumps and Other Tools for Thinking* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2013), 80.

physicist is naturally comfortable working within these confines without further explication, the physicalist philosopher will often feel the need to qualify such statements so as to include more experiential concerns and observations. For instance, while it is true that both a stone and an alarm clock can be understood solely from the physical stance, the time and effort required for one to do so increases exponentially from the former to the latter, and thus proves that while always *possible*, the physical strategy may not be always *preferable*.

In such instances, the so-called design stance may prove more useful. At once both riskier and richer than the physical strategy, this stance allows for a more timely explanation of those objects that can be thought of in terms of their design function. “Suppose I categorize a novel object as an alarm clock: I can quickly reason that *if* I depress a few buttons just so, *then* some time later the alarm clock will make a loud noise. I don’t need to work out the specific physical laws that explain this marvelous regularity; I simply *assume* that it has a particular design – the design we call an alarm clock – and that it will function properly, as designed.”<sup>787</sup> This stance, it could be quite logically argued, is what allows the average human to operate such devices as microwave ovens and DVD players in relatively regular and predictable patterns. But while the amount of useful, predictive information is unquestionably increased by the adoption of this method, the design stance is not without its pitfalls and presumptions. As previously stated, in order for one to successfully employ such a notion, one must first assume that the object under observation has been designed in a purposeful, logical way *and* is

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<sup>787</sup> Ibid.

functioning properly. Should either of these assumptions prove false, then the predictive power of the design stance would be irreparably reduced.<sup>788</sup>

Of course, even in the most ideal of circumstances, this strategy will only take us so far. Dennett's example of the chess-playing computer is especially helpful to illustrate this point. Obviously, to attempt a solely physical stance explanation for predicting the behavior of such a device would be well beyond the intellectual purview of the average human being (who is nonetheless still able to both understand and interact with the computer). So perhaps this problem could be solved by employing the design stance? Unfortunately, the knowledge that said computer is "designed" to play chess is, in and of itself, hardly useful in predicting any real pattern(s) of play. Dennett then proceeds to list the steps that would be necessary in order to successfully employ the design stance in a predictive (and thus productive) manner. "First, list the legal moves available to the computer when its turn to play comes up (usually there will be several-dozen candidates). Now rank the legal moves from best (wisest, most rational) to worst (stupidest, most self-defeating). Finally, make your prediction: the computer will make the best move."<sup>789</sup> And while, predictively, this method is far superior to the physical stance, it is a far too lengthy and arduous process to be of any practical use. This is where Dennett's third and final stance, the intentional stance, would seem to be of greatest use. Although admittedly riskier than even the design stance, given that now both the proper design and physical functioning of the chess-playing computer must be assumed *in conjunction with* its "rational desire," or intention, to win the game, it is also potentially a much more timely and efficient means of predicting the behavior of said computer. Now, of course, this in

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<sup>788</sup> Or so Dennett's traditional argument goes...though I will soon claim otherwise.

<sup>789</sup> Dennett, *Intuition Pumps*, 81.

no way implies that the computer is actually a rational agent, conscious of its supposed intent or supervening behavior; only that conceiving of it in such a way is predictively useful in a very real and verifiable way.

Although presumably intending to extend this methodology to human social interaction and scientific inquiry (where it would arguably prove most useful), it appears that a number of Dennett's critics and supporters alike are either unable or unwilling to see beyond his belief in inherent rationality as well as his anthropomorphic tendencies in describing the behavior of obviously inanimate objects or processes.<sup>790</sup> This seems to me rather odd considering that Dennett has, on numerous occasions, argued against even the possible existence of qualia (*Consciousness Explained, Sweet Dreams*, etc.). So to presume liberalism on his part, at least in this regard, seems ill-advised if not deliberately disingenuous.

This view is perhaps best expressed in his 1991 article, "Real Patterns," in which Dennett advocates for a type of "mild realism." He considers it mild in the sense that it cannot be equated with what he describes as the "industrial-strength realis[m]" of Jerry Fodor in which "the pattern dimly discernible from the perspective of folk psychology could also be discerned (more clearly, with less noise) as a pattern of structures in the brain," but real in the sense that it is "useful" in the predicting of behavior and the recognition of patterns.<sup>791</sup> In other words, the intentional stance, like the various concepts of "folk psychology" which it helps us to interpret, are real in the sense that they are

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<sup>790</sup> See Stephen Stich's "Dennett on Intentional Systems," *Philosophical Topics* 12 (1981): 39-62; Richard Rorty's "Comments on Dennett," *Synthese* 53 (1982): 181-187; John Bricke's "Dennett's Eliminative Arguments," *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition* 45 (1984): 413-429; Natika Newton's "Dennett on Intrinsic Intentionality," *Analysis* 52 (1992): 18-23; and Nicholas Thompson's "Has Dennett Given up on Argument?" *Behavior and Philosophy* 24 (1996): 169-174.

<sup>791</sup> Daniel Dennett, "Real Patterns," in *Mind and Cognition: An Anthology*, 3rd Edition, eds. William G. Lycan and Jesse J. Prinz (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2008), 359.

useful in (perhaps even essential to) the understanding, describing, and relating of *human* experience and interaction from one person to another. So, simply stated, the intentional stance is *applicable* only to those systems in which it “works,” and *appropriate* only for those systems for which a physical stance would be uninformative and a design stance either too limiting or too complex. We, therefore, have no need to apply it to stones, alarm clocks, and the like, as the essence of these objects can be readily understood and their “behaviors” reliably predicted using the more readily acceptable methodologies of either the physical or design strategies.<sup>792</sup>

That said, grapplers with Dennett’s idea have argued (and rightly so) that no human being is completely and consistently rational. We do occasionally hold either false and/or self-contradictory beliefs both about ourselves and others. But I believe this fact in no way undermines or obscures the usefulness of the intentional stance. This may itself seem a false or contradictory belief until it is viewed through the lens (if not from the perspective) of the design stance.

For instance, evidence of a mechanical failure in a particular automobile would not suggest a total lack of design or a failure of the so-called design stance, but rather a slight anomaly or imperfection within an otherwise working system. And understanding how this particular example differs from the archetypal model (in this case, real in the Fodorian sense) from which it is derived, would still have sufficient predictive power to

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<sup>792</sup> Stephen Stich’s attempt to blur this line between simple and complex, by citing the example of natural selection, is of particular interest here. It would appear, at least at first glance, that neither the physical nor the design stance is capable of providing a useful understanding of the process of evolution, much less as a means of predicting its subsequent step(s). However, the intentional strategy seems equally ill-equipped to provide any real and usable data when understood simply as the search for “rationality” and/or “truth,” because (as Stich notes) natural selection is bound by neither of these concerns and sometimes even *seems to favor* their opposites. But simply substitute the term “useful” in their place, and then the intentional strategy suddenly seems not only plausible but obviously so. (Whether Dennett would be comfortable with such a substitution is another matter, but the proposed solution does seem viable nonetheless.) For more, see Stich’s “Dennett on Intentional Systems,” 39-62.

warrant its consultation and continued use. Similarly, a physical or behavioral abnormality within a single human being does not automatically reduce the predictive powers of the design stance to nonviable levels. Instead, its comparison to the archetypal model (which, in this instance, is real only in the Dennettian sense, as the “perfect” human has never existed) can still provide great insight into its past and subsequent “behavior.”

In other words, deviations from the so-called “norm” can still be useful in both interpreting past behavior and predicting future behavior, whether that norm actually exists (as in the example of the automobile prototype) or not (as in the case of the idealized human body). Therefore, what matters most is its abstract usefulness, not its concrete existence.<sup>793</sup> In much the same way, perfect rationality need not be uniformly practiced by all human beings at all times in order to justify employing the intentional stance. Its general embrace and utilization within the population is itself sufficient to warrant such a practice.

However, were we to conclude here, what argument could possibly be given for insisting that Dennett is concerned with the nature of thought and the implication of belief? In service of this end, we must now return to our previous discussions concerning the predictive effectiveness (and therefore the mild realism) of “folk psychology,” a term, incidentally, that Dennett himself coined back in 1981. The scientific idealism of Eliminativists and Reductionists aside, the *current* state of physics does not permit a purely materialist conception of mind nor yet provide the (necessary) alternative physicalist vocabulary with which to discuss its development. For this reason, the majority of us continue to conceive of and to communicate our *experiences* (either real or

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<sup>793</sup> In fact, any such deviation might reasonably be considered the exception that proves the rule.

imagined) using the common colloquial jargon of “folk psychology.” Now, it could very well be that, in time, a more accurate *and complete* physicalist understanding and interpretation of experience will emerge, rendering “folk psychology” obsolete. But until such time, we must rely on the best tools at our disposal for the understanding, interpreting, and communicating of individual experience and behavior. And given the reasonably reliable predictive success with which “folk psychology” is so often employed, it is only logical to assume that a correlation (if not a direct mirroring) between it and so-called “reality” does indeed exist. Perhaps only in a mildly realistic sense, but real nonetheless. And so long as the methodology by which we refer to our perceived internal mental states (beliefs, desires, goals, etc.) continues to prove the most useful in identifying, relatable in describing, and essential in predicting our individual and collective behavior, then one sees no reason to abandon or eliminate it.

Now that Dennett’s notion of heterophenomenology has been made clear, and the intentional stance upon which it hinges has been sufficiently outlined, let us turn our attentions to the recent rebuttals from Daniel Zahavi, Shannon Vallor, and Alva Noë to determine what, if any, challenges their critiques represent to Dennett’s proposed methodology. According to Zahavi:

Heterophenomenology doesn’t study conscious phenomena, since it is neutral about whether they exist; rather it studies reports of conscious phenomena. Thus, Dennett urges us to adopt a neutral stance and to bracket the question concerning the validity of the subjects’ expressed beliefs, and he argues that this maneuver amounts to a third-person version of Husserl’s famous epoché.<sup>794</sup>

Zahavi counters that not only is Dennett’s proposed methodology misguided (as it is not the reports of experiences with which phenomenology is

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<sup>794</sup> Daniel Zahavi, “Killing the Straw Man: Dennett and Phenomenology,” *Phenom Cogn Sci* 6 (2007): 23.

concerned but the actual experiences themselves), but also that his initial reading of Husserl is fundamentally flawed. He elaborates:

The purpose of the epoché and the reduction is not to doubt, neglect, abandon, or exclude reality from consideration, rather their aim, as Husserl repeatedly emphasizes, is to suspend or neutralize a certain dogmatic *attitude* towards reality, thereby allowing us to focus more narrowly and directly on reality just as it is given. In short, the epoché entails a change of attitude towards reality, and not an exclusion of reality.<sup>795</sup>

Thus, Zahavi takes Dennett's argument to be something of a non-starter, or "straw man" of sorts. And in a very limited sense, perhaps he is right. After all, Dennett does appear to be maintaining a rather dogmatic attitude towards reality, all the while questioning, or at the very least suspending judgment concerning the possible existence of the very phenomena with which traditional phenomenology is primarily concerned. In fact, in many ways, Dennett's heterophenomenology appears to constitute something of a mirrored philosophy to that of Husserl. But rather than constituting a misreading of Husserl, as Zahavi maintains, I would contend that this is precisely what Dennett is referring to when he describes his own "Husserlian heritage."<sup>796</sup>

For instance, in employing a type of epoché himself, Dennett, like Husserl before him, is not suggesting a fundamental split between consciousness and reality, only that we suspend our judgment(s) or unquestioned acceptance of the one in order to better understand the other. Although they undoubtedly disagree as to which we should accept and which we should withhold judgment, they both seem to agree that the proposed methodology is sound. Zahavi's own reading of

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<sup>795</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>796</sup> Ibid., 27.



both Dennett and Husserl, as evidenced in the above passages, would seem to bear this out.

This fact notwithstanding, Zahavi then proceeds to “correct” another of Dennett’s supposed misinterpretations: the introspective nature of traditional phenomenology. Zahavi writes: “Phenomenology is certainly interested in the phenomena and in their conditions of possibility, but phenomenologists would typically argue that it would be a metaphysical fallacy to locate the phenomenal realm within the mind, and to suggest that the way to access and describe it is by turning the gaze inwards (*introspectio*).”<sup>797</sup> While Zahavi subsequently provides several categorical denials of phenomenological introspection previously put forth by Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger, and others, this critique seems to hinge almost entirely on Dennett’s supposed misunderstanding of the aforementioned epoché. If it were true, as Zahavi maintains, that Dennett believed both in the totality of Husserlian epoché, and likewise in the totality of his own, then introspection would indeed seem the only avenue left open to the autophenomenologist to gain access to the experiences themselves. Similarly, third-person observation would seem the only means by which the heterophenomenologist could ever hope to study consciousness in any serious, scientific way. Zahavi cites the notions of *embodied consciousness* in Merleau-Ponty and the *Dasein* of Heidegger in support of this point.<sup>798</sup>

However, as has already been demonstrated, neither Husserl nor Dennett are themselves arguing for such an extreme understanding of the

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<sup>797</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>798</sup> Ibid., 27-30.

phenomenological reduction. Consequently, it would seem that introspection can remain a tool in the heterophenomenologist's handbag, and need not simply exist as an albatross around the autophenomenologist's neck, as Zahavi claims and Dennett implies. This point can be made more plain by the following exchange:

Contrary to what Dennett is suggesting, a science of consciousness should draw on both the first-,second- and the third-person point of view, just like all of us do when we engage in the everyday practice of understanding ourselves and others. If the only data the heterophenomenologists are allowed to rely on are the data that are available from the outside, they will not be permitted to draw implicitly on their own first-person understanding of consciousness when they are to interpret and understand the interviewed subject's verbal reports. *In fact, and needless to point out, the heterophenomenologists have no direct first-personal access to their own consciousness, according to Dennett.*<sup>799</sup>

Dennett, however, maintains that

It has always been good practice for scientists to put themselves in their own experimental apparatus as informal subjects, to confirm their hunches about what it feels like, and to check for any overlooked or underestimated features of the circumstances that could interfere with their interpretations of their experiments. But scientists have always recognized the need to confirm the insights they have gained from introspection by conducting properly controlled experiments with naive subjects. *As long as this obligation is met, whatever insights one may garner from 'first-person' investigations fall happily into place in 'third-person' heterophenomenology.*<sup>800</sup>

Thus, Zahavi's issues with Dennett's charge of phenomenological introspection seem more semantic than substantial, as both he and Dennett appear to acknowledge its value and use in their respective methodologies. As a result, I would argue that it is not Dennett's reading of Husserl that is mistaken, but instead Zahavi's reading of Dennett that is most in need of revision.

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<sup>799</sup> Ibid., 39, emphasis mine.

<sup>800</sup> Dennett, "Who's on First?" 23, emphasis mine.

Next, let us address the issues of observer neutrality and the supposed biases of the scientific method. In “The Fantasy of Third-Person Science: Phenomenology, Ontology and Evidence,” Shannon Vallor argues that “a coherent scientific method cannot possibly elide first-person phenomenology but must be rooted in it.”<sup>801</sup> In effect, she claims that the proposed neutrality of the observer within the heterophenomenological model is, at once, too broad (encompassing the experiences themselves) and too narrow (by not automatically accepting a subject’s own claims about her experiences as authoritative) to warrant its supposed necessity or continued presence. In addition to repeatedly accusing Dennett of having conflated a subject’s claims about “what is going on in her” and “what it is like to be her,”<sup>802</sup> Vallor, like Zahavi, also charges him with having fundamentally misunderstood Husserl, noting that

One of the most important of Husserl’s insights was his recognition of the need to maintain a sharp distinction between...the real (in German, *reell*) contents of the subject’s conscious experience considered from the phenomenological standpoint (Husserl 1913, 213) vs. the real (in German, *reale*) contents of her experience taken as the factual psychological state of an empirical subject.<sup>803</sup>

This, Vallor seems to think, represents a fundamental flaw in Dennett’s logic. By not recognizing the difference between the *reell* and the *reale*, she claims that Dennett has missed the subtlety of Husserl’s arguments and thus failed to grasp the utter impossibility of neutrality, observer or otherwise, and thus the inherent biases contained within the scientific method.

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<sup>801</sup> Shannon Vallor, “The Fantasy of Third-Person Science: Phenomenology, Ontology and Evidence,” *Phenom Cogn Sci* 8 (2009): 2.

<sup>802</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>803</sup> *Ibid.*

I find this a rather curious conclusion, especially when one is reminded of the great pains undertaken by Dennett in the elaboration of his intentional stance hypothesis to distinguish between “mild realism” and so-called “industrial-strength realism.” It seems not that Dennett has missed the subtlety of Husserl’s argument, but rather that, in acceptance of his “Husserlian heritage,” he is one of the few to truly understand its implications. It is precisely because *pure neutrality is impossible* that the intentional stance must be adopted. Dennett maintains that it is the abstract predictive power of a thing, and not its concrete physical existence that is of utmost importance. The successful scientific employment of centers of gravity, lines of latitude, the archetypal human body, and other only mildly real notions and abstractions would seem to bear this out. In other words, it is only by maintaining a neutral attitude regarding a subject’s actual experiences that Dennett and other heterophenomenologists may successfully put aside the question of their concrete existence and instead consider the implications of those experiences as expressed in the subject’s articulated beliefs about them.

Here again, the objection to Dennett’s proposed methodology seems to be more semantic than substantive. For instance, Vallor’s primary objection to Dennett’s version of the epoché seems to center around his use of the word “fictions” to describe the various phenomenological states of subjects, their individual expressions and beliefs regarding those experiences notwithstanding. “While Dennett is correct to resist the view that such states constitute a set of ‘further facts’ about consciousness, I claim that his conclusion that we should therefore relegate them (at least provisionally) to the status of fictions is deeply

misguided.”<sup>804</sup> However, she then goes on to claim that, “phenomenological states are neither ‘facts’ nor ‘fictions,’ but the sole evidential wellspring for both.”<sup>805</sup> Perhaps “fictions” is indeed too strong or, at the very least too loaded, a word to use in service of this argument, but in proclaiming that “phenomenological states are neither facts nor fictions,” it would seem that Vallor is committing herself to the same sort of observer neutrality and intentionalism for which she had previously chastised Dennett.

A similar argument can be found in Alva Noë’s “Is the Visual World a Grand Illusion?” In it, he states: “Dennett then points out, convincingly, that our experience is not like a snapshot – there’s a blind spot, bad parafoveal vision, etc. – and he concludes that we are victims of an illusion about the character of our own consciousness.”<sup>806</sup> Noë, however, disagrees with Dennett’s piecemeal interpretation and instead offers his own more cumulative approach to consciousness, somewhat analogous to the various pieces of a puzzle coming together (via a potentially infinite number of individual perceptions) to form a coherent and continuous consciousness. This is to say that Noë is challenging Dennett’s assertion that “when we claim to be just using our powers of inner observation, we are always actually engaging in a sort of impromptu theorizing – and we are remarkably gullible theorizers, precisely because there is so little to ‘observe’ and so much to pontificate about without fear of contradiction.”<sup>807</sup>

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<sup>804</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>805</sup> Ibid.

<sup>806</sup> Alva Noë, “Is the Visual World a Grand Illusion?” *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 9 (2002):

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<sup>807</sup> Dennett, *Consciousness Explained*, 67-68.

However, it seems to me that Noë's arguments hinge almost entirely upon our individual ability to accurately perceive our inability to accurately perceive! In other words, Noë's account desires to preserve our own preferential position and authority with respect to our own consciousness, but at the same time admits that such a position can only be maintained by constant repositioning and revision. "We don't take ourselves to experience all environmental detail in consciousness all at once. Rather, we take ourselves to be situated in an environment to have access to environmental detail as needed by turns of the eyes and head, and repositioning of the body."<sup>808</sup> Perhaps Noë is right that Dennett's view presumes too little about our own abilities, but it is almost certainly true that Noë's presumes too much. After all, Dennett's point is that, for the most part, we are completely unaware of the natural deficiencies within our own perceptual fields and abilities. If this were not the case, then Noë's arguments would certainly seem a reasonable means of self-policing and correction. But as it stands, even this solution implies the same sort of impromptu theorizing that Noë is ostensibly arguing against in the first place.

Perhaps these arguments can be effectively summed up by the following exchange. In "The Critique of Pure Phenomenology," Noë writes:

The trouble with pure phenomenology, then, is not that it is reflective, or introspective, or focused on experience and the subjective, or even that it relies on first-person warrant (whatever exactly that is supposed to be). The trouble, rather, is that pure phenomenology conceives of its subject matter as autonomous. It is this epistemic isolation of phenomenology, more than anything else, that threatens to undermine its claim to be a serious kind of intellectual pursuit. At best, it seems, it is the fantasy of such a pursuit.<sup>809</sup>

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<sup>808</sup> Noë, "Is the Visual World a Grand Illusion?" 8.

<sup>809</sup> Alva Noë, "The Critique of Pure Phenomenology," *Phenom Cogn Sci* 6 (2007): 232.

On this point, I think Dennett would agree:

The problem with autophenomenology is not that it is (always, or typically) *victim* to illusion and distortion but that it is (always) *vulnerable* to illusion and distortion. That is why it must be quarantined behind brackets. As Roy says, “the problem is not that autophenomenology takes consciousness to be a purely passive form of observation, but that it fails to appreciate its real limits.” But he also says: “Heterophenomenology is phenomenology only inasmuch as it is a closet autophenomenology.” Well, yes, and I am asking autophenomenologists to come out of the closet and become an accredited part of the scientific enterprise. You don’t have to abandon anything of value, since the widespread conviction that you have to defend the citadel of the first-person is simply a mistake. And after all, as autophenomenologists you have all along had the burden of making your soliloquies comprehensible to an audience aside from yourself.<sup>810</sup>

In other words, Dennett is not suggesting that the heterophenomenological bridge he hopes to build between phenomenology and the natural sciences consist of one-way traffic only, nor be effectively burned once those on the philosophical side have successfully journeyed across to the scientific. As we noted earlier, “Heterophenomenology is the beginning of a science of consciousness, not the end. It is the organization of the data, a catalogue of what must be explained, not itself an explanation or a theory.”<sup>811</sup> As such, the role of phenomenology has not been diminished or dismissed by this new enterprise, as so many have claimed, but has instead been communicated and connected to a much wider scientific community from which both may ultimately benefit.

Perhaps an example would prove useful as both a conclusion and as a means of recognizing Dennett’s importance as the interdisciplinary arbiter that he is. Merleau-Ponty once said, “Everything that I know about the world, even through science, I know from a perspective that is my own or from an experience

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<sup>810</sup> Dennett, “Heterophenomenology Reconsidered,” 264.

<sup>811</sup> Dennett, “Who’s on First?” 27.

of the world without which such scientific symbols would be meaningless. The entire universe of science is constructed upon the living world, and if we wish to think science rigorously, to appreciate its sense and its scope, we must first awaken that experience of the world of which science is the second-order expression.”<sup>812</sup> Thus, the task of the phenomenologist.

Although a number in the scientific community might understandably take umbrage at Merleau-Ponty’s characterization of their discipline as somehow derivative, Albert Einstein’s words remind us that there is a certain amount of truth to them. “It would not be difficult to come to an agreement as to what we understand by science. Science is the century-old endeavor to bring together by means of systematic thought the perceptible phenomena of this world into as thoroughgoing an association as possible. To put it boldly, it is the attempt at the posterior reconstruction of existence by the process of conceptualization.”<sup>813</sup> This, the work of the scientist. And thanks to Dennett, the two need no longer view one another as either alien or antagonist. Instead, a resuscitated heterophenomenology makes possible the sharing of that experience, and the collaboration of that endeavor, in a way that is palatable and profitable to both enterprises, as well as to the larger world of which they are mutually and inseparably a part.

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<sup>812</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, lxxii.

<sup>813</sup> Albert Einstein, *Ideas and Opinions* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1954), 44.



## Alternatives to Fanon: The Search for a Less Violent, More Cosmopolitan Approach to Decolonization<sup>814</sup>

### Introduction

Frantz Fanon's 1961 *The Wretched of the Earth* is undoubtedly one of the most prominent and potent examples of anti-colonial scholarship to emerge from the tumultuous aftermath of World War II. In it, he describes the ways in which imperialism inevitably dehumanizes its victims, destabilizes their society, and devalues/destroys their culture, all the while managing to offer a two-pronged solution to the problem which jointly serves to bookend his treatise. In the opening chapter, Fanon makes the case for the necessity of retributive violence in the process of decolonization, while in the concluding chapter, he calls for a new form of humanism in which the culture and traditions of imperialist Europe are to be excluded in favor of more "universal" values. Although I applaud much of what rests between these two sections, I cannot help but be troubled by what is contained within them. In what follows, I will endeavor to elaborate my misgivings about these two proposals, as well as to introduce the reader to two

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<sup>814</sup> In the preceding essay, I endeavored to defend Dennett's much maligned efforts to bridge the ideological (and methodological) gap between phenomenology and cognitive science in order to more forcefully ground the former and to exponentially expand the horizons of the latter, hopefully to the benefit of both. My intentions in this section are quite similar. While I acknowledge the validity of many of Fanon's postcolonial criticisms, I believe that in advocating the complete abandonment of Enlightenment culture as little more than the ideology of the oppressors, Fanon, like so many Europeans with whom he was justifiably perturbed, risks misunderstanding the purpose and promise of the entire intellectual tradition. As an aside (which I also stated in my introduction), I am well aware of the tendency to confuse and/or conflate postmodernism and post-colonialism. However, my interest in them both (as well as with phenomenology, for that matter) is based largely upon their collective inclination to deride, dismiss, or at the very least obscure the principles of the Enlightenment and/or the Scientific Revolution, the former from within and the latter largely from without. Therefore, I will attempt to confine my treatment of them to this predisposition alone (and not make the all-too-common error of considering them as synonyms for the same phenomenon). This will, of course, be in keeping with the spirit of the New Atheists' various attacks on religion, which are themselves largely underwritten by an affirmation in the existence of an objective, observable reality governed by natural laws, a commitment to Enlightenment ideals (such as empiricism, rationality, equality, freedom, secularism, self-determination, tolerance, etc.), as well as to the principles established and advances wrought by utilization of the scientific method.

individuals who I believe offer viable alternatives to Fanon's ideology and/or approach: C.L.R. James and Kwame Anthony Appiah. Although I title the first section "The Problems," I am hesitant to call its successor "The Solution(s)." That would be unfair to Fanon (for much of what he has to say is true and of unquestionable value) as well as to the theorists I offer in his stead (for, as we shall see, their ideas and suggestions are not without challenges and complications of their own). My aim, then, is not to solve the "problem" of Fanon, but simply to contribute to the conversation that already surrounds him and the post-colonial world(s) of which he was a part.

### The Problems: Concerning Violence

In the opening chapter of *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon makes the following assertion: "whatever may be the headings used or the new formulas introduced, decolonization is always a violent phenomenon."<sup>815</sup> Historically speaking, it is difficult to disagree with his assessment: from our own revolution against the British all those centuries ago to the many recent and current independence struggles of the African and Asian continents, decolonization *has always been* a violent phenomenon. However, in acknowledging this fact, we must not allow ourselves to make the ideological leap from past truth (or even present circumstance) to future inevitability. Unfortunately, this is precisely what Fanon seems to do: "colonialism is not a thinking machine, nor a body endowed with reasoning faculties. It is violence in its natural state, and it will only yield when confronted with greater violence."<sup>816</sup> In his preface to the work, Jean-Paul Sartre

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<sup>815</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 35.

<sup>816</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

echoes the same sentiment: “this irrepressible violence is neither sound and fury, nor the resurrection of savage instincts, nor even the effect of resentment: it is man recreating himself. I think we understood this truth at one time, but we have forgotten it – that no gentleness can efface the marks of violence; only violence itself can destroy them.”<sup>817</sup> In both instances, I believe it is possible to agree with the historicity of Fanon and Sartre’s statements, all the while challenging the abject fatalism of their collective conclusion(s). In this section of the essay, I shall attempt to do so.

Sartre and Fanon’s discussion of the three phases of colonial violence is especially useful towards achieving this end. The first phase consists of violence done against the native at the hands of the settler. The second phase of this process consists of this violence being absorbed and appropriated by the native, who then often redirects it against himself as well as his own people. The final stage is the self-corrective phase when native violence is then finally, perhaps righteously, revisited upon the settler. Sartre describes this final phase as a time when “the same violence is thrown back upon us as when our reflection comes forward to meet us when we go toward a mirror.”<sup>818</sup> Not only is this statement visually effusive; it is also psychologically informative as well. According to Sartre, blaming the native for his violent reaction to the violence visited upon him would be akin to blaming the mirror for showing us the unpleasantness of our own appearance. In both instances, Sartre would argue, the fault lies with us and responsibility must be accepted as such. However, this admission/realization in no way implies either the efficacy or the necessity of violence to which both Sartre and Fanon seemed committed.

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<sup>817</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, in Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*, 21.

<sup>818</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

In realizing that violence against the settler may indeed be justified, neither he nor the native poised to inflict it would be well served in allowing this reckoning to proceed unchallenged or unconsidered. For, rather than a three-phased process nearing its conclusion, what we, in fact, find is a perpetual cycle of violence and self-destruction from which none can ever hope to escape. Our own American Revolution provides perhaps the best example of this unfortunate reality.

Fanon argues that “the immobility to which the native is condemned can only be called in question if the native decides to put an end to the history of colonization – the history of pillage – and to bring into existence the history of the nation – the history of decolonization.”<sup>819</sup> This would certainly seem to have been the impetus for our own revolution against the might of British colonials. Our Founding Fathers may be considered somewhat akin both to Fanon’s notion of native nationalists and the “know-all, smart, wily intellectuals” of colonial Africa.<sup>820</sup> However, whether acting as true patriots or mere opportunists, it was they who initially championed compromise... so long as they believed it possible and profitable. Once disillusioned with its potential for success, it was they who most vociferously incited the masses to violence, all in the name of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Their goal thus achieved, they did not then (as promised) seek either justice for the fallen or happiness for the masses, but rather only retributions and reparations for themselves. For many Americans to this day, the promises of the Declaration and Constitution remain little more than a dream deferred, left to wither on the malnourished vine of democracy.

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<sup>819</sup> Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 51.

<sup>820</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

Even worse, the United States has not become the enemy of colonialism we intended, but rather an imperialist power itself. Our fraternal bonds, once forged in the fires of revolution, have since cooled at home, and now rage only in the vast expanses beyond our borders. It is only when confronted with the notion of “other” that we manage to resurrect our repressed nationalism and redirect our individual hostilities toward mutual enemies and/or collective opportunities abroad. Once the victims of abuse, we have since become the abusers, a cycle all too familiar to those who have experienced it on a personal (i.e. domestic) level. Perhaps, as a nation, we will now share in the fate of our once oppressors, and perhaps that violent destiny is, in a way, justified and appropriate. However, I would seek to spare not only myself and my kinsmen from such horrid fortune, but also those who would visit it upon us. Perhaps Sartre and Fanon were right; perhaps violence is simply man recreating himself. But so long as he does so with the tools and in the image of his oppressor, he should not be surprised to find he does not like the reflection staring so sadly and so contemptuously back at him.

#### A New Humanism?

A similar problem with Fanon’s approach can be found in the final sentiments of his conclusion to *The Wretched of the Earth*, in which he argues that “if we wish to reply to the expectations of the people of Europe, it is no good sending them back a reflection, even an ideal reflection, of their society and their thought with which from time to time they feel immeasurably sickened. For Europe, for ourselves, and for humanity, comrades, we must turn over a new leaf, we must work out new concepts, and try to set afoot a new

man.”<sup>821</sup> Leaving aside, for the moment, that this statement directly contradicts both Sartre’s and Fanon’s earlier rationale for the use of retributive violence, one could also argue that this turning over of a new leaf is, in fact, merely a gilding or repurposing of the old.

Although perhaps difficult to discern in the current context, the reasons for this can be found just two pages earlier in the text, in which Fanon admits “all the elements of a solution to the great problems of humanity have, at different times, existed in European thought. But the action of European men has not carried out the mission which fell to them, and which consisted of bringing their whole weight violently to bear upon these elements, of modifying their arrangement and their nature, of changing them and finally of bringing the problem of mankind to an infinitely higher plane.”<sup>822</sup> Thus, it appears that, while Fanon does find at least occasional merit in the history of European thought, he is less convinced of its past and present application on the world stage. And once again, it is hard to argue with his assessment: after all, “Enlightened” Europe has certainly failed to make good on most of its promises and proclamations regarding the self-evident equality and universal brotherhood of all men. Unfortunately, Fanon allows his disappointment with past action to overshadow his (admittedly begrudging) appreciation of abiding ideal.

To illustrate this point, let us turn our attention again to the history of the post-colonial United States. In the previous section, I argued that the United States’ own subsequent imperialism has been a direct result of its willingness to appropriate Sartre and Fanon’s notion of retributive violence. If you’ll recall, in his introduction to *The*

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<sup>821</sup> Ibid., 316.

<sup>822</sup> Ibid., 314.

*Wretched of the Earth*, Sartre likened this process of anti-colonial violence to that of a reflection being cast in a mirror, and thus implied that we (the colonizers) mustn't blame the mirror for showing us the distastefulness of our own reflection but should instead recognize that the responsibility for that image actually lies with us. If this is, in fact, the case, it seems strange that Fanon would categorically reject the opportunity to demonstrate something quite similar with regards to the failed application of European philosophical and cultural ideals. Unfortunately, this is precisely what he does.

In recounting his own understanding of American history, Fanon claims that “two centuries ago, a former European colony decided to catch up with Europe. It succeeded so well that the United States of America became a monster, in which the taints, the sickness, and the inhumanity of Europe have grown to appalling dimensions.”<sup>823</sup> Paradoxically, Fanon attributes this not to the former colonies' willingness to appropriate and reflect the violence of their oppressors, but rather upon their desire to “catch up” and presumably emulate the ideals and institutions of Europe. I would argue that this is where Sartre's and Fanon's mirror metaphor shatters and their arguments become, consequently, unsustainable.

For if Europe's great crime has been, as Fanon claims, that it has failed to carry out the mission which fell to it (i.e. to disseminate Enlightenment ideals throughout the world), then how could the United States, or any former colony for that matter, be guilty of unwisely appropriating its tenets? In other words, if Europeans failed to understand, appreciate, *and export* the “sometimes prodigious theses” that they created, and instead carried with them to their colonies only the desire for power, an appetite for material gain, and a fanatical will to sweep aside or oppress any who would stand in their way,

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<sup>823</sup> Ibid., 313.

then these would have been the only European notions that would have been readily available for the colonists to imitate or adopt.<sup>824</sup> That the majority have historically been so obtusely oppressive is made all the more tragic by Fanon's inability to realize this irony and thus to perpetuate and endorse its continued existence.

In adopting violence as the primary, if not exclusive, means of overthrowing colonial power, Sartre and Fanon have committed themselves and those who would follow them to the cycle of abuse that continues to play itself out in the United States and elsewhere in the post-colonial world. Furthermore, in summarily rejecting the tenets of European (i.e. Western) culture, Fanon is not, as he believes, advocating for a new leaf of humanism, but is instead committing himself to the same tired foliage (and unfortunate fate) of the colonizers from which he most fervently wishes to escape. When he says "comrades, let us not pay tribute to Europe by creating states, institutions, and societies which draw their inspiration from her. Humanity is waiting for something from us other than such an imitation, which would be almost an obscene caricature," I fear that Fanon misses the point entirely.<sup>825</sup> After all, it is not the ideas and ideals of Europe that have failed, but rather its actions.<sup>826</sup> And to mirror the latter, whilst denying the former, is to invite this vicious cycle to continue all but unabated. It is, to employ an old expression, not that Fanon has thrown the baby out with the bathwater; it is, in fact, that he has done just the opposite.

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<sup>824</sup> Ibid., 315.

<sup>825</sup> Ibid.

<sup>826</sup> Thus, the obscene caricature of which Fanon speaks already exists, embodied in the unenlightened history of European colonialism. But imitating Europe's actional failures is simply not the same as embracing its (heretofore unexported) ideals.



## The Alternatives:

### C.L.R. James and the Argument for Cross-Cultural Communication

1938 was a pivotal year in the life and career of C.L.R. James. Not only did it include an extended lecture tour of the segregated United States, but it also resulted in the publication of two of his most influential discourses on the history of global black resistance. The first, *A History of Negro Revolt* (later retitled *A History of Pan-African Revolt*), was intended not only as a “stinging indictment of colonialism,” but also as an examination of “all sorts of problems – like the struggles of women, market women in Africa and so on,” in addition to “historical things like the Haitian Revolution and the blacks in the American Civil War.”<sup>827</sup> The second, *The Black Jacobins*, is a closer look at one of those aforementioned events, the San Domingo Slave Revolt (1791-1803), which, according to James, is the only successful slave revolt in history. While it focuses largely on the exploits of a single man, Toussaint L’Ouverture, former slave and subsequent leader of the Haitian Revolution, James is quick to remind us that “great men make history, but only such history as it is possible for them to make. Their freedom of achievement is limited by the necessities of their environment. To portray the limits of those necessities and the realisation, complete or partial, of all possibilities, that is the true business of the historian.”<sup>828</sup> And, as we shall see, that is precisely what James provides us. But like L’Ouverture, James, too, was a product of his environment, and so to understand his role in history, one must first endeavor to situate him within it.

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<sup>827</sup> Robin D.G. Kelley, introduction to C.L.R. James’ *A History of Pan-African Revolt* (Chicago: PM Press, 2012), 15.

<sup>828</sup> C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), x.

Cyril Lionel Robert James was born in Trinidad in 1901, “one year after the epochal Pan-African Conference held in London had bequeathed the term ‘pan-Africanism’ to the worldwide struggle of black peoples.”<sup>829</sup> That his life would become so closely intertwined with Pan-African movement thus seems almost preordained. He was raised “solidly middle class – at least in terms of cultural capital if not actual money. He read Thackeray and Shakespeare with enthusiasm, and due to his mother’s influence he became an inveterate reader of history, literature, and to a lesser degree politics.”<sup>830</sup> Following the completion of an instructional certificate program at Queen’s Royal College in 1918, James accepted a teaching position at his alma mater and began what could have been a very comfortable and comparatively normal life.

But despite his intellectual leanings (or perhaps because of them), James remained wary of becoming disconnected from the rhythms of everyday life and the various pulses of Trinidadian popular culture. In addition to his interests in history, literature and politics, James was also fascinated by jazz and calypso, and particularly with the game of cricket. It was, in fact, the latter, that ultimately led him from his Caribbean home to the stony shores of England in 1932. Hired to assist in the writing of a book on cricket and English society, James relocated to Lancashire, where he moonlighted as a cricket correspondent for the *Manchester Guardian*. This work served to connect him with the English masses, and as a result of his discussions with local workers in both Lancashire and London, James became quite interested in Marxism (particularly Trotskyism) and the struggles of the Depression-era proletariat. “Thus it was as a budding Trotskyist and

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<sup>829</sup> Tony Martin, “C. L. R. James and the Race/Class Question,” *Race & Class* 14:2 (1972): 184.

<sup>830</sup> Robin D.G. Kelley, in C.L.R. James, *A History of Pan-African Revolt*, 3.

supporter of the Independent Labour Party that James entered London's hotbed of black anti-colonial and Pan-Africanist politics."<sup>831</sup>

Not coincidentally, this was also the time during which James met, and in some cases mentored, many of the men who were to eventually lead independence movements of their own. "First among these was George Padmore, the Trinidadian who, in 1928, became head of the Negro Bureau of the Red International of Labour Unions (Profintern), whose headquarters were in Moscow."<sup>832</sup> Other people of note within James' newly minted circle of friends include Kwame Nkrumah, who would later play a pivotal role in the fight for Ghanaian independence, and Jomo Kenyatta, who would later serve as both the first Prime Minister and first President of Kenya. It is, therefore, also no coincidence that these men (Nkrumah and Kenyatta in particular) and the varying success of their respective movements were to occupy a significant portion of the new epilogue to James' 1969 reissuing of *A History of Negro (now Pan-African) Revolt*. But before we examine James' analysis of these two men and their methodologically opposed paths to independence, some attention must first be paid to James' own understanding of Pan-Africanism and the way(s) in which it might realistically be achieved.

According to Kenan Malik, "The problem, for James, lay not in the ideals of the Enlightenment but in their distortion, in the way in which they had been turned by Europeans into tribal values, for their benefit and for the enslavement of the rest of the world. James thought of himself not as crafting an alternative to Enlightenment values

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<sup>831</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>832</sup> Tony Martin, "C. L. R. James and the Race/Class Question," 185.

but as reclaiming them for all of humanity.”<sup>833</sup> This stands in stark contrast to the more separatist ideology of Fanon, who argued that the miscarriage of justice perpetrated by the exponents of Enlightenment culture had rendered that society and its values inappropriate for adoption by the “Other” peoples of the world. But rather than viewing them as the tools and trappings of the oppressor, James read in the works of Thackeray and Shakespeare the same critique of European hypocrisy and the same cries for freedom, equality, and constancy that Fanon (and others) would later echo. Perhaps an example or two would prove useful in illustrating this point.

When discussing Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, James once remarked “for me, the play is the thing, wherein you will catch the conscience, not of the King, but of the play, particularly of the playwright.”<sup>834</sup> Whereas the majority of academic criticism has focused on the play’s dramatization of such topics as the spiritual value of human suffering, the bonds and burdens of kinship, and even the essence of human nature itself, James argues that *King Lear* is, first and foremost, “a critique of Elizabethan society, of the society that was and of the society that was coming into being. But Shakespeare didn’t merely criticize. He put somebody there. He put Edgar, today one of the most important of Shakespeare’s characters, and he gave him the training and the discipline, and Edgar himself tells us how fitted he was to take charge of a country that was in ruins and would be in difficulties for some time to come.”<sup>835</sup> What, one might ask, makes Edgar so uniquely qualified to assume the mantle of leadership following Lear’s and

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<sup>833</sup> Kenan Malik, “C.L.R. James, Frantz Fanon and the Meaning of Liberation.” *Pandaemonium*, 16 April 2012, accessed 10 April 2015, <https://kenanmalik.wordpress.com/2012/04/16/clr-james-frantz-fanon-and-the-meaning-of-liberation/>.

<sup>834</sup> C.L.R. James, *You Don’t Play with Revolution*, ed. David Austin (Oakland: AK Press, 2009), 71.

<sup>835</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

Cordelia's demise? After all, as son and heir to the Earl of Gloucester, he is, by all rights, just another aristocrat, and thus ostensibly no different from the many other highborn claimants to Lear's throne. But that is only part of Edgar's story.

The blameless victim of his illegitimate half-brother Edmund's slanderous schemes to usurp his birthright, Edgar is, in due course, disinherited, banished from his father's home, declared an outlaw, and made to wander the countryside as an agricultural vagrant. In order to disguise his true identity and thus evade capture, Edgar is forced to adopt the persona of "Poor Tom," a crazed beggar whose rages against society in many ways mirror those of the King. But whereas the King (and the rest of the aristocracy) only have cause to mourn for the noble ills of high society, Edgar now understands the situation from the point of view of the masses as well. When he encounters Lear and his father upon the heath, he is asked to identify himself. Witness his reply:

Poor Tom; that eats the swimming frog, the toad,  
the tadpole, the wall-newt and the water; that in  
the fury of his heart, when the foul fiend rages,  
eats cow-dung for sallets; swallows the old rat and  
the ditch-dog; drinks the green mantle of the  
standing pool; who is whipped from tithing to  
tithing, and stock-punished, and imprisoned; who  
hath had three suits to his back, six shirts to his  
body, horse to ride, and weapon to wear;  
But mice and rats, and such small deer,  
Have been Tom's food for seven long year.  
Beware my follower. Peace, Smulkin; peace, thou fiend!  
(Shakespeare's *King Lear* 3.4. 120-131)<sup>836</sup>

Thus, in a single passage, Shakespeare has identified precisely why it is this man who is most qualified to lead his people into a new era of peace and prosperity for all. For though afforded the education and charmed life of the upper echelons of society for most

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<sup>836</sup> William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, The Complete Works of William Shakespeare, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1993, accessed 10 April 2015, <http://shakespeare.mit.edu/lear/index.html>.

of his young life, Edgar has also been made to experience the hardships of the common man and so to understand both the hypocrisies and shortcomings of that high-minded ideology. The result is a man uniquely positioned to understand his world from the perspective of both its rulers and its people. And according to James, it is only such a man who can break the cycle of corruption and abuse that occurs when the will of the masses is not tempered by the wisdom of its culture. “That is the play, as I want you to think of it, as I have seen it. The rest is now up to you.”<sup>837</sup> Of course, a literary example alone would hardly seem sufficient to confirm James’ belief in the universal value and real-world applicability of Enlightenment ideals. For that, we must turn our attention to another society in transition, and the “Poor Tom” that emerged from its chaos to usher in a new era for all mankind.

Toussaint L’Ouverture was born a slave on the island of San Domingo (modern day Haiti) sometime in the mid-1740s. It was to this lowly existence that he was relegated for the first four and a half decades of his life. But by the summer of 1791 (when he joined the budding rebellion), “he was forty-six, first his master’s coachman and afterward, owing to his intelligence, placed in charge of the livestock on the estate, a post usually held by a white man. He had a smattering of education, but he could not write correct French, and usually spoke Creole i.e. the local French patois.”<sup>838</sup> That smattering, however, seems to have been rather broad, and appears to have encompassed such historical figures as Epictetus (the Stoic philosopher who, like L’Ouverture, had once been a slave), Machiavelli, and Guillaume Thomas Raynal (a French belletrist and

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<sup>837</sup> James, *You Don’t Play with Revolution*, 87.

<sup>838</sup> James, *A History of Pan-African Revolt*, 41.

contemporary of L'Ouverture, whose writings often championed the abolition of slavery).<sup>839</sup>

Even more importantly, L'Ouverture's own correspondence demonstrates more than a passing familiarity with the events of the French Revolution (1789-1799). In fact, it was this uprising that provided L'Ouverture and his insurgent band of brothers with not only the political opportunity but also the justifying ideology for their freedom. As James recounts "during the revolutionary period the blacks fought under the slogans of liberty and equality. They embraced the revolutionary doctrine, they thought in republican terms. The result was that these slaves, lacking education, half-savage, and degraded in their slavery as only centuries of slavery can degrade, achieved a liberality in social aspiration and an elevation of political thought equivalent to anything similar that took place in France."<sup>840</sup>

When L'Ouverture and his army demonstrated similar physical prowess in the field (winning numerous battles against not only the French, but the British and Spanish as well, whose subsequent participation in the struggle was intended primarily to substitute their authority in place of the French), the nations of Europe eventually had no choice but to acknowledge the power of their presence and to comply with the principles of freedom and self-determination that they themselves had first dictated. That they did so only reluctantly and with ulterior motives in tow is revealed by L'Ouverture's own letters. After forming a tenuous alliance with the French republican government in 1794, it soon became apparent to L'Ouverture and his advisors that what the French intended

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<sup>839</sup> See Madison Smartt Bell's *Toussaint L'Ouverture: A Biography* (New York: Pantheon, 2007), 61, and J. R. Beard's *Toussaint L'Ouverture: A Biography and Autobiography* (Boston: James Redpath Publisher, 1863) 34-41. Out of Print. Available from *Documenting the American South*, 2001, accessed 9 April 2015, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/beard63/beard63.html>.

<sup>840</sup> James, *A History of Pan-African Revolt*, 47.

was not a newly collaborative effort between equals but instead a coercive attempt to subvert their rebellion and restore its members to their former condition as slaves. But what is most interesting about this unfortunate turn of events is not the betrayal of the French (of both their people and their principles), but the way in which L'Ouverture's reply forces them to confront the limitations of their ideology and the consequent hypocrisy of their actions. Witness his reply:

Do they think that men who have been able to enjoy the blessing of liberty will calmly see it snatched away? They supported their chains only so long as they did not know any condition of life more happy than that of slavery. But today when they have left it, if they had a thousand lives they would sacrifice them all rather than be forced into slavery again. But no, the same hand which has broken our chains will not enslave us anew. France will not revoke her principles, she will not withdraw from us the greatest of her benefits. She will protect us from all our enemies; she will not permit her sublime morality to be perverted, those principles which do her most honor to be destroyed, her Decree of the 16<sup>th</sup> Pluviose which so honors humanity to be revoked. *But if, to re-establish slavery in San Domingo, this was done, then I declare to you it would be to attempt the impossible; we have known how to face dangers to obtain our liberty, we shall know how to brave death to maintain it.*<sup>841</sup>

By being familiar with both the wisdom of his culture and the suffering of its masses, L'Ouverture was able to recognize their ideological incompatibility and thus to appropriate the power of the two in order to improve the quality of the whole. That their movement and its precepts were destined to spread beyond their shores seems evidence of this truth. (Within a matter of years following Haitian independence, the Atlantic slave trade was abolished; within decades, the peculiar institution itself was destroyed.) As James later recounted, "They had at their disposal the French language in which to express themselves, and still more important, they had the ideas of the French Revolution by which to develop themselves. In other words, that was a perfect situation and they

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<sup>841</sup> Ibid., 49, emphasis L'Ouverture's.



developed it perfectly.”<sup>842</sup> This is certainly a far cry from Fanon’s assessment of French language and culture and its effects on the psyche of the oppressed. “Every colonized people – in other words, every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality – finds itself face to face with the language of the civilizing nation; that is, with the culture of the mother country. The colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country’s cultural standards.”<sup>843</sup> In other words, where Fanon sees only obstacle and obfuscation, James sees occasion and opportunity.

When writing the new epilogue to his 1969 reissuing of *A History of Negro Revolt*, James sought to determine whether or not the lessons of the San Domingo Slave Revolt were being utilized in the various independence struggles then taking place on the African continent. Although he discusses several, we shall examine only two, Ghana and Kenya, because, as James notes, “in the Gold Coast and in Kenya we have the two extremes of the African struggles for independence.”<sup>844</sup> Their respective paths to freedom and divergent post-colonial histories demonstrate both the viability of James’ hypothesis as well as the ways in which it has largely failed to be implemented.

The Gold Coast had been a British colony since the 1870s. Although calls for self-determination, at least in limited form, were occasionally made, it was not until the end of World War II that the independence movement truly garnered widespread attention and unified support. Using the tools of civil disobedience and non-violent resistance (when and where possible), the citizenry of the Gold Coast instituted boycotts, led protest marches, and even called for a national strike. Although the repression of

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<sup>842</sup> James, *You Don’t Play with Revolution*, 54.

<sup>843</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 9.

<sup>844</sup> James, *A History of Pan-African Revolt*, 115.

these activities by the British government did result in intermittent acts of violence (on both sides), the path to independence was primarily paved with the best of intentions and the values by which colonial Britain had largely failed to abide. That someone such as Nkrumah would emerge in 1948 to become the leader of the resistance seemed, at least to James, a most reasonable course of events.

They had been waiting for somebody to lead them and they welcomed Nkrumah as a person to do so. Lawless mob indeed. Within eighteen months Nkrumah was going to call a Ghana Constituent Assembly in Accra, which would be attended by 90,000 people. Within two years these people would carry out a policy of Positive Action in which the life of the whole country would be brought to a standstill with the utmost discipline and order. Within three years they would give Nkrumah a vote of 22,780 out of a possible 23,122. Nkrumah was taken out of jail to be made Leader of Government Business. Then after years of in-fighting he finally achieved the independence of the Gold Coast in 1957.<sup>845</sup>

Kenya's path to independence was quite different. As James laments "nowhere in Africa was there such a struggle as began before 1914 and lasted decade after decade until it culminated in the independence of Kenya nearly fifty years later."<sup>846</sup> Perhaps the height of that struggle came with the Mau Mau Rebellion (1952-56). Initially ignored or dismissed as inconsequential by the British colonial government, it was not until the later part of 1953 that the rebellion was recognized as a true threat to the stability and prosperity of the colony.<sup>847</sup> Convicted of being one of its leaders, Jomo Kenyatta was imprisoned by the British in 1952, where he would remain for almost a decade. The rebellion was effectively suppressed in 1956, with many thousands killed and at least 50,000 revolutionaries rounded up and "detained in special camps to cure them of the mental disease which the British authorities discovered as the cause of their refusal to

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<sup>845</sup> Ibid., 112.

<sup>846</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>847</sup> Hilda Nissimi, "Mau Mau and the Decolonisation of Kenya," *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies* 8:3 (2006): 4-5.

submit.”<sup>848</sup> Unfortunately, their “disease” proved incurable, and, as in Ghana, the will of the people led to the formation of pro-independence political parties, and the ultimate release and elevation of Kenyatta from prisoner to Prime Minister in 1963.

Superficially, these both appear to be success stories in the rather bleak history of anti-colonial struggle. However, the post-independence history of these two nations reveals the less-than-pleasant realities with which they were both still confronted. With the British effectively ousted, the nationalist ties that had once bound these disparate people and cultures together soon began to unravel. Interethnic violence became rampant, and in response, the leaders became increasingly despotic and their governments more intolerant and suppressive of difference and dissent. As James recalls:

The states which the African nationalist leaders inherited were not in any sense African. With the disintegration of the political power of the imperialist states in Africa, and the rise of militancy of the African masses, a certain political pattern took shape. Nationalist political leaders built a following, they or their opponents gained support among the African civil servants who had administered the imperialist state, and the newly independent African state was little more than the old imperialist state only now administered and controlled by black nationalists.<sup>849</sup>

Thus, what happened is exactly what one would expect given the imitation of European actions and not of Enlightenment ideals. Nevertheless, that Ghana was able to achieve its independence largely without the employment of widespread organized violence – armed only with the (quite literally) transcendental tools of civil disobedience and non-violent protest – stands as a testament to the value and viability of James’ notion of cross-cultural communication as well as to the inherent pitfalls and presumptions of Fanon’s more radical methodology. And while Ghana has since managed to recapture its more pluralistic spirit in recent decades, Kenya continues to embrace a more forceful

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<sup>848</sup> James, *A History of Pan-African Revolt*, 115.

<sup>849</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

ideology, still tethered to the notions of strength and separatism. That the former has emerged a more stable, prosperous, and peaceful nation, while the latter continues to descend further into chaos and an unfortunate state of neo-colonialism, should therefore come as no surprise.

### Kwame Anthony Appiah and the Case for Cosmopolitanism

Cosmopolitanism is a rather ancient idea. The term itself has been with us for the better part of two and a half thousand years, but the notion is undoubtedly even older than that, perhaps even as old as civilization itself. When the Greek philosopher Diogenes first claimed to be a *kosmopolitês*, or citizen of the world, “the formulation was meant to be paradoxical, and reflected the general Cynic skepticism toward custom and tradition.... Talk of cosmopolitanism originally signaled, then, a rejection of the conventional view that every civilized person belonged to a community among communities.”<sup>850</sup>

A revolutionary notion, perhaps, but on a more personal level, Diogenes was simply speaking truth. Though of Greek heritage, both biological and cultural, Diogenes was born in the colony of Sinope in what is today northern Turkey. Following the exposure of a financial scandal in which he was personally involved, Diogenes was stripped of his home, his possessions, and most significantly, his citizenship within the polis. Thus, when the exiled Diogenes entered Athens and uttered those fateful words, he was not merely positing a new philosophical theorem; he was also attempting to redefine himself in a new, and now necessary, way. Later infused into (Greek and then Roman) Stoic philosophy, cosmopolitanism managed to survive into the modern age, even

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<sup>850</sup> Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006), xiv.

underwriting “some of the great moral achievements of the Enlightenment, including the 1789 “Declaration of the Rights of Man,” and Immanuel Kant’s work proposing a “league of nations.”<sup>851</sup>

Consequently, when Anthony Appiah first attempted to revive and repurpose the term in 2006, he did so with the understanding that while his task was indeed possible it would be somewhat problematic as well. Like Diogenes’, Appiah’s cosmopolitanism rejects the notion of a “community among communities,” and instead replaces it with a “communities *within* communities” approach. As he states in his introduction, “people are different, the cosmopolitan knows, and there is much to learn from our differences. Because there are so many human possibilities worth exploring, we neither expect nor desire that every person or every society should converge on a single mode of life.”<sup>852</sup> As we have seen, this notion stands in stark contrast to both the European imperialist approach *and* the more stringently exclusivist notions of Fanon. But unlike Diogenes’, Appiah’s form of cosmopolitanism isn’t as inherently skeptical of communities’ differing notions of custom and tradition. He is merely advocating for more active dialogue amongst those communities as a means of achieving a more peaceful coexistence between them. This is, of course, no easy task, and as Appiah himself admits, “there’s a sense in which cosmopolitanism is the name not of the solution but of the challenge.”<sup>853</sup>

Standing in cosmopolitanism’s way are two diametrically opposed ideological camps: the universalists and the cultural relativists. The dangers of the universalist approach should be obvious. When describing the self-assuredness and intolerance that most often accompanies universalist (i.e. fundamentalist) movements, Appiah makes two

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<sup>851</sup> Ibid.

<sup>852</sup> Ibid., xv.

<sup>853</sup> Ibid.

statements that are in many ways reminiscent of the mirror metaphor that both Sartre and Fanon attempted to employ. “You will find some parts of the truth (along with much error) everywhere and the whole truth nowhere. The deepest mistake... is to think that your little shard of mirror can reflect the whole.”<sup>854</sup> The particular problem with universalists, Appiah argues, is that “their mirror is not shattered, it is whole: and we have no shard of it. All of these men want everyone on their side, so we can share with them the vision in their mirror... there is no curiosity about the ways of the ‘disbeliever.’ All we are is embodiments of error.”<sup>855</sup> Conversely, the relativist’s intentions are probably more honorable and his desires for toleration sincere, but his efforts are almost as unlikely as the universalist’s to lead to the sort of dialogue that Appiah prescribes. “From our different perspectives, we would be living effectively in different worlds. And without a shared world, what is there to discuss? People often recommend relativism because they think it will lead to tolerance. But if we cannot learn from one another what it is right to think and feel and do, then conversation between us will be pointless. Relativism of that sort isn’t a way to encourage conversation; it’s just a reason to fall silent.”<sup>856</sup>

And therein, skeptics will say, lies the problem. “You are asking us to care about all human beings. But we care only about people with whom we share an identity – national, familial, religious, or the like. And those identities get their psychological energy from the fact that to every in-group there’s an out-group.”<sup>857</sup> There is undoubtedly some truth to this critique, especially in the colonial context which has framed the

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<sup>854</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>855</sup> Ibid., 145-146.

<sup>856</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>857</sup> Ibid., 98.

majority of our discourse thus far. Appiah's response is nuanced, and he uses humanity's seemingly universal appreciation for art to frame it.

We can respond to art that is not ours; indeed, we can fully respond to "our" art only if we move beyond thinking of it as ours and start to respond to it as art. But equally important is the human connection. My people – human beings – made the Great Wall of China, the Chrysler Building, the Sistine Chapel: these things were made by creatures like me, through the exercise of skill and imagination. I do not have those skills, and my imagination spins different dreams. Nevertheless, the potential is also in me. The connection through a local identity is as imaginary as the connection through humanity. The Nigerian's link to the Benin bronze, like mine, is a connection made through the imagination; but to say this isn't to pronounce either of them unreal. They are among the realest connections that we have.<sup>858</sup>

If that argument still seems a bit too idealistic to be of any practical use, one should remember that, like Diogenes, Appiah is a living embodiment of his philosophy. Though born (in 1954) and later educated in London, he came of age in Ghana. His father was a Ghanaian lawyer and statesman who actively participated in the independence struggle as well as in the post-war period of political and economic instability that was to follow. His mother was a British children's author and philanthropist, who spent the last fifty years of her life in Ghana. Thus his philosophy, like his life, has been rooted in the understanding that cosmopolitanism is already a reality in many parts of the world, and that one need only embrace it as an ideology to reap its many social and psychological benefits. Observe how he describes the city of his childhood:

The capital of Asante is accessible to you, whoever you are – emotionally, intellectually, and, of course, physically. It is integrated into the global markets. None of this makes it Western, or American, or British. It is still Kumasi. What it isn't, just because it's a city, is homogenous. English, German, Chinese, Syrian, Lebanese, Burkinabe, Ivorian, Nigerian, Indian: I can find you families of each description. I can find you Asante people, whose ancestors have lived in this town for centuries, but also Hausa households that have been around for centuries, too. There are people

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<sup>858</sup> Ibid., 135.

there from all the regions, speaking all the scores of languages of Ghana as well. And while people in Kumasi come from a wider variety of places than they did a hundred or two hundred years ago, even then there were already people from all over the place coming and going. I don't know who was the first Asante to make the pilgrimage to Mecca, but his trip would have followed trade routes that are far older than the kingdom. Gold, salt, kola nuts, and alas, slaves have connected my hometown to the world for a very long time. And trade means travelers. If by globalization you have in mind something new and recent, the ethnic eclecticism of Kumasi is not the result of it.<sup>859</sup>

Cosmopolitanism, then, is not the naïve, abstract philosophical principle that the so-called realists would have us believe. It is, in Kumasi and most other cities around the world, already a fact of life. Thus, the problem with trying to impose an imperialist ideology is, in many ways, the same as the problem with trying to exclude the culture behind it. As Appiah states, "Trying to find some primordially authentic culture can be like peeling an onion," and in every society, if one delves deeply enough, one discovers that all "tradition was once an innovation. Should we reject it for that reason as untraditional? How far back must one go?"<sup>860</sup> This holds just as true for European culture as it does for African. Therefore, the solution lies not in trying to determine which set of cultural norms and values to adopt and which to reject. It is instead to be found in the recognition that each culture has already helped to shape the other, for better or for worse, and will undoubtedly continue to do so. That realization carries a power and a responsibility all its own, complete with the knowledge that, in this global age of ours, isolationism isn't possible, and violence isn't necessary.

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<sup>859</sup> Ibid., 161-162.

<sup>860</sup> Ibid., 107.



EPILOGUE: SOPHISTIC(ATED) INDEED: A CLOSER LOOK AT THE THEISTIC ARGUMENTS OF CRAIG, LENNOX, MCGRATH, AND PLANTINGA

*Thirteenth Rule: To be right in everything, we ought always to hold that the white which I see, is black, if the Hierarchical Church so decides it, believing that between Christ our Lord, the Bridegroom, and the Church, His Bride, there is the same Spirit which governs and directs us for the salvation of our souls. Because by the same Spirit and our Lord Who gave the Ten Commandments, our holy Mother the Church is directed and governed.*<sup>861</sup>

The nondenominational parachurch organization *Got Questions Ministries* defines presuppositionalism as “an approach to apologetics which aims to present a rational basis for the Christian faith and defend it against objections by exposing the logical flaws of other worldviews and hence demonstrating that biblical theism is the only worldview which can make consistent sense of reality.”<sup>862</sup> Such are the oft-stated intentions and generally-recognized results of Christian apologists William Lane Craig, John Lennox, Alistair McGrath, and Alvin Plantinga. However, if you’ll recall from my introductory remarks, I denounced (while promising to subsequently demonstrate) the speciousness of such circular reasoning and to expose it for the (at best) wishful or (at worst) duplicitous thinking that it is. For the most part, I have yet to accomplish my goal.

While it is true that Drs. Craig and Plantinga did receive some (rather derogatory, albeit terse) attention in the body of the preceding work, neither the names nor works of Professors Lennox or McGrath appeared at all. But rest assured, this was neither an

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<sup>861</sup> Ignatius of Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola [1909]*, trans. Elder Mullan. Sacred Texts, accessed 25 May 2018, <http://www.sacred-texts.com/chr/seil/seil82.htm>.

<sup>862</sup> “What is Presuppositional Apologetics?” Got Questions Ministries, accessed 12 May 2018, <https://www.gotquestions.org/presuppositional-apologetics.html>

inadvertent omission nor a silent retraction of my earlier claims, only a simple stylistic choice on my part. At the start of the previous chapter, I included an excerpted lyric from the Irish singer-songwriter Sinéad O'Connor, in which she claims that "through their own words, they will be exposed." Thus the song (also entitled "The Emperor's New Clothes") was not only a titular reference to the name of my own work, but also a concise explanation of the tack I intended to take in the chapter: to allow the proponents of postmodernism to paint themselves into their own ideological corners... the insinuation, of course, being that they did not require any assistance from me in exposing the bankruptcy of their banality, the pretenses of their posturings, and indeed the "bad faith" of their entire pseudo-academic enterprise.

My intention here is quite similar. In what follows, I will present excerpts of four televised, live-streamed, and/or published debates featuring each of the aforementioned scholars and one of the so-called Four Horsemen. In the interest of full transparency, I will provide corresponding links to the complete transcripts and/or texts of each of these encounters (which I highly recommend both for their respective contents and as evidence that the passages I will shortly provide are in keeping with the overall positions and perspectives being elucidated and advanced). Believing it wholly unnecessary and thus not wishing to insert myself into these discourses, I will allow the self-proclaimed presuppositionalism of each individual to speak for itself. Whether, in fact, they collectively represent more sophisticated arguments in support of (Christian) theism as both they and their supporters claim, or whether they are simply more elaborately-stitched, extensively-embroidered invisible garments for an emperor who shall remain nameless (and naked)... well, I leave such judgments entirely up to you.

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“Does God Exist?”

Christopher Hitchens vs. William Lane Craig

Biola University, 4 April 2009

CRAIG: Why does the universe exist, instead of just nothing, where did it come from? There must have been a cause which brought the universe into being. Now as the cause of space and time, this being must be an uncaused, timeless, spaceless, immaterial being of unfathomable power. Moreover, it must be personal as well. Why? Because the cause must be beyond space and time, therefore it cannot be physical or material. Now there are only two kinds of things that fit that description: either an abstract object, like numbers, or else a personal mind. But abstract objects can't cause anything. Therefore it follows that the cause of the universe is a transcendent, intelligent mind. Thus the cosmological argument gives us a personal creator of the universe.

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CRAIG: If God does not exist then objective moral values do not exist. By objective moral values I mean moral values which are valid and binding whether we believe in them or not.... here Mr. Hitchens seems to agree with me. He says moral values are just innate predispositions, ingrained into us by evolution. Such predispositions, he says, are inevitable for any animal endowed with social instincts. On the atheistic view then an action like rape is not socially advantageous and so in the course of human development has become taboo, but that does absolutely nothing to prove that rape is really morally wrong. On the atheistic view there's nothing really wrong with raping someone. But the problem is that objective values do exist and deep down we all know it. In moral experience we apprehend a realm of objective moral goods and evils. Actions like rape, cruelty, and child abuse aren't just socially unacceptable behavior, they're moral abominations. Some things, at least, are really wrong. Similarly love, equality, and self-sacrifice are really good. But then it follows logically and necessarily that God exists.

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CRAIG: The historical person Jesus of Nazareth was a remarkable individual. Historians have reached something of a consensus that the historical Jesus came on the scene with an unprecedented sense of divine authority, the authority to stand and speak in God's place. He claimed that in Himself the Kingdom of God had come and as visible demonstrations of this fact He carried out a ministry of miracle working and exorcisms. But the supreme confirmation of His claim was His resurrection from the dead. If Jesus did rise from the dead than it would seem that we have a

divine miracle on our hands and thus evidence for the existence of God. Now most people probably think that the resurrection of Jesus is something you just believe in, by faith or not. But there are actually three established facts recognized by the majority of New Testament historians today which I believe are best explained by the resurrection of Jesus. Fact number one: On the Sunday after His crucifixion, Jesus' tomb was discovered empty by a group of His women followers. According to Jakob Kremer, an Austrian specialist, by far most scholars hold firmly to the reliability of the biblical statements about the empty tomb. Fact number two: On separate occasions different individuals in groups experienced appearances of Jesus alive after his death. According to the prominent New Testament critic Gerd Lüdemann, it may be taken as historically certain that the disciples had experiences after Jesus' death in which Jesus appeared to them as the risen Christ. These appearances were witnessed not only by believers but also by unbelievers, skeptics, and even enemies. Fact number three: The original disciples suddenly came to believe in the resurrection of Jesus despite having every predisposition to the contrary. Jews had no belief in a dying, much less rising Messiah. And Jewish beliefs about the afterlife prohibited anyone's rising from the dead before the resurrection at the end of the world. Nevertheless the original disciples came to believe so strongly that God had raised Jesus from the dead that they were willing to die for the truth of that belief. N. T. Wright, an eminent New Testament scholar concludes, "That is why as a historian I cannot explain the rise of early Christianity unless Jesus rose again leaving an empty tomb behind him." Attempts to explain away these three great facts like the disciples stole the body or Jesus wasn't really dead have been universally rejected by contemporary scholarship. The simple fact is that there just is no plausible, naturalistic explanation of these facts. And therefore it seems to me the Christian is amply justified in believing that Jesus rose from the dead and was who he claimed to be. But that entails that God exists.

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CRAIG: The immediate experience of God: This isn't really an argument for God's existence, rather it's the claim that you can know that God exists wholly apart from argument, simply by immediately experiencing him.... belief in God is, for those who know him, a properly basic belief grounded in our experience of God.... We mustn't so concentrate on the external arguments that we fail to hear the inner voice of God speaking to our own hearts. For those who listen, God becomes an immediate reality in their lives.

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CRAIG: Genesis 1 admits all manner of different interpretations and one is by no means committed to six-day creationism.... if evolution did occur on this planet it was literally a miracle, and therefore evidence for the existence of God. So I don't think this is an argument for atheism, quite

the contrary, it really provides good grounds for thinking that God superintended the process of biological development.

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CRAIG: Now Mr. Hitchens says, “But why did God wait so long before he sent Christ? Human beings have existed for thousands of years on this planet before Christ’s coming.” Well, what’s really crucial here is not the time involved rather it’s the population of the world. The population reference bureau estimates that the number of people who have ever lived on this planet is about 105 billion people. Only 2% of them were born prior to the advent of Christ. Erik Kreps of the Survey Research Center of the University of Michigan’s Institute for Social Research says, “God’s timing couldn’t have been more perfect. Christ showed up just before the exponential explosion in the world’s population.”

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CRAIG: Now what about my arguments for theism? Mr. Hitchens had some general remarks here: He says it’s difficult to get from deism to theism. Now I want to point out that’s a false use of these terms, this is simply confused. Deism is a type of theism. Theism is the broad world view that God exists. Deism is a specific kind of theism that says God has not revealed himself directly in the world. Now my arguments are a cumulative case for Christian theism. They add up to the belief in the God that has been revealed by Jesus of Nazareth. Now Mr. Hitchens says, “But you must prove this with certainty.” Not at all, I am not claiming these argument demonstrate Christian theism with certainty. I’m saying this is the best explanation of the data when you compare it with other competing hypotheses. I think it’s more probable than not.

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CRAIG: Now, Mr. Hitchens responds, “But we’re headed towards nothingness, we’re ultimately going to be doomed and therefore the universe is not designed.” Well now, this is not a very powerful objection. The temporal duration of something is irrelevant to whether it’s been designed. The products of human intelligence and engineering like computers and automobiles will eventually decay and cease to exist but that doesn’t mean they weren’t designed. I think the real objection that he’s getting at here is why would God create mankind only to have it go extinct? But of course, you see, on the Christian view that’s false, that is an atheistic assumption. On the Christian view life does not end at the grave and God has given assurance of this by raising Jesus from the dead. So the objection simply has no purchase against Christian theism. So it seems to me that the fine tuning argument is also unrefuted.

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CRAIG: Let me simply quote N. T. Wright in his recent study of the resurrection. He says that, “The empty tomb and the appearances of Jesus have a historical probability so high as to be virtually certain, like the death of Augustus in AD 14 or the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70.” So we are on very solid ground in affirming these three facts that I mentioned in my

opening speech and I can't think of any better explanation than the ones that the eye witnesses gave, namely that God raised Jesus from the dead.

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CRAIG: Mr. Hitchens seems to fail to recognize that atheism is itself a world view and it claims alone to be true and all the other religions of the world false. It is no more tolerant than Christianity, with respect to these other views. He asserts that he alone has the true world view: atheism. The only problem is he doesn't have any arguments for this world view, he just asserts it. So it seems to me that if you're going to have a world view and champion it tonight you've got to come to a debate prepared to give some arguments and we haven't heard any.

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CRAIG: You need to ask yourself is the atheist claiming, as Epicurus did, that the existence of God is logically incompatible with the evil and suffering in the world? If that's what the atheist is claiming then he's got to be presupposing some kind of hidden assumptions that would bring out that contradiction and make it explicit because these statements are not explicitly contradictory. The problem is no philosopher in the history of the world has ever been able to identify what those hidden assumptions would be that would bring out the contradiction and make it explicit. On the contrary, you can actually prove that these are logically compatible with each other by adding a third proposition, namely, that God has morally sufficient reasons for permitting the evil in the world. As long as that statement is even possibly true, it's proves that there's no logical incompatibility between God and the suffering in the world. So the atheist would have to show that it is logically impossible for God to have morally sufficient reasons for permitting the evil and suffering in the world and no atheist has ever been able to do that. So, that the logical version of this problem, I think, is widely recognized to have failed.

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CRAIG: It seems to me that on the basis of the resurrection of Jesus that we have grounds for the hope of immortality. This is the foundation upon which the Christian hope is predicated. So, again, it gets back to whether or not one has good grounds for thinking that Jesus was who he claimed to be, and that God raised him from the dead. Because if he did, then there is hope of immortality.<sup>863</sup>

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<sup>863</sup> "Does God Exist?: Christopher Hitchens vs. William Lane Craig." ReasonableFaith.org, 4 April 2009, accessed 23 September 2016, <http://www.reasonablefaith.org/does-god-exist-craig-vs-hitchens-apr-2009>.

## The God Delusion Debate

Richard Dawkins vs. John Lennox

The University of Alabama at Birmingham, 3 October 2007

LENNOX: I can't speak authoritatively for other religions but faith in the Christian sense is not blind, and indeed I do not know a serious Christian who thinks it is. Indeed, as I read it, blind faith in idols and figments of the human imagination, in other words delusional gods, is roundly condemned in the Bible. My faith in God and Christ as the Son of God is no delusion; it is rational and evidenced based. Part of the evidence is objective and some of it comes from science, some comes from history, and some is subjective coming from experience.

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LENNOX: If in the end my beliefs, my theories, my scientific theories are the results ultimately of the motions of atoms in my brain produced by an unguided, random, mindless process, why should I believe them? In other words it's like someone sitting on the branch of a tree cutting off the branch on which they're sitting. And it seems to me that therefore atheism actually undercuts the scientific endeavour very seriously. That for my mind is a fatal flaw.... An argument that purports to derive rationality from irrationality doesn't even rise in my opinion to the dignity of being an intelligible delusion. It is logically incoherent. But theism tells us that the reason science is possible, the reason that I can access the universe at least in part through my human intelligence, is because the same God who created the universe is ultimately responsible for the human mind in here.

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LENNOX: The Bible is frequently dismissed as being anti-scientific because it makes no predictions. Oh no, that's incorrect! It makes a brilliant prediction! For centuries it's been saying there was a beginning, and if scientists had taken that a bit more seriously they might have discovered evidence for the beginning a lot earlier than they did.

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LENNOX: Created gods are by definition a delusion.... The God who created the universe, ladies and gentlemen, was not created. He is eternal. This is the fundamental distinction between God and the universe. It came to exist, He did not. And this is precisely the point that Christian apostle John makes at the beginning of his gospel: "In the beginning was the word." The word already was. All things came to be by him. God is uncreated. The universe was created by Him.

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LENNOX: If a rock falls off of a mountain onto your head and kills you, it makes no sense calling the rock evil. It just exists. If Pol Pot chooses to eliminate a million intellectuals or the 9/11 terrorists choose to fly hundreds of people to their deaths into the twin towers, how can you call

them evil if they were simply dancing to their DNA? Now that strikes me as a hideous world you're delivering us into. That is no morality at all... this kind of philosophy, that has no base for morals in a transcendent God, has got to find morality either in raw nature or a combination of nature and society, and often leads to a kind of utilitarianism. And we are in serious ethical confusion I think in our contemporary world, in the legal sphere, in the ethical and the medical sphere, and in the business sphere, because the foundations are crumbling.

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LENNOX: I do not think that miracles are violations of the laws of nature. Because the laws of nature describe what normally happens. God, who is the God of this universe, and created it with its regularities, is perfectly at liberty to feed a new event into the universe.

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LENNOX: The resurrection of Jesus Christ, a miracle, something supernatural, for me constitutes the central evidence upon which I base my faith not only that atheism is a delusion, but that justice is real and our sense of morality does not mock us, because if there is no resurrection, if there is nothing after death, in the end the terrorists and the fanatics have got away with it.<sup>864</sup>

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## Poison or Cure – Religious Belief in the Modern World:

Christopher Hitchens vs. Alister McGrath

Georgetown University, 11 October 2007

MCGRATH: The real problem I think is extremism, the kinds of ideologies that force violence upon us and those it seems to me do need to be challenged and on that, I'm at one with Mr. Hitchens. But is it God that's doing this? Let's move on and talk about this. Clearly a very important question here is how we know what God is like. Can you imagine God saying, go and do violence to someone. Well I think some could, quite easily. But I speak from a specific perspective, namely, that of a Christian theologian and for Christianity. The identity, the nature of God is disclosed in Jesus of Nazareth. He is the image of the invisible God, he is the fulfillment of the law and the prophets. And when we look at Jesus of Nazareth, we see something that I think is very, very challenging. We have one who refuses to do violence, even in Gethsemane, when some want to raise swords to defend him as he's about to be betrayed, he bids

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<sup>864</sup> "The God Delusion Debate: Richard Dawkins vs. John Lennox." ProTorah.com, 20 December 2014, accessed 23 September 2016, <http://www.protorah.com/god-delusion-debate-dawkins-lennox-transcript/# Prof. Richard Dawkins>.



them to put their swords down. Jesus does not do violence, but he has violence done to him. And the point I want to make is that your vision of what God is like has a profound impact on what you think God is urging you to do. And it seems to me that if one is a good Christian, then one is going to take the vision of what God is like and what God wants us to do from what we find disclosed in Jesus with the utmost seriousness.

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MCGRATH: We can read nature in an atheist way, we can read nature in an agnostic way, and we can read nature in a Christian way. But nature in itself and of itself does not force us to any of those positions. I will simply say that I find my Christian faith gave me new intellectual energy both to engage the natural order, and I found to engage nature is to learn more about God and also to energize my understanding of what I was observing... In other words, it gives you an intellectual lens or framework through which you can look at the world, ourselves and our culture and see it in a new light. So for me science and religion, there may be tensions, but is also a very powerful synergy which I believe to be both welcomed and also something that can be developed further.

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MCGRATH: I find it puzzling because for me as an intellectual historian, the Enlightenment really had been left behind us as being in the view of many postmodern critics a world view that led to intolerance and a world view that actually generated the potential of a conflict in violence. You all know why postmodernity moved away from modernity on that point. And, people like Alistair McIntyre, and other critics of modernity make the point that its foundational judgments about the nature of reason, the nature of what is right actually cannot be sustained on the basis of an appeal to history and reason itself. For McIntyre and for many others, the enlightenment offers us a vision of a rationality and morality which actually are unattainable in practice.

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MCGRATH: What do I think about the resurrection? Do I think about this being metaphorical? I think the resurrection is a historical event, something that happened in history, was seen as intriguing but not obviously interpreted as something of dramatic significance. The key question was not simply the history, but also its meaning. And so in the New Testament, for example, we see debates taking place around the time of the resurrection which are primarily concerned with “what does this mean?” In other words, something seems to have happened, but it’s a historical event, what is the overall meaning of this event? And so for me that, that second question begins to emerge as being of major importance. And in the New Testament we see a number of ideas beginning to emerge, the most important of these is that in some way Jesus had been demonstrated to have some sort of relationship with God that validated his teaching; in other words, that authorized him to speak with authority on what God was like. It’s a bit like, you know, interpreting something like

Caesar crossing the Rubicon.... And of course the Christian hope of eternal life, the very strong New Testament declaration that we are people who have hope is very much grounded on that particular idea.

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MCGRATH: The key idea in the New Testament is that in some way the death of Christ, again violence done to Christ, not violence done by Christ, is seen as having as transformative potential for human beings and this transformative potential is articulated using a range of models, some of which are drawn from the Old Testament. For example, there's an analogy drawn with animal sacrifice and that is seen as in some way establishing a link between Christ's death and the bringing of possibility of purity to someone.... For me, the death of Christ on the cross means that something that I could never gain for myself has been done for me and offered to me. In other words, it is something that by myself as a human being I could never hope to achieve, is achieved on my behalf and offered to me and I am asked: will you accept what has been done for you? In other words, it's about the possibility of transformation being offered to me but not being imposed upon me. And for me, that is about a God who offers but does not demand that I respond to him in this way. I find that to be a very good summary of what the Christian faith is trying to say about a God who offers but does not impose.

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MCGRATH: I'm a Christian, and, obviously I read the Old Testament and one of the questions is how on earth do I make sense of those passages which seem to, at least on the face of it, authorize acts of killing and so on which I personally find very disagreeable. And for me as a Christian, as I was saying, a fundamental theme here is that Christ is the fulfillment of the law and the prophets. In other words, not simply that he brings to fulfillment their intentions, but that in some way he is authorized to show us what these are really meant to be like. In other words, that there are other interpretations, but these are relativized or placed to one side because of who Jesus is and what he did. And, therefore, I would want to look at the Old Testament through this lens and say that I believe it allows us to look at these passages and challenge the most natural interpretations.... we gain a further understanding of what God is like, a firmer understanding of what God is like as time goes on and above all, for example, through the revelation of Christ and, again, whether you're a Protestant or a Catholic, you might talk about the continued guidance of the Holy Spirit or indeed continued reflection on the part of the church, but the engagement of the scripture is dynamic and ongoing. It's not really something that's been ended in the past.

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MCGRATH: I don't think it's all solipsistic to say let's reflect on why we are here, let's reflect on why there is something rather than nothing, it's to ask a very important question about how the universe came into being, why is there something rather than nothing. I mean for Wittgenstein that

was a hugely important question and it seems to me to be entirely right to answer that question or at least to try and answer it.... I made it very, very clear I was not making any claims to special knowledge, I was looking at what I saw, what others say. I interpreted it in this way. I claim no privilege. I say it is my judgment that this is the best explanation and it means this, and I'm open to challenge on this, as you have challenged me, but I am not claiming anything special. I'm saying there are public events there, they are open to interpretation, as they were at the time, and the issue really is what is the best explanation of those. And I think that is a legitimate debate. I've made it very clear what my conclusion is. I made it clear it is a matter of faith and I cannot prove this, but I'm also suggesting that whatever judgments we make on this is actually a matter of faith and therefore while I'm very happy to be challenged on this, I think I'm still entitled to say that this seems to me to be the best way of making sense of it and live my life out on its basis.<sup>865</sup>

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## Science and Religion: Are They Compatible?

Daniel Dennett vs. Alvin Plantinga.

New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.

PLANTINGA: It's clear, I think, that there is no conflict between theistic religion and the ancient earth thesis, or the descent with modification thesis, or the common ancestry thesis. According to theistic belief, God has created the living world; but of course he could have done so in many different ways, and in particular in ways compatible with those theses.... But is it also consistent with Darwinism? It looks as if it is. God could have caused the right mutations to arise at the right time, he could have preserved populations from perils of various sorts, and so on; in this way, by orchestrating the course of evolution, he could have ensured that there come to be creatures of the kind he intends.... But Gould's suggestion *presupposes* that God has not guided and orchestrated the course of evolution, and hence can't be appealed to as a reason for supposing that he has not done so. Given the biological evidence and the proposition that God has indeed created human beings in his image, Gould's suggestion is wholly implausible; for if the tape were rewound and let go forward again, no doubt God would still have intended that there be creatures created in his image, and would still have seen to it that there be such creatures....

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<sup>865</sup> "Poison or Cure: Religious Belief in the Modern World. Christopher Hitchens vs. Alistair McGrath." Hitchens Debates (blog), 21 October 2011, accessed 23 September 2016, <http://hitchensdebates.blogspot.com/2011/10/hitchens-vs-mcgrath-georgetown.html>.

But clearly a mutation could be both random in that sense and also intended and indeed caused by God.<sup>866</sup>

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PLANTINGA: Belief in God is seldom accepted on the basis of the teleological argument, or indeed any argument or propositional evidence at all. Both untutored observation and current research in the scientific study of religion suggest that a tendency to believe in God or something like God, apart from any propositional evidence is part of our native cognitive endowment. Furthermore, if theistic belief is true, it probably doesn't require propositional evidence for its *rational* acceptance. As I argued in *Warranted Christian Belief*, if theistic belief is true, then very likely it has both rationality and warrant in the *basic* way: that is, not on the basis of propositional evidence.... In this way belief in God, like belief in other minds, has its own source of rationality and warrant, and doesn't depend on arguments from other sources for those estimable qualities. The demise of the teleological argument, if indeed evolution has compromised it, is little more of a threat to rational belief in God than the demise of the argument from analogy for other minds is to rational belief in other minds.<sup>867</sup>

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PLANTINGA: Going all the way back to St. George Mivart, critics have expressed serious doubts as to whether the eye, for example, could have come to be by way of unguided natural selection operating on random genetic mutation – could have, that is, apart from absolutely stunning improbability. The eye, the mammalian brain, and other organs remain difficult problems for unguided evolution. But the really hard problem here for unguided Darwinists isn't the development of macroscopic organs such as eyes and hearts. The hard problem is rather at the microscopic (molecular) level: the stupefying complexity of the living cell... with its enormous complication, together with what we know about mutation rates, the age of the earth, population sizes, and the like, it seems reasonable to estimate that [the probability of unguided evolution] is exceedingly low, orders of magnitude lower than [the probability of guided evolution]. If this is right, then even if we think [unguided], as an explanation, is Ockhamistically superior to [guided], it is inferior to [guided] in that the relevant likelihood is lower....

As an analogy, suppose we land a spaceship on a planet we know is inhabited by intelligent creatures. We find something that looks exactly like a stone arrowhead, complete with grooves and indentations apparently made in the process of shaping and sharpening it. Two possibilities suggest themselves: one, that it acquired these characteristics by way of

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<sup>866</sup> Daniel Dennett and Alvin Plantinga. *Science and Religion: Are They Compatible?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 3-6.

<sup>867</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

erosion, let's say, and the other, that it was intentionally designed and fashioned by the inhabitants. Someone with a couple of courses in philosophy might suggest that the former hypothesis is to be preferred because it posits fewer entities than the latter. He'd be wrong, of course; since we already know that the planet contains intelligent creatures, there is no Ockhamistic cost involved in thinking those structures designed. The same would go for evolution; theists already accept divine design, and do not incur additional Ockhamistic cost by way of thinking of evolution as guided....

Even if, contrary to fact, there were scientific evidence for unguided evolution and hence for atheism, that would by no means settle the issue. Suppose there is scientific evidence against theism: it doesn't follow that theism is false, or that theists have a defeater for their beliefs, or that theistic belief is irrational, or in some way problematic. Perhaps there is also evidence, scientific or otherwise, *for* theism. But second, and more important... if theism is true, it is likely that it has its own intrinsic and basic source of warrant.... Indeed what Christians and other theists should think of current science can quite properly depend, in part, on theology.<sup>868</sup>

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PLANTINGA: [Dennett] and others like to try to discredit theism by comparing it with ideas everyone takes to be silly – Supermanism, or Flying Spaghetti Monsterism, or Tooth Fairyism, or Bertrand Russell's fantasy of an undetectable china teapot orbiting the sun, and so on. They typically don't give us their reasons (if they have any) for thinking theism is like these ideas. But *is* theism like these ideas? Well, any two views resemble each other in *some* respects. Take atheism and solipsism, for example. You're a solipsist if you think you're the only thing that exists, everything else being a figment of your imagination. Atheism obviously resembles solipsism in many ways: Both involve the denial of the existence of personal beings (atheism denies God; solipsism denies other persons); both go contrary to beliefs most people have and that furthermore we seem to be hard-wired to have; both are exceedingly hard to support by way of decent argument; etc.

As a matter of fact, atheism is a lot more like solipsism than theism is like Supermanism. Superman is certainly an impressive young fellow, but clearly not much greater than Captain Marvel, or even the Green Lantern. God, on the other hand, is all-knowing, all-powerful, and wholly good; furthermore, God has these properties essentially; he could not have been ignorant or impotent, or evil. He has also created the world.

Still further, according to classical theism, God is a *necessary being*; he exists in all possible worlds; it's not even possible that he should fail to exist. And since he has the property of being omniscient *essentially*, his

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<sup>868</sup> Ibid, 12-16.

believing a proposition is logically equivalent to that proposition's being true. Further yet, many theists hold that God's will, what he approves and disapproves, is the standard for right and wrong, good and bad. Superman may be faster than a speeding bullet and more powerful than a locomotive, but he is pretty small potatoes when compared with God.<sup>869</sup>

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PLANTINGA: The scientific evidence for *unguided* evolution (as opposed to evolution *simpliciter*) seems to be scant to nonexistent. Given this alleged connection between evolution and naturalism, furthermore, many Americans are understandably reluctant to have evolution taught to their children in the public schools, the schools they themselves pay taxes to support. Protestants don't want Catholic doctrine taught in the schools and Christians don't want Islam taught; but the distance between naturalism and theistic belief, whether Catholic or Protestant, or Muslim or Jewish, is vastly greater than the distance between Catholics and protestants or, for that matter, between Christians and Muslims. Christians, Jews, and Muslims concur on belief in God; naturalism stands in absolute opposition to these theistic religions; and evolution is widely seen as a pillar in the temple of naturalism. This association of evolution with naturalism is the obvious root of the widespread antipathy, in the United States, to the theory of evolution. Insofar as Dennett and others proclaim conflict between evolutionary theory and theistic belief, they exacerbate this distrust of evolution – a distrust that spills over to science itself, with the consequent cost in public support of science.<sup>870</sup>

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PLANTINGA: One of the ways in which Christian theism is hospitable to science, one of the reasons modern empirical science came to be and flourished in the Christian West, is this assumption that God is in control of nature and does not act arbitrarily. According to Christian, Jewish, and some varieties of Islamic theism, God has created us human beings in his image. For present purposes, we can take this to mean that he has created us as rational creatures, creatures who resemble him in having the capacity to know important things about ourselves, our environment, and God himself. The divine image includes more: It includes a moral sense, the grasp of right and wrong, and the ability to know and love God. But a central and crucial part of the divine image in us human beings is our ability to have worthwhile and important knowledge about ourselves and our world. Obviously our ability to do science is an extremely important part of the divine image, so taken. God has created both us in our world, and created them in such a way that the former can know much about the latter. But this implies that God would not arbitrarily stand in the way of our coming to such knowledge – by, for example, capriciously spoiling our experiments. And this shows, as against Dennett and Haldane, how

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<sup>869</sup> Ibid., 58-59.

<sup>870</sup> Ibid., 62-63.

far off the mark is the suggestion that science presupposes atheism or naturalism....

Of course God's faithfulness and reliability along these lines doesn't mean that he never acts in ways outside of the normal course of things: It doesn't mean, for example, that miracles never occur. Some people seem to think that the occurrence of miracles, supposing they occurred, would somehow go against science – presumably because miracles would violate the laws promulgated by science.... This too is in error.... The laws or principles of science are typically stated for *closed* systems, systems that are closed to outside causal influence.... But now suppose God miraculously created a full-grown horse inside the headquarters of the American Association for the Advancement of Science: Any system containing that headquarters, obviously, would not be causally closed; hence the preceding principles would not apply to them.<sup>871</sup>

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I'll leave you with two terms to consider. *Wishful thinking* is defined as “the attribution of reality to what one wishes to be true or the tenuous justification of what one wants to believe.”<sup>872</sup> Conversely, *sophistry* is defined as “subtly deceptive reasoning or argumentation.”<sup>873</sup> Whether or not one ultimately chooses to affix either of these terms to the aforementioned statements (or to the modus operandi of the authors who proffered them), I would nevertheless submit that the above excerpts demonstrate that such unflattering adjectives must be acerbically ascribed to any future pronouncements concerning their supposed sophistication or the unambiguous approbation with which they have been heretofore received.

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<sup>871</sup> Ibid., 64-66.

<sup>872</sup> “Wishful Thinking,” Merriam-Webster.com, 2018, accessed 12 May 2018, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/wishful%20thinking>.

<sup>873</sup> “Sophistry,” Merriam-Webster.com, 2018, accessed 12 May 2018, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/sophistry>.

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