

Believe It or Not

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I think I am very close to concluding that this whole New Atheism movement is only a passing fad—not the cultural watershed its purveyors imagine it to be, but simply one of those occasional and inexplicable marketing vogues that inevitably go the way of pet rocks, disco, prime-time soaps, and *The Bridges of Madison County*. This is not because I necessarily think the current marketplace of ideas particularly good at sorting out wise arguments from foolish. But the latest trend in a mode godlessness, it seems to me, has by now proved itself to be so intellectually and morally trivial that it has to be classified as just a form of light entertainment, and popular culture always tires of its diversions sooner or later and moves on to other, equally ephemeral toys.

Take, for instance, the recently published *50 Voices of Disbelief: Why We Are Atheists*. Simple probability, surely, would seem to dictate that a collection of essays by fifty fairly intelligent and zealous atheists would contain at least one logically compelling, deeply informed, morally profound, or conceptually arresting argument for not believing in God. Certainly that was my hope in picking it up. Instead, I came away from the whole drab assemblage of preachments and preenings feeling rather as if I had just left a large banquet at which I had been made to dine entirely on crushed ice and water vapor.

To be fair, the shallowness is not evenly distributed. Some of the writers exhibit a measure of wholesome tentativeness in making their cases, and as a rule the quality of the essays is inversely proportionate to the air of authority their authors affect. For this reason, the philosophers, who are no better than their fellow contributors at reasoning but who have better training in giving even specious arguments some appearance of systematic form, tend to come off as the most insufferable contributors. Nicholas Everitt and Stephen Law recycle the old (and incorrigibly impressionistic) argument that claims of God's omnipotence seem incompatible with claims of his goodness. Michael Tooley does not like the picture of Jesus that emerges from the gospels, at least as he reads them. Christine Overall notes that her prayers as a child were never answered; ergo, there is no God. A. C. Grayling flings a few of his favorite papier-mâché caricatures around. Laura Purdy mistakes hysterical fear of the religious right for a rational argument. Graham Oppy simply provides a précis of his personal creed, which I assume is supposed to be compelling because its paragraphs are numbered. J. J. C. Smart finds miracles scientifically implausible (gosh, who could have seen that coming?). And so on. Adele Mercier comes closest to making an interesting argument that believers do not really believe what they think they believe, but it soon collapses under the weight of its own baseless presuppositions.

The scientists fare almost as poorly. Among these, Victor Stenger is the most recklessly self-confident, but his inability to differentiate the physical distinction between something and nothing (in the sense of not anything as such) from the logical distinction between existence and nonexistence renders his argument empty. The contributors drawn from other fields offer nothing better. The Amazing Randi, being a magician, knows that there is quite a lot of credulity out there. The historian of science Michael Shermer notes that there are many, many different and

even contradictory systems of belief. The journalist Emma Tom had a psychotic scripture teacher when she was a girl. *Et, as they say, cetera*. The whole project probably reaches its *reductio ad absurdum* when the science-fiction writer Sean Williams explains that he learned to reject supernaturalism in large part from having grown up watching *Doctor Who*.

So it goes. In the end the book as a whole adds up to absolutely nothing as, frankly, do all the books in this new genre, and I have to say I find this all somewhat depressing. For one thing, it seems obvious to me that the peculiar vapidness of New Atheist literature is simply a reflection of the more general vapidness of all public religious discourse these days, believing and unbelieving alike. In part, of course, this is because the modern media encourage only fragmentary, sloganeering, and emotive debates, but it is also because centuries of the incremental secularization of society have left us with a shared grammar that is perhaps no longer adequate to the kinds of claims that either reflective faith or reflective faithlessness makes.

The principal source of my melancholy, however, is my firm conviction that today most obstreperous infidels lack the courage, moral intelligence, and thoughtfulness of their forefathers in faithlessness. What I find chiefly offensive about them is not that they are skeptics or atheists; rather, it is that they are not skeptics at all and have purchased their atheism cheaply, with the sort of boorish arrogance that might make a man believe himself a great strategist because his tanks overwhelmed a town of unarmed peasants, or a great lover because he can afford the price of admission to a brothel. So long as one can choose one's conquests in advance, taking always the paths of least resistance, one can always imagine oneself a Napoleon or a Casanova (and even better: the one without a Waterloo, the other without the clap).

But how long can any soul delight in victories of that sort? And how long should we waste our time with the sheer banality of the New Atheists—with, that is, their childish Manichean view of history, their lack of any tragic sense, their indifference to the cultural contingency of moral truths, their wanton incuriosity, their vague babblings about religion in the abstract, and their absurd optimism regarding the future they long for?

I am not—honestly, I am not—simply being dismissive here. The utter inconsequentiality of contemporary atheism is a social and spiritual catastrophe. Something splendid and irreplaceable has taken leave of our culture, some great moral and intellectual capacity that once inspired the more heroic expressions of belief and unbelief alike. Skepticism and atheism are, at least in their highest manifestations, noble, precious, and even necessary traditions, and even the most fervent of believers should acknowledge that both are often inspired by a profound moral alarm at evil and suffering, at the corruption of religious institutions, at psychological terrorism, at injustices either prompted or abetted by religious doctrines, at arid dogmatisms and inane fideisms, and at worldly power wielded in the name of otherworldly goods. In the best kinds of unbelief, there is something of the moral grandeur of the prophets, a deep and admirable abhorrence of those vicious idolatries that enslave minds and justify our worst cruelties.

But a true skeptic is also someone who understands that an attitude of critical suspicion is quite different from the glib abandonment of one vision of absolute truth for another—say, fundamentalist Christianity for fundamentalist materialism or something vaguely and inaccurately called humanism. Hume, for instance, never traded one dogmatism for another, or one facile certitude for another. He understood how radical were the implications of the

skepticism he recommended, and how they struck at the foundations not only of unthinking faith, but of proud rationality as well.

A truly profound atheist is someone who has taken the trouble to understand, in its most sophisticated forms, the belief he or she rejects, and to understand the consequences of that rejection. Among the New Atheists, there is no one of whom this can be said, and the movement as a whole has yet to produce a single book or essay that is anything more than an insipidly doctrinaire and appallingly ignorant diatribe.

If that seems a harsh judgment, I can only say that I have arrived at it honestly. In the course of writing a book published just this last year,* I dutifully acquainted myself not only with all the recent New Atheist bestsellers, but also with a whole constellation of other texts in the same line, and I did so, I believe, without prejudice. No matter how patiently I read, though, and no matter how Herculean the efforts I made at sympathy, I simply could not find many intellectually serious arguments in their pages, and I came finally to believe that their authors were not much concerned to make any.

What I did take away from the experience was a fairly good sense of the real scope and ambition of the New Atheist project. I came to realize that the whole enterprise, when purged of its hugely preponderant alloy of sanctimonious bombast, is reducible to only a handful of arguments, most of which consist in simple category mistakes or the kind of historical oversimplifications that are either demonstrably false or irrelevantly true. And arguments of that sort are easily dismissed, if one is hardy enough to go on pointing out the obvious with sufficient indefatigability.

The only points at which the New Atheists seem to invite any serious intellectual engagement are those at which they try to demonstrate that all the traditional metaphysical arguments for the reality of God fail. At least, this *should* be their most powerful line of critique, and no doubt would be if any of them could demonstrate a respectable understanding of those traditional metaphysical arguments, as well as an ability to refute them. Curiously enough, however, not even the trained philosophers among them seem able to do this. And this is, as far as I can tell, as much a result of indolence as of philosophical ineptitude. The insouciance with which, for instance, Daniel Dennett tends to approach such matters is so torpid as to verge on the reptilian. He scarcely bothers even to get the traditional theistic arguments right, and the few ripostes he ventures are often the ones most easily discredited.

As a rule, the New Atheists' concept of God is simply that of some very immense and powerful being among other beings, who serves as the first cause of all other things only in the sense that he is prior to and larger than all other causes. That is, the New Atheists are concerned with the sort of God believed in by seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Deists. Dawkins, for instance, even cites with approval the old village atheists' cavil that omniscience and omnipotence are incompatible because a God who infallibly foresaw the future would be impotent to change it, as though Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, and so forth understood God simply as some temporal being of interminable duration who knows things as we do, as external objects of cognition, mediated to him under the conditions of space and time.

* *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies* (Yale, 2009).

Thus, the New Atheists' favorite argument turns out to be just a version of the old argument from infinite regress: If you try to explain the existence of the universe by asserting God created it, you have solved nothing because then you are obliged to say where God came from, and so on *ad infinitum*, one turtle after another, all the way down. This is a line of attack with a long pedigree, admittedly. John Stuart Mill learned it at his father's knee. Bertrand Russell thought it more than sufficient to put paid to the whole God issue once and for all. Dennett thinks it as unanswerable today as when Hume first advanced it—although, as a professed admirer of Hume, he might have noticed that Hume quite explicitly treats it as a formidable objection only to the God of Deism, not to the God of “traditional metaphysics.” In truth, though, there could hardly be a weaker argument. To use a feeble analogy, it is rather like asserting that it is inadequate to say that light is the cause of illumination because one is then obliged to say what it is that illuminates the light, and so on *ad infinitum*.

The most venerable metaphysical claims about God do not simply shift priority from one kind of thing (say, a teacup or the universe) to another thing that just happens to be much bigger and come much earlier (some discrete, very large gentleman who preexists teacups and universes alike). These claims start, rather, from the fairly elementary observation that nothing contingent, composite, finite, temporal, complex, and mutable can account for its own existence, and that even an infinite series of such things can never be the source or ground of its own being, but must depend on some source of actuality beyond itself. Thus, abstracting from the universal conditions of contingency, one very well may (and perhaps must) conclude that all things are sustained in being by an *absolute* plenitude of actuality, whose very essence is being as such: not a supreme being, not another *thing* within or alongside the universe, but the infinite act of being itself, the one eternal and transcendent source of all existence and knowledge, in which all finite being participates.

It is immaterial whether one is wholly convinced by such reasoning. Even its most ardent proponents would have to acknowledge that it is an almost entirely negative deduction, obedient only to something like Sherlock Holmes' maxim that when you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, *however improbable*, must be the truth. It certainly says nearly nothing about who or what God *is*.

But such reasoning is also certainly *not* subject to the objection from infinite regress. It is not logically requisite for anyone, on observing that contingent reality must depend on absolute reality, to say then what the absolute depends on or, on asserting the participation of finite beings in infinite being, further to explain what it is that makes being to be. Other arguments are called for, as Hume knew. And only a complete failure to grasp the most basic philosophical terms of the conversation could prompt this strange inversion of logic, by which the argument from infinite regress traditionally and correctly regarded as the most powerful objection to pure materialism is now treated as an irrefutable argument against belief in God.

But something worse than mere misunderstanding lies at the base of Dawkins' own special version of the argument from infinite regress, a version in which he takes a pride of almost maternal fierceness. Any being, he asserts, capable of exercising total control over the universe would have to be an extremely complex being, and because we know that complex beings must evolve from simpler beings and that the probability of a being as complex as that evolving is vanishingly minute, it is almost certain that no God exists. *Q.E.D.* But, of course, this scarcely rises to the level of nonsense. We can all happily concede that no complex, ubiquitous,

omniscient, and omnipotent superbeing, inhabiting the physical cosmos and subject to the rules of evolution, exists. But who has ever suggested the contrary?

Numerous attempts have been made, by the way, to apprise Dawkins of what the traditional definition of divine simplicity implies, and of how it logically follows from the very idea of transcendence, and to explain to him what it means to speak of God as the transcendent fullness of actuality, and how this differs in kind from talk of quantitative degrees of composite complexity. But all the evidence suggests that Dawkins has never understood the point being made, and it is his unfortunate habit contemptuously to dismiss as meaningless concepts whose meanings elude him. Frankly, going solely on the record of his published work, it would be rash to assume that Dawkins has ever learned how to reason his way to the end of a simple syllogism.

To appreciate the true spirit of the New Atheism, however, and to take proper measure of its intellectual depth, one really has to turn to Christopher Hitchens. Admittedly, he is the most egregiously slapdash of the New Atheists, as well as (not coincidentally) the most entertaining, but I take this as proof that he is also the least self-deluding. His *God Is Not Great* shows no sign whatsoever that he ever intended anything other than a rollicking burlesque, without so much as a pretense of logical order or scholarly rigor. His sporadic forays into philosophical argument suggest not only that he has sailed into unfamiliar waters, but also that he is simply not very interested in any of it. His occasional observations on Hume and Kant make it obvious that he has not really read either very closely. He apparently believes that Nietzsche, in announcing the death of God, literally meant to suggest that the supreme being named God had somehow met his demise. The title of one of the chapters in *God Is Not Great* is “The Metaphysical Claims of Religion Are False”, but nowhere in that chapter does Hitchens actually say what those claims or their flaws are.

On matters of simple historical and textual fact, moreover, Hitchens’ book is so extraordinarily crowded with errors that one soon gives up counting them. Just to skim a few off the surface: He speaks of the ethos of Dietrich Bonhoeffer as an admirable but nebulous humanism, which is roughly on a par with saying that Gandhi was an apostle of the ruthless conquest and spoliation of weaker peoples. He conflates the histories of the first and fourth crusades. He repeats as fact the long discredited myth that Christians destroyed the works of Aristotle and Lucretius, or systematically burned the books of pagan antiquity, which is the very opposite of what did happen. He speaks of the traditional hostility of religion (whatever that may be) to medicine, despite the monastic origins of the modern hospital and the involvement of Christian missions in medical research and medical care from the fourth century to the present. He tells us that *countless* lives were lost in the early centuries of the Church over disputes regarding which gospels were legitimate (the actual number of lives lost is zero). He asserts that Myles Coverdale and John Wycliffe were burned alive at the stake, although both men died of natural causes. He knows that the last twelve verses of Mark 16 are a late addition to the text, but he imagines this means that the entire account of the Resurrection is as well. He informs us that it is well known that Augustine was fond of the myth of the Wandering Jew, though Augustine died eight centuries before the legend was invented. And so on and so on (and so on).

In the end, though, all of this might be tolerated if Hitchens’ book exhibited some rough semblance of a rational argument. After all, there really is a great deal to despise in the history of religion, even if Hitchens gets almost all the particular details extravagantly wrong. To be

perfectly honest, however, I cannot tell what Hitchens' central argument is. It is not even clear what he understands religion to be. For instance, he denounces female circumcision, commendably enough, but what pray tell has that got to do with religion? Clitoridectomy is a widespread cultural tradition of sub-Saharan Africa, but it belongs to no particular creed. Even more oddly, he takes indignant note of the plight of young Indian brides brutalized and occasionally murdered on account of insufficient dowries. We all, no doubt, share his horror, but what the hell is his point?

As best I can tell, Hitchens' case against faith consists mostly in a series of anecdotal enthymemes—that is to say, syllogisms of which one premise has been suppressed. Unfortunately, in each case it turns out to be the major premise that is missing, so it is hard to guess what links the minor premise to the conclusion. One need only attempt to write out some of his arguments in traditional syllogistic style to see the difficulty:

Major Premise: [omitted]

Minor Premise: Evelyn Waugh was always something of a bastard, and his Catholic chauvinism often made him even worse.

Conclusion: Religion is evil.

Or:

Major Premise: [omitted]

Minor Premise: There are many bad men who are Buddhists.

Conclusion: All religious claims are false.

Or:

Major Premise: [omitted]

Minor Premise: Timothy Dwight opposed smallpox vaccinations.

Conclusion: There is no God.

One could, I imagine, counter with a series of contrary enthymemes. Perhaps:

Major Premise: [omitted]

Minor Premise: Early Christians built hospitals.

Conclusion: Religion is a good thing.

Or:

Major Premise: [omitted]

Minor Premise: Medieval scriptoria saved much of the literature of classical antiquity from total eclipse.

Conclusion: All religious claims are true.

Or:

Major Premise: [omitted]

Minor Premise: George Bernard Shaw opposed smallpox vaccinations.

Conclusion: There *is* a God.

But this appears to get us nowhere. And, in the end, I doubt it matters.

The only really effective antidote to the dreariness of reading the New Atheists, it seems to me, is rereading Nietzsche. How much more immediate and troubling the force of his protest against Christianity seems when compared to theirs, even more than a century after his death. Perhaps his intellectual courage, his willingness to confront the implications of his renunciation of the Christian story of truth and the transcendent good without evasions or retreats, is rather a lot to ask of any other thinker, but it does rather make the atheist *chic* of today look fairly craven by comparison.

Above all, Nietzsche understood how immense the consequences of the rise of Christianity had been, and how immense the consequences of its decline would be as well, and had the intelligence to know he could not fall back on polite moral certitudes to which he no longer had any right. Just as the Christian revolution created a new sensibility by inverting many of the highest values of the pagan past, so the decline of Christianity, Nietzsche knew, portends another, perhaps equally catastrophic shift in moral and cultural consciousness. His famous fable in *The Gay Science* of the madman who announces God's death is anything but a hymn of atheist triumphalism. In fact, the madman despairs of the mere atheists, those who merely do not believe, to whom he addresses his terrible proclamation. In their moral contentment, their ease of conscience, he sees an essential oafishness; they do not dread the death of God because they do not grasp that humanity's heroic and insane act of repudiation has sponged away the horizon, torn down the heavens, left us with only the uncertain resources of our will with which to combat the infinity of meaninglessness that the universe now threatens to become.

Because he understood the nature of what had happened when Christianity entered history with the annunciation of the death of God on the cross, and the elevation of a Jewish peasant above all gods, Nietzsche understood also that the passing of Christian faith permits no return to pagan naiveté, and he knew that this monstrous inversion of values created within us a conscience that the older order could never have incubated. He understood also that the death of God beyond us is the death of the human as such within us. If we are, after all, nothing but the fortuitous effects of physical causes, then the will is bound to no rational measure but itself, and who can imagine what sort of world will spring up from so unprecedented and so vertiginously uncertain a vision of reality?

For Nietzsche, therefore, the future that lies before us must be decided, and decided between only two possible paths: a final nihilism, which aspires to nothing beyond the momentary consolations of material contentment, or some great feat of creative will, inspired by a new and

truly worldly mythos powerful enough to replace the old and discredited mythos of the Christian revolution (for him, of course, this meant the myth of the *Übermensch*).

Perhaps; perhaps not. Where Nietzsche was almost certainly correct, however, was in recognizing that mere formal atheism was not yet the same thing as true unbelief. As he writes in *The Gay Science*, once the Buddha was dead, people displayed his shadow for centuries afterwards in a cave, an immense and dreadful shadow. God is dead: but as the human race is constituted, there will perhaps be caves for millennia yet where people will display his shadow. And we have yet to overcome his shadow! It may appear that Nietzsche is here referring to persons of faith, those poor souls who continue to make their placid, bovine trek to church every week to worship a God who passed away long ago, but that is not his meaning.

He is referring principally to those who think they have eluded God simply by ceasing to believe in his existence. For Nietzsche, “scientism”—the belief that the modern scientific method is the only avenue of truth, one capable of providing moral truth or moral meaning—is the worst dogmatism yet, and the most pathetic of all metaphysical nostalgias. And it is, in his view, precisely men like the New Atheists, clinging as they do to those tenuous vestiges of Christian morality that they have absurdly denominated humans, who shelter themselves in caves and venerate shadows. As they do not understand the past, or the nature of the spiritual revolution that has come and now gone for Western humanity, so they cannot begin to understand the peril of the future.

If I were to choose from among the New Atheists a single figure who to my mind epitomizes the spiritual chasm that separates Nietzsche’s unbelief from theirs, I think it would be the philosopher and essayist A. C. Grayling. For a short time I entertained the misguided hope that he might produce an atheist manifesto somewhat richer than the others currently on offer. Unfortunately, all his efforts in that direction suffer from the same defects as those of his fellows: the historical errors, the sententious moralism, the glib sophistry. Their great virtue, however, is that they are mercifully short. One essay of his in particular, called “Religion and Reason”, can be read in a matter of minutes and provides an almost perfect distillation of the whole New Atheist project.

The essay is even, at least momentarily, interesting. Couched at one juncture among its various arguments (all of which are pretty poor), there is something resembling a cogent point. Among the defenses of Christianity an apologist might adduce, says Grayling, would be a purely aesthetic cultural argument: But for Christianity, there would be no Renaissance art—no Annunciations or Madonnas—and would we not all be much the poorer if that were so? But, in fact, no, counters Grayling; we might rather profit from a far greater number of canvasses devoted to the lovely mythical themes of classical antiquity, and only a macabre sensibility could fail to see that an Aphrodite emerging from the Paphian foam is an infinitely more life-enhancing image than a Deposition from the Cross. Here Grayling almost achieves a Nietzschean moment of moral clarity.

Ignoring that leaden and almost perfectly ductile phrase “life-enhancing,” I, too—red of blood and rude of health—would have to say I generally prefer the sight of nubile beauty to that of a murdered man’s shattered corpse. The question of whether Grayling might be accused of a certain deficiency of tragic sense can be deferred here. But perhaps he would have done well, in choosing this comparison, to have reflected on the sheer strangeness, and the significance, of the

historical and cultural changes that made it possible in the first place for the death of a common man at the hands of a duly appointed legal authority to become the captivating center of an entire civilization's moral and aesthetic contemplations and for the deaths of all common men and women perhaps to be invested thereby with a gravity that the ancient order would never have accorded them.

Here, displayed with an altogether elegant incomprehensibility in Grayling's casual juxtaposition of the sea-born goddess and the crucified God (who is a crucified man), one catches a glimpse of the enigma of the Christian event, which Nietzsche understood and Grayling does not: the lightning bolt that broke from the cloudless sky of pagan antiquity, the long revolution that overturned the hierarchies of heaven and earth alike. One does not have to believe any of it, of course—the Christian story, its moral claims, its metaphysical systems, and so forth. But anyone who chooses to lament that event should also be willing, first, to see this image of the God-man, broken at the foot of the cross, for what it is, in the full mystery of its historical contingency, spiritual pathos, and moral novelty: that tender agony of the soul that finds the glory of God in the most abject and defeated of human forms. Only if one has succeeded in doing this can it be of any significance if one still, then, elects to turn away.