Late Twentieth Century Atheism

In 1948, the BBC broadcast a debate between Bertrand Russell and Father Frederick Copleston on the existence of God. In that debate, Copleston claims: (1) that the existence of God can be proven by a metaphysical argument from contingency; and (2) that only the postulation of the existence of God can make sense of our religious and moral experience. Russell replies by giving divers reasons for thinking that these two claims are incorrect: there are various ways in which Copleston's argument from contingency fails to be persuasive, and there are more plausible alternative explanations of our religious and moral experience. While there are many significant changes of detail, it is fair to say that the debate between Russell and Copleston typifies exchanges between theists and atheists in the second half of the twentieth century, and it is also fair to say that Russell's contribution to this debate typifies the approaches of late twentieth century atheists.[1]

Speaking very roughly, we might divide the activities of atheists in the following way. First, some atheists have been concerned to argue that religious talk fails to be meaningful: there is no serious discussion to be had about, for example, the existence of God because one cannot even meaningfully deny the existence of God. Second, many atheists have been concerned to developed alternative worldviews to the kinds of worldviews that are presented in the world's religions; and, in particular, many atheists have been concerned to developed naturalistic world views that leave no room for any kinds of supernatural entities. Third, some atheists have been interested in discussions of the ground rules for the arbitration of debates between theists and non-theists; and, in particular, some atheists have wanted to insist that there is an initial presumption in favour of atheism that leaves theist opponents carrying the argumentative burden of proof. Fourth, many atheists have been concerned to raise objections against the plethora of theistic arguments that have been advanced, in particular on behalf of the claim that God exists. Fifth, some atheists have also been concerned to advance argument on behalf of atheism and, in particular, on behalf of the claim that God does not exist. Sixth, in the early part of the twenty-first century, some "new" atheists have attempted to advance overarching critiques of religion—not merely theistic religion—in which even moderate religious belief is characterised as barbaric superstition. In what follows, we shall survey all of these different spheres of activity of atheists in the second half of the twentieth century.

Some philosophers have taken great pains to distinguish different varieties of non-belief, i.e. different ways in which philosophers who do not accept the claim that God exists view that claim. While we can distinguish between 'weak agnosticism', 'strong agnosticism', 'weak atheism', 'strong atheism', and the like, for the purposes of the present chapter we shall just use the term 'atheism' to refer to all of those who are non-believers, i.e. all of those who fail to accept the claim that God exists. Given this terminological stipulation, it follows that there are many atheists who are also religious believers: for what unites "atheists" is merely their failure to accept the theistic hypothesis that God exists, and there are many religious traditions which fail to endorse the claim that God exists.

1. **Alleged Problems with Religious Language**

One of the perennial temptations in philosophy is the thought that we can describe boundaries to intelligible thought and intelligible utterance that place much philosophical and religious thought and talk on the wrong side of that boundary. At the mid-point of the twentieth century, there were two powerful philosophical traditions—logical positivism and ordinary language philosophy—that endorsed different ways of filling out this perennially tempting thought. The impact of those two traditions can be seen very clearly in the articles collected together in the influential anthology of Flew and McIntyre (1955).

On the logical positivist line of thought, the reason why religious claims are meaningless is that, while clearly not being mere truths of reason, those claims are insusceptible of empirical verification. The crude articulation of this line of thought in Ayer (1936) went on to receive further development in the work of such writers as Wisdom (1944) and Flew (1976), and significant elaboration of this type of approach can also be seen in the work of Neilson (1982) and Martin (1990). While there has been strenuous criticisms of this line of thought from theistic philosophers—see, for example, Plantinga (1967)(2000)—it is also worth noting that many atheistic philosophers have been prepared to reject the view that religious claims are literally meaningless (see, for example, Mackie (1982) and Sobel (2004)).

On the ordinary language philosophy line of thought, the leading idea is that religious claims should be given some kind of non-cognitivist construal, i.e., they should not be supposed to be in the business of stating facts. There are many different ways in which this fundamental idea might be further developed. On one way of thinking, religious assertions are *expressive*—e.g., according to Braithwaite (1955), religious assertions are expressions of intentions to act in certain specified ways. On another way of thinking, the only standards to which religious claims are answerable are standards that are internal to religious language games—there is no single conception of "the business of stating facts" to which commonsense, science and religion are all answerable. Some philosophers—e.g. Phillips (1976)—have supposed that this latter way of thinking need not be uncongenial to religion; however, others—e.g. Davis (2001)—have supposed that the "Wittgensteinian" way with religion amounts to the embrace of atheism.

At the end of the twentieth century, there were still some atheistic philosophers inclined to the view that, for example, the claim that God exists is literally meaningless. However, it seems safe to say that many more atheistic philosophers were inclined to follow the line taken by Mackie and Sobel, a line that leads to the search for evidence or reasons that bear on the assessment of the truth statues of the claim that God exists.

2. **The Rise of Naturalistic Philosophy**

One of the major post-World War II developments in philosophy has been the rise to prominence of naturalism and naturalistic philosophy. While naturalistically inclined philosophers disagree about many matters, they characteristically agree that the natural

world forms a causally closed system, and that there are no causal exchanges that do not form part of that causally closed system. Thus, naturalistically inclined philosophers typically agree that there are no supernatural agents—no spooks, no gods, no ghosts, no unembodied minds or souls—because supernaturally agency, by definition, requires causal interactions that form no part of that causally closed system that is the natural world. Among the matters on which naturalistically inclined philosophers disagree are such questions as whether all that exists belongs to the natural world; whether all that exists "comes down" to elementary particles and microphysical events; and whether there is anything that resists explanation by the methods that are characteristic of the natural sciences.

In many senses, Quine is the father of modern naturalistic philosophy. Quine held the view that everything that belongs to the natural world "comes down" to elementary particles and microphysical events, but he allowed that there are things—numbers, functions, classes—that do not belong to the natural world. (Alas, Quine gave no very clear account of what it is for the natural world to "come down" to elementary particles and microphysical events, a question that has received much closer attention in more recent times.) Furthermore, Quine gave special prominence to the methods that are characteristic of the natural sciences in the project of describing and understanding the natural world. While it is perhaps not quite right to say that he denied that there is anything that resists explanation by the methods that are characteristic of the natural sciences, he was certainly inclined to insist on the use of the methods that are characteristic of the natural sciences in a diverse range of inquiries. In particular, Quine is very well known for his insistence that epistemology should be "naturalised", i.e. for his insistence that epistemology should be reconceived as a scientific study of the relationship, in human beings, between the inputs of sensory experience and the neural states that are prompted by those inputs. Moreover, Quine is also very well known for his insistence that, because the idioms that we typically use in making ascriptions of beliefs and desires resist smooth incorporation into a properly scientific worldview, those idioms should be accorded only a second class status, and should not be thought fit for the purposes of *serious* description and understanding of the world.

After Quine, naturalistic philosophy has developed in various directions. Some naturalists hold the thesis that everything in the natural world "supervenes" upon elementary particles and microphysical events, whereas other naturalists hold merely that everything in the natural world is "constituted by" elementary particles and microphysical events. Some naturalists suppose that there are no such things as numbers, functions and classes; other naturalists suppose that numbers, functions and classes are denizens of the natural world; and yet other naturalists continue to agree with Quine that numbers, functions and classes exist, but not as parts of the natural world, and not in such a way as to be engaged in causal interaction with the natural world. Some naturalists suppose that it is indeed true that there isn't anything that resists explanation by the methods that are characteristic of the natural sciences; but many naturalists suppose that, at the very least, there are many legitimate domains of inquiry that we can pursue only via the methods of inquiry of the social sciences, the humanities, and so forth.

Alongside the rise of naturalistic philosophy, there has been a parallel rise in naturalistic investigations of religious practices, customs, and beliefs. While the project of arriving at a naturalistic explanation of religion was at least understood by Hume, and while various early attempts at naturalistic explanations of religion were enunciated during the nineteenth century, it is fair to say that the move to develop naturalistic explanations of religion really began to gather momentum towards the end of the twentieth century. In particular, the close of the twentieth century saw the beginnings of some bold, interdisciplinary projects—drawing on anthropology, linguistics, cognitive science, neuroscience, evolutionary theory, and a range of other disciplines—that seek to provide satisfactory naturalistic accounts of religion. Important examples of these types of projects include: Atran (2002), Boyer (2001), Dennett (2006), and Lawson and McCauley (1990).

3. **Debating the Burden of Proof**

Some atheistic philosophers—including Flew (1976) and Scriven (1966)—have argued that there is a "burden of proof" upon believers in the existence of God. In particular, these atheistic philosophers argue that the default position, adopted by all *reasonable* people in the absence of compelling arguments to the contrary, is either atheism or agnosticism. If theists cannot provide arguments that ought to persuade reasonable atheists to renounce their atheism and become theists then, on this line of thought, those theists are convicted of irrationality in their theistic beliefs. (Amongst subsequent writers, Martin (1990:29) "remains neutral" on the question whether there is a presumption of atheism, but in a way which suggests some sympathy for the view that the "burden of proof" rests with theists. Similarly, Parsons (1989) suggests at least some sympathy for the view that the "burden of proof" rests with theists).

Against these atheistic philosophers, other atheistic philosophers have thought that there is something improper in the legalistic invocation of the concept of "burden of proof" in the context of philosophical debate about the existence of God. Thus, for example, Lewis (1993:172) ends with the observation that "some will want to play on by debating the burden of proof. Myself, I think that this pastime is as useless as it is undignified." Furthermore, other atheistic philosophers have worried that there is a conflation of requirements upon debate (argumentation) and requirements upon belief at work in the suggestion that theists suffer under a "burden of proof". While it seems right to think that doxastic responsibility requires that believers have sufficiently good grounds for their beliefs, it is not at all clear how this requirement connects either to the demand that believers have evidence that supports their beliefs, or to the demand that believers adduce acceptable chains of reasoning that terminate in statements of the beliefs in question, or to the demand that believers find arguments that ought to persuade reasonable atheists to take on those theistic beliefs.

4. **Responding to Theistic Arguments**

During the heyday of logical positivism and ordinary language philosophy, philosophers typically took a very dismissive view of arguments for the existence of God. Consider, for example, Stace (1959: 180)

> I simply cannot bear to discuss the dreary logomachy of the ontological argument. Probably Broad has completely demolished the argument. But I cannot bring myself to think that it needs demolishing.

However, the last four decades of the twentieth century witnessed quite a lot of interesting criticism of arguments for the existence of God on the part of atheistic philosophers of religion. Of course, this period also witnessed quite a lot of interesting criticism of arguments for the existence of God on the part of theistic and other non-atheistic philosophers of religion. Thus, for example, Plantinga (1966) provides exemplary critiques of some of the best-known arguments for the existence of God. Nonetheless, much of the most interesting criticism of arguments for the existence of God in this period has come from the pens of atheistic philosophers.

Some of this critical work is local, and consists in the detailed criticism of a particular argument or family of arguments, often within the compass of a single journal article or book chapter. Examples of this kind of critical work include: the discussion of Anselm's ontological argument in Lewis (1970); the discussion of Plantinga's ontological argument in Tooley (1981); the discussion of William Lane Craig's *kalām* cosmological argument in Draper (1997); the discussion of cosmological arguments, including arguments from contingency, in Rowe (1975); the discussion of the argument for design in Sober (2003); and the discussion of Pascal's Wager in Hájek (2003).

Some of the interesting critical work has had a wider scope, and criticises a wide range of arguments for the existence of God within the bounds of a single work. While there are earlier attempts to provide a synoptic discussion of arguments about the existence of God—as, for example, in the very readable, but somewhat flawed Matson (1965)—the first really significant book of this kind is Mackie (1982). In that work (*The Miracle of Theism*), Mackie provides careful and incisive critiques of ontological arguments, cosmological arguments, arguments for design, arguments from consciousness, moral arguments, and Pascalian wagers (in the service of constructing an overall case for the conclusion that there is no God). Other works constructed according to a similar plan, and covering much of the same range of arguments, include Martin (1990), Everitt (2004) and Sobel (2004). Of works in this genre, Sobel's *Logic and Theism* established a new benchmark: though it has a more limited range than Mackie (1982), Sobel (2004) provides much more painstaking and detailed analyses of the arguments that it covers.

Apart from books that attempt to provide over-arching critiques of arguments for the existence of God, there are also some shorter works which aim to show that cases for the existence of God can be mimicked by equally good (or bad) cases for the existence of alternative deities, e.g. a perfectly evil God or a morally indifferent God. A nice example of this genre is provided by New (1993), who provides inversions of a large family of

arguments for the existence of God, each of which purports to establish the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, and maximally evil being.

5. **Arguing for Atheism**

Much of the most interesting recent work done of atheistic philosophers has focussed on attempts to argue directly against the truth of theism (and directly for the truth of atheism). As in the case of responses to theistic arguments, some of this work has been local, focussing on particular kinds of considerations, while other instances of this kind of work have attempted to construct an overarching case for atheism (as in the work of Matson (1965), Mackie (1982), Martin (1990), Le Poidevin (1996) and Everitt (2004).)

Findlay (1948) attempts an ontological disproof of the existence of God. While this proof is not strong—among other things, it is vitiated by reliance upon a conventionalist conception of necessity—it does point the way towards an interesting global criticism of ontological arguments for the existence of God: in a large range of cases, ontological arguments for the existence of God can be "paralleled" by arguments for the conclusion that God does not exist. Findlay himself quickly gave up on his ontological disproof; and perhaps there has been no subsequent atheist philosopher who has supposed that there are successful ontological disproofs of the existence of God. Nonetheless, many atheistic philosophers have supposed that most (if not all) ontological arguments for the existence of God are disabled by these "parallel" arguments for the conclusion that God does not exist.

Smith (1991) attempts a cosmological disproof of the existence of God, drawing upon contemporary cosmological theorising. In particular, Smith argues that there is some kind of inconsistency between Big Bang cosmology and theism. Given the fluid state of contemporary cosmological theorising, it is unclear how much importance could be attributed to Smith's argument even if it were otherwise unexceptionable. And, in any case, there is much else in Smith's argument that has proven to be controversial. Other atheist authors have hinted at different cosmological disproofs of the existence of God: there are arguments in Rowe (1975) which suggest that considerations about contingency point strongly to the conclusion that God does not exist. Here, the idea is roughly this: If there is contingency, then there is brute, unexplained *initial* contingency. Theism is committed both to the claim that there is contingency—this is required by the assumption that we have libertarian freedom—and to the claim that there is no brute, unexplained *initial* contingency—this is required by the assumption that God provides a complete explanation for the existence and nature of the world even though there is no contingency in God.

Salmon (1979) attempts a teleological disproof of the existence of God. Salmon proof is elaborated into a whole battery of teleological disproofs in Martin (1990). The idea behind this style of disproof is that we have inductive evidence—based on universal human experience—that certain kinds of created entities are typically created by creators with certain kinds of properties. Given that the universe is an entity of the kind in question, we can infer that if it has a creator, then that creator has the properties in

question: embodiment, fallibility, finitude, being a worker with pre-existing materials, being one member of a creative team, and so forth. But a creator with these properties would not be the God of monotheistic religions. (Everitt (2004) gives an argument from scale which runs along somewhat similar lines. Here, the motivating question is whether one would expect the God of traditional theism to create the kind of universe in which we actually live; and the line that Everitt takes is that more or less everything that modern science tells us about the size and scale and nature of the universe reveals that universe to be strikingly inapt as an expression of a set of divine intentions of the kind that is postulated by traditional theism.)

Perhaps predictably, many of the direct arguments that recent atheistic philosophers have launched against theism have involved considerations about evil. Mackie (1955) launched an intensive investigation of logical arguments from evil—i.e. of arguments which purport to show that there is a logical inconsistency between the claim that God exists and some well-established claim about evil (e.g. that there is evil in the world, or that there is moral evil in the world, or that there is horrendous evil in the world, or the like). While many theists suppose that these kinds of arguments are defeated by the free will defence elaborated in Plantinga, there are some atheist philosophers who continue to pursue and defend logical arguments from evil (see, for example, Gale (1991)).

Rowe (1979) provoked a similarly intensive investigation of evidential arguments from evil—i.e., of arguments which purport to show that the claim that God exists is implausible, or improbable, or not worthy of belief, in the light of certain evidence about the nature and extent of kinds of evil in our universe. On Rowe's account, it is highly improbable that particular instances of the suffering of animals and young children would be permitted by an all-powerful, all-knowing, and perfectly good God. While some theists have maintained that Rowe's evidential argument from evil is in no better shape than Mackie's logical argument from evil—see, for example, the theistic contributions to Howard-Snyder (1996)—there are many atheist philosophers who continue to think that Rowe's evidential argument from evil does embody powerful grounds for atheism.

Draper (1989) presents another kind of evidential argument from evil. On Draper's account, there is good *prima facie* reason to reject theism deriving from the negative evidential impact on theism of the observations that we make, and the testimony that we encounter, concerning human and animal experiences of pain and pleasure. (The observations that we make, and the testimony that we encounter, concerning human and animal experiences of pain and pleasure, if much more likely on the hypothesis that neither the nature nor the condition of sentient beings on earth is the result of benevolent or malevolent actions performed by non-human persons, then it on the hypothesis that the nature and condition of sentient beings on earth is the result of the actions of an omnipotent, omniscient and perfectly good God.) Draper's argument has occasioned a considerable amount of critical discussion from theistic philosophers such as Plantinga and Howard-Snyder; it seems doubtful that this discussion has yet been exhausted.

There are other arguments that atheists have mounted against theism that are not strictly speaking arguments from evil, but which are arguments in the same ballpark. So, for

example, Schellenberg (1993) mounts a sustained argument against the existence of God on the grounds of divine hiddenness: if there were an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good God, surely there would be much better evidence available to all of the existence of such a being. Similarly, Drange (1998) mounts an argument against the existence of God on the grounds of non-belief: if there were an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good God, surely there would not be so many reasonable, intelligent and well-informed people who fail to believe that God exists. The arguments of Schellenberg and Drange have both been widely discussed—see, for example, Howard-Snyder and Moser (2002), for a selection of critical responses to Schellenberg's argument.

Apart from logical arguments from evil, there are other arguments that purport to raise logical difficulties for theism. Mackie (1955) also initiated contemporary debate about the paradoxes of omnipotence: What should a theist say in response to the question whether God can make a stone so heavy that God is unable to lift that stone? (On the one hand, if God can't make such a stone, then there is something God can't do, and so God is not omnipotent. On the other hand, if God can make such a stone, then there is something that God can't do, namely, lift the stone that God is able to make.) While this simple version of the paradox of omnipotence seems easily met—not even God can be expected to do that which is logically impossible, and at least one half of the dilemma prompted by our question implicitly requires God to do something that is logically impossible—discussion of more complex versions of this argument has continued into the twenty-first century.

Grim (1983) is the first of a series of papers that develops arguments for the conclusion that it is impossible for there to be an omniscient being. According to Grim, the very notion of omniscience is beset by logical paradox: there is no collection of truths that could form the object of knowledge of an omniscient being; and, besides, there are perspective-dependent truths that can only be grasped from perspectives other than the one that would be occupied by God (if there were such a being). While Grim has pursued his arguments in debate with numerous theistic opponents—including, notably, Plantinga—it is probably fair to say that his arguments have not found as much support as the corresponding arguments that have been developed in connection with the notion of divine omnipotence.

Of course, there are many other arguments that are taken to raise logical problems for theism. There are questions about divine foreknowledge and human freedom—see Fischer (1994) for contributions by some contemporary atheists to debate about this topic. There are questions about divine freedom; Rowe (2004) marks one recent attempt to argue that an omnipotent, omniscient and perfectly good being could not have the kind of freedom that is required for moral responsibility, praise, and gratitude. There are also lots of questions about less commonly discussed divine attributes, and particular theological doctrines. So, to take a small number of examples among many: Gale (1991) argues for the claim that the doctrine of divine simplicity is incoherent; Martin (1997) argues that there are many logical difficulties in the traditional theistic conception of heaven; and Lewis (1997) argues that the doctrine of the atonement is not worthy of belief. One of the interesting developments in analytic philosophy of religion in the latter part of the

twentieth century has been the wider range of topics that have been investigated using the tools of analytical philosophy: this broadening of range has been true of atheistically motivated philosophers no less than it has been true of theistically motivated philosophers.

6. **The 'New' Atheism**

The beginning of the new millennium has witnessed a perhaps unexpected surge in public enthusiasm for books that take a highly critical view of theism, and of religion in general. Works by the 'new atheists'—Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, Michel Onfrey, Anthony Grayling, Daniel Dennett, and others—have found a large global audience, often occupying prominent positions in bestseller lists.

The works of these "new atheists" have been written against the background of broader changes in attitudes towards religion and religious belief over the course of the second half of the twentieth century. Census figures across the Western world indicate that, for much of the latter half of the twentieth century, organised religion was in something approaching decline. While there was some increase in the number of those claiming to have no religion, there was much greater increase in the number of those who claimed to belong to no organised religion. Church numbers maintained a steady downwards slide; and the percentage of people who attended church only very infrequently continued to increase.

Of course, these general trends were not uniform. Moreover, and more importantly, even while the *overall* trends indicated that organised religion was in decline, these trends were not necessarily replicated in the fortunes of the *evangelical* branches of at least some of the major religions. In particular, in the United States, the last part of the twentieth century witnessed strong gains for evangelical Christianity, especially in the so-called "red" states. As evangelical Christians came to have more influence on the Republican party and its policies, the influence of evangelical Christian beliefs could be discerned in diverse range of social trends: a greater push for evangelical Christian home schooling (and schooling outside the public education system); more intense evangelical Christian opposition to legal recognition of gay relationships and other legal entitlements for gay couples; greatly increased evangelical Christian support for equal recognition of the theory of intelligent design in public school biology classes; massive diversion of public funds from secular social service organisations to evangelical Christian organisations under the label of "faith-based initiatives"; increased evangelical Christian promotion of "abstinence only" sex education programs in public schools; and so on across the full range of evangelical Christian activity.

In other parts of the world, the later part of the twentieth century witnessed gains for evangelical branches of other major world religions. In particular, evangelical Islam made considerable gains in many corners of the globe—in the Middle East, in Africa, and in Asia—and there were also some gains for evangelical Hinduism, most notably in India. And, along with the rise of support for evangelical forms of several of the major world religions, there has also been a rise in political and social tensions—and, in many cases, political and social *violence*—in which matters of evangelical religious disagreement

have played some kind of role. While the causal aetiology is unclear, it is uncontroversial that evangelical religion is one of the causal factors involved in the rise of Al Qaeda, 9/11, suicide bombings in the Middle East, skirmishes on the India/Pakistan border, and so on and so forth.

Writers such as Harris (2005)(2006), Hitchens (2007) and Dawkins (2006) argue, not only that the recent rise of evangelical religion marks a serious slide back towards a dark and barbarous past, but that even religious moderation marks a set of irresponsible cultural and intellectual accommodations with a best-rejected ancient heritage. In their view, teaching the beliefs of evangelical religionists to children is tantamount to child abuse; and, in general, "religious faith represents so uncompromising a misuse of the power of our minds that it forms a kind of perverse cultural singularity—a vanishing point beyond which rational discourse proves impossible" Harris (2005:25). Critics of the "new atheists" have not been slow to wonder at the sheer magnitude of the assertions that the "new atheists" make: in claiming that even religious moderates are irrational in their religious beliefs, the "new atheists" commit themselves to the view that more than 90% of all of the adults on the planet have simply irrational religious beliefs.

While is certainly should not be supposed that all atheists are enthusiastic supporters of the "new atheists", it seems plausible to suppose that the "new atheism" will occupy a prominent position in academic debates about religion and religious belief in the immediate future. Indeed, because—as least in the area of philosophy—evangelical Christians have made considerable inroads into the academy (particularly, but not only, in the United States), one expects that arguments involving the "new atheists" will grow even noisier in the coming years.

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[1] A more recent (and more developed) version of a very similar debate can be found in Smart and Haldane (1996).