

BOOK REVIEWS AND NOTICES

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CLIMBING MOUNT UNINTELLIGIBLE? SCIENCE, RELIGION AND THE QUESTION OF MEANING AND EXPLANATION

Richard Dawkins. *The God Delusion*. New York: First Mariner Books, 2008.

Michael Martin, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

Louise M. Antony, ed. *Philosophers without Gods. Meditations on Atheism and the Secular Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

I.

Science and religion, atheism and theism, seem to be attracting quite a lot of attention these days. Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion* has generated significant debate not just among philosophers of religion (most notably Richard Swinburne and Alvin Plantinga among others) but also among scientists (for example, Steven Weinberg and Peter Atkins) and other thinkers such as Daniel Dennett, Michel Onfray and so on. Recent volumes tend to reinforce the idea of an upsurge of interest in the philosophical and scientific foundations, if any, of atheism. Two of the most significant recent contributions are the volumes edited by Michael Martin and Louise Anthony. All of these volumes deserve careful analysis and scrutiny.

II.

Dawkins attacks a number of important philosophical and religious targets. For example, “agnosticism” is critiqued, though Dawkins argues that it is acceptable, even reasonable, where evidence is lacking (p. 69). He cites Hugh Ross Williamson and Carl Sagan on agnosticism, but not the Pyrrhonists, Pascal, Hume, Kant, Ayer, JJC Smart, Haldane, and many others (see for example, Floridi, 2002; Sinnott-Armstrong, 2004; Nelson, 1981; Penelhum, 2000; Forster, 2008; Ayer, 1990; Smart and Haldane, 1996). He understands it in terms of absence of evidence and in terms of good arguments for opposing positions (p. 70). “Temporary Agnosticism in Practice” [TAP] amounts to “fence-sitting where there really is a definite answer... but we lack the evidence to reach it” (p. 70); “Permanent Agnosticism in Principle” [PAP] applies where “the very idea of evidence is not applicable.” Agnosticism about “the existence of God belongs firmly in the ... TAP category” (p. 70). Dawkins insists: “it is a scientific question” - we do not know the answer now—but “we can say something pretty strong” about the probability.

The “inventor” of the term “agnosticism,” T. H. Huxley (p. 71), focused on the impossibility of furnishing a proof or disproof of the existence of God, but ignored the “shading of probability” (p. 72). Again, Dawkins asserts that the existence of God is a scientific hypothesis, *like any other*. It would be interesting to hear what, for Dawkins, exists beyond the bounds of scientific inquiry, if indeed anything does, and whether or not the domain of metaphysics exceeds these bounds. Dawkins relies more on assertion than on sustained argument here. He asserts that God’s existence is discoverable “in principle” (p. 73); and if it is neither proven nor disproven, “available evidence and reasoning may yield an estimate of probability far from 50 percent” (p. 73). Dawkins seems to mean that this estimate of probability would be made in accord with methods of empirical inquiry. But then what of metaphysics? (It is frustrating that, in the end, one is left with an unclear, incomplete notion of Dawkins’ understanding of metaphysics). He states, baldly, “it is in the nature of faith that one is capable... of holding a belief without adequate reason to do so” (p. 74); atheists “do not have faith” (p. 74). Neither assertion is adequately or clearly defended. Where might a biologist find such

a creature, atheistic in inclination, and faithless (literally, completely)? On Mount Unintelligible, perhaps?

There is no account of “*adequate* reasons” and what differentiates these from other sorts of reasons, yet much turns on this move; no coherent account of “faith” and its diverse forms. What does “faith in x” or “having faith” mean in relation to deities, as well as to other people, other minds, the future, induction in the sciences, theories, unobservable entities, events, and so on? He means that atheists do not have “religious faith,” but this is typical of the book’s blind spots and lacunae, and indeed, lack of clear, sustained thinking at a number of critical points.

Russell’s “parable of the celestial teapot” (p. 76) is quoted approvingly: “revolving around the sun in an elliptical orbit” that “nobody would be able to disprove” provided one “were careful to add that the teapot is too small to be revealed even by our most powerful telescope”. The conclusion drawn from this is that the “burden of proof rests with the believers not the non-believers” (p. 76). There is no critical reflection on the analogy: is it wholly uncontroversial or uncontentious, especially given the anomaly of the scenario with its completely physical, manufactured vessel? The resemblance seems superficial, at best. Yet the analogy is asserted uncritically even as the irony is missed: a champion of “science” proceeds by unwarranted or unsubstantiated assertions. It would help to know why he thinks the analogy *suffices*—because it reinforces his case? Why suspend critical thinking in relation to questionable analogies, assumptions and assertions?

Russell’s teapot “demonstrates that the ubiquity of belief in God ... does not shift the burden of proof in logic” (p. 77). How it demonstrates this is not explained. What does Dawkins *understand* by the “burden of proof” in logic? Is he thinking of *inductive* arguments? If so, what of proof and *demonstration*? Again, the vast literature on agnosticism, and its complex historical affiliations, is largely overlooked, forgotten, or ignored at this point. The research is very thin—a pity given what is at stake in these debates.

The sections on the classical theistic arguments are also problematic, because they are dismissive or not deeply researched. According to Dawkins, Aquinas’ “five ways” are “easily... exposed as vacuous” (p. 100)—an intemperate and unscientific judgment, perhaps even an irrational one, since it is not demonstrated by any argument in the book. Dawkins notes,

with good reason, that there are some “unwarranted assumptions” in these arguments (p. 101). Perhaps there is “absolutely no reason to endow” a first cause with omniscience and omnipotence; perhaps, as he points out, calling this cause, “God,” is “at best unhelpful and at worst perniciously misleading” (p. 102). But even if one grants all of this, for the purposes of argument, his conclusion (that these arguments are “vacuous”) would still not follow. This kind of lack of rigor and care at critical stages undermines the book as a whole.

He asserts that Darwin “blew [the teleological argument] out of the water” (p. 103). The fact that Hume, among others, critiqued such arguments almost a century before Darwin’s *Origin of Species* is not given much credit. Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* is not discussed. These thinkers are mentioned briefly in the section on the Ontological Argument, but not here. The Ontological Argument translates into the “language of the playground” (p. 104); it employs “logomachist trickery” (p. 104). It does not feed “in a single piece of data from the real world” (p. 107). It is hardly reasonable to expect an ontological argument to do the work of a cosmological argument, that is, to begin with empirical premises. He leaves out much of the debate especially the work of its defenders: Plantinga, Hartshorne, Godel, Malcolm, and so on. Assertions and presuppositions about the “real world” are not elucidated or substantiated: is this “real world” the “world” revealed by, or consistent with, quantum physics or neuroscience? If so, how is this the case?

The “central argument” of the book (p. 187) deserves careful scrutiny, as it turns on numerous claims that raise significant (and largely unanswered) questions. For example, Dawkin’s assertion that the “argument from improbability is the big one” and “comes close to proving that God does *not* exist” (emphasis added; p. 136). He calls this “statistical demonstration” the “Ultimate Boeing 747 Gambit” (after Hoyle): the probability “of life originating on earth is no greater than the chance that a hurricane, sweeping through a scrapyard, would have the luck to assemble a Boeing 747” (pp. 137–138). The Gambit is not developed much: why not present the analogy critically, that is to say even-handedly? Is it actually defensible? He does imply that “science” is an “honest quest for truth” (p. 185), after all. Another example: “Darwinian natural selection is the only known solution to the otherwise *unanswerable* riddle of where the information comes from [i.e. the “source of all the information in living matter”]” (emphasis added;

p. 138). It would help to know how a theory can do all of this work, and conclusively, without going well beyond the available evidence, and if it does go well beyond, how these conclusions are to be justified.

Six other central claims are questionable to say the least. First, he states that “complex things could not have come about by chance” (p. 139), yet no evidence is presented to justify this proposition in relation to *all* complex things. Second, he states that the “illusion of design is a trap”—fair enough, but the link between the evidence, design and “illusion” in *nature as a whole* remains obscure; the *evidence* may someday *establish* this much, but it may require a fair measure of faith! Third, he states that natural selection “explains *the whole* of life [it is a “theory of *life*,” emphasis added] in terms of non-random but purely natural causes” (p. 141). How then do we arrive, starting from what we know of *nature* by observation, experience, calculation, reasoning, and so on, at a comprehensive view of the whole of *life*? Indeed, what does Dawkins mean by “life”? Fourth, he states that “evolution by natural selection is the ultimate scientific consciousness raiser” (p. 142). It would help to see evidence for claims concerning “ultimate” things, so that Dawkins might escape the suspicion that he is committing a kind of “Biologism”—*discriminating, without sufficient reason, in favor* of biology. Fifth, he states that “Darwin and Wallace... provided explanations of our existence that completely rejected supernatural agents” (Susskind quoted, p. 143). There is no account of what “explanation of our existence” means, of how Darwin’s science relates to metaphysics and specifically, ontology. Finally, he claims that “the designer immediately raises the bigger problem of his own origin... Far from terminating the vicious regress, God aggravates it with a vengeance... who designed the designer?” (p. 146). Even if one grants this, does Dawkins’ posited first “vital ingredient,” a “genetic molecule,” evade the “regress”? It is not clear how. The analysis seems tendentious and incomplete.

He misses the irony again when he writes that, “we on the science side must not be too dogmatically confident” [!] (p. 150)—though the basis on which he speaks on behalf of “science” remains obscure. Even as he speaks for “science” (whatever that grandiose monolith signifies) he warns against too much dogmatic confidence! Likewise, he speaks of the “scientist’s natural—indeed necessary—rejoicing in (temporary) uncertainty” (p. 152). It is a pity, it has to be said, that more evidence of such rejoicing isn’t evident in this book.

He insists, sensibly, that making an assertion without further argument or justification is “no way to do science” (p. 154) and misses the irony again; it is tempting to conclude then, that many of the positions in the book, some of which have already been mentioned, are “no way to do science.” He asserts that God “explains nothing” (p. 161) but misses the ambiguity in the meaning of “explanation,” which might refer to the “explanations” that might conceivably flow to theists from the belief in an intervening creator, or the “explanation” that God might constitute for theists, or the “explanation” of why something came out of nothing, or the “explanation” in terms of some creative origin of life. Some disentangling is necessary. It should be noted that there is another large body of research—on “explanation”—which is missing from the book (see for example, Ayer, 1973 and 1956; Hempel, 1965 and 2001; Achinstein, 1983; Rescher, 1983; Pitt, 1988; Kitcher and Salmon, 1989; Ruben, 1990; Knowles, 1990; Wisdom, 1991; Charles and Lennon, 1992; Earman, 1992; Schaffner, 1993; Lipton, 1995; Salmon, 1998; Campbell, O’Rourke and Silverstein, 2007; and many others)

Other monoliths such as “the religious mind” (p. 164) are presented without deep analysis. The lack of supporting evidence, clarification and critical reflection is again striking. What on earth does “the factual premise of religion” (p. 189) *mean*? Is “religion” monolithic? Such one-dimensional thinking raises doubts about this conception of “religion,” which seems to be reduced to a Straw Man. One cannot but wonder, if any profound truths can be revealed about “religion” or “faith” by this kind of thinking? The understanding of the “first cause” is hardly less problematic: a “self-bootstrapping crane which eventually raised the world as we know it into its present complex existence” (p. 185). A crane that *self-bootstraps*? And in such a way, that the whole “world” and “our existence” arise from it? One awaits, with eager anticipation, a presentation of clear evidence in justification of this claim. The noble discourse— that Dawkins invokes— of an “honest quest for truth” (p. 185) becomes problematic in light of gaps in the evidence Dawkins provides, and flaws in his reasoning.

It is disappointing in this day and age, given the vast research (largely absent from the book) on philosophy of science and of religion, to see such a flawed yet encompassing, unsubstantiated affirmation of “science”—a kind of *naïve biologism*, one might say, at the foundation, that broadens and

blazes, albeit nebulously, into a kind of *naïve neo-scientism*. Affirmation is fine, but Dawkins seems unaware of, or he overlooks, at least *four* areas of significant contemporary debate that impact on his understanding, broadly, of “science” and “religion.” Firstly, debates about the *epistemology* of scientific *theories*, which raises questions about whether theories are the *only* or the *best* sources of our knowledge of nature, what these *theories* entail or offer, particularly in relation to “truth,” whether or not *theoretical* knowledge can be *privileged* over other forms of knowledge, as well as examining the meaning, nature and scope of theoretical *explanations* and *probabilistic explanations*, and so on. Secondly, debates about the *metaphysics* of scientific theories as representations of “reality,” broadly defined, and their *explanatory* capability in relation to “reality” as a whole. This includes debates about induction and the logic of causation, especially in light of the physics of indeterminacy, uncertainty and complementarity; debates about the nature and scope of scientific revolutions and about the contingency of empirical propositions; and about the question of the *unity* of the sciences (which ought *not* to be presupposed, unless what are arguably *articles of faith*, are to be allowed into the discussion. Dawkins should make his understanding of and position on these debates clear if the broad understanding of science that underpins the book is to be well-informed, thoroughly researched, profound and/or convincing.

III.

Martin’s volume is particularly rich and thought-provoking: there are 3 papers on context and “background” (Ian N. Bremmer on atheism and antiquity; Gavin Hyman on atheism in “modern history”; Phil Zuckerman on contemporary atheism); nine chapters on the case against theism (including papers by William Lane Craig on “theistic critiques of atheism”; Richard M. Gale and Keith Parsons on theistic arguments; Dennett on evolution; Quentin Smith on Kalam cosmological arguments and so on; and six essays on “Implications,” including Martin on “atheism and religion,” Christine Overall on feminism, and John D. Caputo on postmodernism.

Dennett argues that Darwin’s theory was “in fact a new and wonderful way of thinking... a bubble-up vision in which [anthropomorphic]

intelligence...eventually emerges as just one of the products of mindless, mechanistic processes... fueled by untold billions of pointless, undesigned collisions, some vanishing small fractions of which fortuitously lead to tiny improvements in the lineages in which they occur" (p. 136). Further, "these ruthlessly tested design innovations accumulate over the eons, yielding breathtakingly brilliant designs that never had a designer—other than the purposeless, distributed process of natural selection itself" (p. 136). What is remarkable, and unsurprising, about this discourse—not so much an *argument* as a discourse, or a *rhetorical flourish*, perhaps—is not just that it is breathtaking in its stylistic brilliance, but that much is simply asserted and remains unsubstantiated. Indeed, the effulgence threatens to push significant scientific and philosophical questions almost out of view: is Darwin's way of thinking "new" in a literal sense, and if so, in what sense? In part or as a whole? Does the *available evidence* justify the assertion of "mindlessness" or "purposelessness" in relation to all the processes or, for that matter, the "pointless" nature of all the "collisions"? Dennett does seem to go well beyond the evidence; too much is taken for granted.

One can go on: in what sense does the available biological evidence *show* that "fortuitousness" reigns, and reigns *everywhere*? Dennett believes that "there can be no reasonable doubt" that the Darwinian picture is "in all its broad outlines... the true story of how *all* living things came to have the designs we observe" (emphasis added; p. 137). We start with regularity (order) and time- "the mere purposeless, mindless, pointless regularity of physics" (p. 141)—and proceed to "a process" [at times Dennett speaks of one process; at other times, "processes"] that yields "products" in which both regularity and purposive design are *observable*. (Are the "regularities" of the quantum world, if there are any such regularities, demonstrably or *observably* "pointless"?)

The understanding of "explanation" implicit in the statement that "X (e.g. God) explains nothing," a claim which Dennet repeats after Dawkins, is debatable; it is one thing to *explain something* (though there is some disagreement on what might *count* as an explanation); it is another thing to *explain something well or conclusively*. One might say: a false or misleading explanation is in a logical sense still an *explanation*; one might distinguish meaningfully between its *sense*, and its *validity, truth or justification*.

According to Dennett, “All that is left over in need of explanation at this point is a certain perceived elegance or wonderfulness in the observed laws of physics” (p. 147). Does this mean that the enigmas of quantum theory, which presumably underpins biological entities (as Schrödinger believed), have been resolved? Dennett, though, makes an important philosophical point: the “Darwinian perspective doesn’t prove that God ... couldn’t exist, but only that we have no good reason to think that God does exist” (p. 147). It is a pity that he does not provide a compelling defense of a number of assertions that are required for the general thrust of his argument to cohere: for example, the claim that there are *no logical arguments* that justify belief in God. (There does seem to be a confusion here between logical arguments for *belief in* God and logical arguments for the *existence of* God; and the best that Dennett can do here is argue that there are no such arguments *up to this point*, if one grants for the moment that he is correct.)

Keith Parsons provides a critique of some arguments by Swinburne and Plantinga. He notes that the arguments he chooses are “unavoidably somewhat idiosyncratic” (p. 102), due to the restrictions on space. He outlines two versions of Plantinga’s argument. Plantinga holds, according to Parsons, that “it is reasonable to believe that God exists even if there are no arguments, reasons, or evidence for the claim that God exists,” (p. 103). To be rational means “that we have certain duties with respect to our beliefs—such as the duty to strive to base our beliefs on adequate evidence” (pp. 103–104) or on “permissible” beliefs that “flout no epistemic duties” (p. 104). According to Plantinga’s 1983 version of theism, “Christians are within their epistemic rights in taking ‘God exists’ as properly basic” (a belief is basic if “is not inferred from any other belief or beliefs”) (p. 103), and so do not flout their epistemic “duties.” Parsons argues forcefully that Plantinga makes the “conditions of proper basicity so absurdly easy to meet that just about anything, however bizarre, could count as properly basic for someone” (p. 106). The critic of the 1983 version can offer a *reductio ad absurdum*, so long as “other patently irrational beliefs” can also be shown to be properly basic “for the groups that endorse them,” for example, belief in “Moloch or voodoo” (p. 108).

Parsons then turns to Plantinga’s “2000 Version”: belief is rational “if and only if it is ‘warranted’”, that is, has “nothing to do with anyone’s subjective awareness of justifying reasons” (p. 108). “Warrant” is used

in an externalist sense: for example, if it is “broad daylight,” Parson’s eyes are open, and there is an elephant in front of him, then his belief that there is an elephant in front of him is warranted, if his optical and cognitive faculties are operating as designed and nothing blocks or distracts his view (p. 109). The “proper functioning of our faculties in appropriate circumstances sometimes produces beliefs that are ‘warrant basic’, that is, both basic and warranted” (p. 109); and according to Parsons, Plantinga argues further that we have a *sensus divinitatis*, a “faculty, that when operating properly and in appropriate circumstances, will provide us with the warrant basic belief that God exists” (p. 109). However, not everyone has such a properly functioning faculty; “unbelief” is construed as “a product of epistemic malfunction” (p. 110). Parsons responds hastily by arguing that the atheist can “stand Plantinga’s argument on its head and argue that the fact that theistic belief is not warrant basic [as noted by Tyler Wunder whom Parsons quotes] shows that there probably is no God!” (p. 111). Parsons adds: “arguments against the *rationality* of theistic belief now become arguments also against the *truth* of theism” (p. 111).

He then turns to Swinburne’s cosmological argument (that “theism can be confirmed as an explanatory hypothesis,” p. 112). According to Parsons, Swinburne argues that the “great simplicity of theism” makes its “intrinsic probability” very high (“relative to other hypotheses about what there is”) (p. 114). Parsons asks three significant questions: is theism “ontologically simpler than any possible naturalistic rival?” Parsons argues that it is not clear why a God who has attributes such as omnipotence would “possess a simplicity that no finite, limited attributes could match,” (p. 115). If theism is “ontologically simpler than any possible naturalistic rival,” does it “achieve greater ontological simplicity at the price of greater conceptual complexity and explanatory obscurity?” And why “should allegedly greater simplicity make theism intrinsically more probable than naturalism?” (p. 115)

Parsons believes that theism of this kind introduces far “greater explanatory obscurity into our view of reality” (p. 115). He adds, “by contrast, the quest for a scientific theory of everything is the search for a theory that will, *we hope*, not only simplify our ontology, but also, ideally, provide greater conceptual simplicity and explanatory clarity” (emphasis added, p. 115). At this point Parson’s argument becomes quite

problematic. First, it is conceivable that Swinburne's theism could be true; if so, it would not necessarily follow that the object of someone's theistic beliefs would introduce greater ontological or "conceptual complexity" and "explanatory obscurity" into their view of reality. It also does not follow that a "theory of everything" would provide greater "conceptual simplicity" or less "explanatory obscurity" than the knowledge of that previously mentioned theist, if they turned out to be right. The problem here is the ambiguity of the phrase "theory of everything"; which normally signifies the bridging, so to speak, of relativity and quantum theory. Parsons seems to understand it more broadly, and literally. Some clarification would help; so too would a convincing case for the view that such a theory— in either or both senses—will produce "conceptual simplicity" and "explanatory clarity."

A counter-argument that hinges, to a significant degree on a *hope*, is hardly going to do the work that is required to secure a conclusive refutation of the Swinburnian theist's position. Further, Parsons also needs to give a clearer preliminary account—if his argument is to be conclusive—of what sort of ontology would count as conceptually simple, and precisely how this ontology would cohere with a naturalistic theory of "reality" that is demonstrably true or valid. His final point is also questionable: he asks if the "promise of a quasi-scientific theism" that "fails to deliver" is the "best that theism can offer in support of itself" and concludes that it is, even though the sample he has analyzed and studied does seem to be a very small one. It would seem that the *idiosyncrasies* of Parson's selection (which he himself acknowledges at the beginning of the essay), may have extended to his *conclusion* as well.

IV.

Louise M. Antony's volume fills an important gap; what the collection of essays offers is not "manifestos or creeds" but explanations, introduced with a quiet eloquence, an arresting honesty: "we have no sacred texts, no authorities with definitive answers to our question about the nature of morality or the purpose of life...only our ideals... to motivate us, only our sympathy and our intelligence to make us good....we want simply to explain what we believe, and why..." (p.xiii)

The first section consists of personal “journeys” by thinkers who “abjure traditional religious faith” (p.x). Antony writes on love and reason; Stewart Shapiro ruminates on “faith and reason”; Joseph Levine writes on secular humanism; Daniel Garber gives an account of the costs of living without God; Dennett reflects on “goodness”; and so on. The essays that comprise the second part of the volume explore more general issues in philosophy and religion. For example, Simon Blackburn reflects on respect; Kenneth A. Taylor reflects on atheism and the “human adventure”; David Owens contributes an essay on “disenchantment”; Richard Feldman reflects on “reasonable religious disagreements”; Jonathan E Adler writes on fanaticism; and David Lewis writes on “divine evil.”

Dennett, having survived “a dissection of the aorta” and nine hours of surgery, provides another vivid, memorable but debatable essay, entitled “Thank Goodness!” in the first section. He wishes to celebrate the “fantastic human-made fabric of excellence” responsible for his continuing life. He argues that “no religion holds its members to the high standards of moral responsibility that the secular world of science and medicine does” (for example, the “standards of conscientiousness endorsed by lab technicians and meal preparers”) (p. 115). However, *no religions* are mentioned here or in footnotes. He certainly has a broader understanding of “faith” than Dawkins, even if the picture seems a little idealized: “this tradition puts its faith in the *unlimited* application of reason and empirical inquiry, checking and rechecking, and getting in the habit of asking, ‘What if I’m wrong?’”

Dennett is generous in his affirmations, and understandably so: “it is the goodness of this tradition of reason and open inquiry that I thank for my being alive today” (p. 115). He is less generous towards his theistic friends: he has had to forgive friends who prayed for him and has resisted the temptation to ask them, “but did you also sacrifice a goat?” (p. 116). Yet there is a tension, potentially fatal, especially in terms of the essay’s coherence. He praises, voluminously and memorably, the “goodness of the tradition” of open inquiry but makes a number of dogmatic assertions (which are not substantiated): the “effectiveness of prayer” is a “myth” (there is nothing in this essay about empirical inquiries into such matters); and the “very idea of thanking God is ludicrous” (p. 117), since gratitude means making “paltry repayments.” “What if I’m wrong?” is the question that Dennett wants “religious people” to ask themselves. Fair enough, too.

But how odd, and ironic, that he does not follow the logic of his argument through, and ask, what if he is wrong, especially about the “fantastic fabric” as a whole?

Simon Blackburn provides a thoughtful, thought-provoking and acutely poignant account of religion and respect, surely one of the compelling questions of our age. He asks why we should respect belief systems that we do not share (p. 179). He notes that respect is a “tricky term” (this “makes it uniquely well placed for ideological purposes,” p. 180) that spans a “spectrum from simply not interfering, passing by on the other side, through admiration, right up to reverence and deference” (p. 180). On the question of “getting the nature of the gods right,” the “only honest way,” he argues, “would be to query the cognitive trappings of religion, or in other words, to admit that we are in the domain of emotion or attitude or stance rather than the domain of belief” (p. 181). Like Lewis, he believes that beliefs are “contagious” (p. 182) (“Whence, then, the demand for respect” for people who seemingly adopt “irrational” beliefs?)

Blackburn argues that “onto-theology” “makes existence claims” (p. 183) which “are more or less reasonable or convincing, and when they are true they point to an explanation of the way things are in one respect or another” (p. 183). The alternative it seems is “expressive theology” (p. 184) which describes “*other* worlds, or even past and future events in *this* world, but only to orientate us towards this world... towards each other” (p. 184). Blackburn adds, insightfully again, “we don’t know how to reject a stance until we know what it is, and unfortunately just here, matters become somewhat indeterminate” (p. 184). He also adds, sensibly, that he does “not think the expressive account of religion could possibly be the whole story” (p. 185). He does assert that “religions are human productions” (p. 185), though there is no scholarly support for this in the essay. He argues that there is no entitlement to respect for someone who holds a “false belief” (p. 188) .

He concludes by arguing, quite reasonably, that religion does not necessarily “occupy” “the entire territory of spirituality, or the search for the meaning of life” (p. 189). Finite things are not devoid of “meaning” (a notion which is not clarified) just because they do not last forever. The “immanent option” involves some dogmatic elements, it seems: “there is nothing beyond or apart from the processes of life”; there is “no one goal

to which all these processes tend, but we can find something precious, value and meaning, in the processes themselves"; "there is no such thing as *the* meaning of life, but there can be many meanings within a life" (p. 190). Blackburn adds, it "may well be a regrettable feature of modernity that we have not found a balance [between the sacred and the secular] and a severe condemnation of the capitalist world that may make it impossible to give it political expression."

If one is asked to show respect for a position that seems to be based on "ontological self-deception" (p. 193), what then? Blackburn says, with memorable honesty: "I fear there is no one answer. I fear that the somewhat unaccountable state of mind of my host may be interpreted in either way, and no doubt in yet other ways again" (p. 193). The room Blackburn makes for the complexities and indeterminateness that inform "our" view of the world gives his essay and his argument a consistency, complexity and coherence that is frankly lacking in a number of the other essays reviewed.

David Lewis argues that the "most ambitious version" of the argument from evil "succeeds conclusively" (p. 231): that is, "the existence of evil is logically incompatible with the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, and completely benevolent deity" (p. 231). Lewis insists: "there is no evasion, unless the standards of success are set unreasonably high." The "neglected version" of this argument focuses not on "the evils that God fails to prevent," but rather the "evils God himself perpetrates" (p. 231). "The orthodox story" shows that insubordination is to be punished, and forever, and though there are disagreements about what counts as insubordination, "it is clear" that there are attitudes and actions that will "suffice for damnation" (p. 232). What "God does is thus infinitely worse than what the worst tyrants did" (p. 232): God prolongs the torture forever and by "vastly surpassing all the modes of torment about which we know" (p. 232). The "punishment of the damned is infinitely disproportionate to their crimes" (p. 232). If lack of faith "suffices for damnation" (does it?), then the suffering will be eternal.

The counter-argument that "the orthodox story" is a kind of "cartoon" version of theism is rejected by Lewis on two grounds: "the neglected argument" does apply against "mainstream versions of theism" (p. 232). Lewis claims that there are numerous passages in the New Testament and in the Koran that when "read at face value," support the thrust

of the “neglected argument.” The counter-argument fails “to appreciate how difficult it is to avoid the ‘orthodox story’ while simultaneously retaining the distinctive doctrines of Christianity” (p. 233). If people are punished because of their choices, and if we “suppose that the alleged choice is ill-informed and irrevocable, then God does evil” because he “places people in a situation in which they must make a judgment that binds them for eternity, and he knows that some will be so inadequately informed that they will opt for an eternity of torment” (p. 233). Much remains unclear: would it follow that if one makes an “ill-informed and irrevocable” choice and one’s creator punishes one, that the latter “does evil”? What is an “irrevocable” choice? What does it mean for someone with free will to be “placed in a situation” in which they “*must* make a judgment” (emphasis added)? Worse, the proposition concerning *the doing* of evil is ambiguous: is it evil because of the punishment, because of the divine plan or will, because of the nature of freewill, or because of the choices that are available (or not available)?

Lewis turns to the standard reply to the question of why God does not prevent damnation (which Lewis seems to assume is evil). “Even an omnipotent, omniscient, and completely benevolent deity who wished to create a world in which incompatibilist freedom [which has “supreme value”] was found might have to allow for the existence of stubborn beings who chose eternally to remain in torment” (p. 234). Lewis sees no greater value in incompatibilist freedom and so, will “not be satisfied with the thought that God may have to allow some people who eternally choose damnation” (p. 234)—God “could have set things up so as to keep his creatures out of trouble” (p. 234) Why, Lewis asks, must choices be made “through a glass darkly”? A God who sets things up in this way “seems negligent, at best” (p. 234). Lewis does not set out an alternative account of what making choices through a glass clearly, so to speak, might be like or an account of how he would reconcile such an alternative account with a coherent concept of freewill.

Freewill, “evil,” proportionate and “disproportionate” punishment, and so on and so forth, are not unpacked clearly or sufficiently enough. So, later, he argues that torment is not an “apt metaphor” for the alienation of an atheist from God and that he would be treated unjustly if his “eternal prospects were determined by a choice” he had been “forced to make in ignorance” (pp. 234–235). Other questions arise: what is “forcing”

Lewis to make such a choice, in what sense is he being “forced,” and if these are characteristic conditions, what sort of “choice” or freewill is involved?

God fails also, according to Lewis, if an atheist changes their mind and makes “amends in the hereafter” only to be tormented because of a memory of insubordination; the atheist has been “permitted” to “hazard... eternal felicity in a state of radically incomplete knowledge” (p. 235). It is a pity that Lewis did not give a more rigorous account of the relation between incomplete knowledge and freewill, or between “hazard” and choice, or of the conditions that make freewill possible. As it stands, his argument takes much for granted and therefore cannot resolve these puzzles convincingly. Lewis claims that “God could have” set up “the causal conditions so that the resisters didn’t go astray to begin with” (p. 235). He *asserts* that inflicting punishment is an example of perpetrating evil, and that the willingness to inflict pain in excess of the “sum total of pain, suffering, and cruelty manifested in the created universe,” whatever that might mean, would amount to “evil.” He does not show how punishment and “evil” (the sense of which is not clarified) are related; how inflicting *punishment* and perpetrating *evil* are related (they could conceivably be different things); how inflicting pain *in excess* of the “sum total of pain suffering, and cruelty manifested in the created universe” entails “divine evil” (is it evil because it is “in excess,” because it is eternal, because it is intentional, or translated into act? Or for some other reason?). Much that is questionable or unclear is again taken for granted.

Finally, Lewis asks, memorably, “appearances notwithstanding, are those who worship the perpetrator of divine evil themselves evil?” (p. 238). He answers that they “endorse the divine evil” (p. 239)—“the perpetrator’s evil extends to them... [they] are tainted by it... Does the evil spread by contagion to us?” (p. 239). These “chains of contagion” can be severed because admirers are often “not fully informed about the attitudes of those they admire” (p. 240). It is significant that Lewis allows for this kind of ignorance at this step of the argument. It is a pity that the “glass” through which Lewis looks—at freewill, choice, justice, punishment, “evil,” and indeed a kind of god, but not possible relations between freewill and forgiveness or mercy, or possible forms of justice—remains darkened, notwithstanding the sketchy nature of the original project. (Lewis died,

sadly, before he could develop the paper in full). It is in this “glass,” shadowy and often indistinct, that his attempt fails to show that the argument from evil “succeeds conclusively.”

V.

What Dawkins calls the “honest quest for truth” and what Dennett calls the “tradition of reason and open inquiry” are worthy banners and standards in our attempts to gain a clear understanding of the questions, the assumptions that enter into our questions and arguments, the key issues and challenges, the possible answers and alternatives, and so on pertaining to theism, atheism, “science” and “religion.” Clarity, coherence, rigor, well-researched and well-informed argumentation and a balanced weighing up of the evidence as well as a careful fit between evidence and conclusions, are important. A number of essays that appeal, implicitly or explicitly, to certainty or truth with regard to atheism do need to ensure that the conclusions follow clearly and rigorously from the evidence (or from the premises); if deductive arguments cannot be provided, or if the conclusions go (well) beyond the evidence, an “honest quest for the truth” would demand a thorough critique. If one wishes to provide inductive or analogical arguments, it then becomes important to explain how their validity can be immune to doubts and challenges that are familiar in the tradition from Hume and Kant to Russell and Ayer, among others (see for example, Rescher, 1969 and 1980; Goodman, 1983; Howson, 2000; Maxwell and Anderson, 1975; Swinburne, 1974; von Wright, 1957; and so on). In the absence of such accounts, intelligibility is likely to become more problematic.

Similarly uncritical, un-elucidated appeals to probability—some have been noted already—require certain things if they are to convince. There is much research and debate on this and related topics and it would be unwise to ignore, overlook or forget the literature (see for example, Lucas, 1970; Ayer, 1973; Vickers, 1988; Prevost, 1990; Ambegaokar, 1996; Denny and Gaines, 2000; Lèassig & Valleriani, 2002; Stevens, 2003; Reichenbach, 2008; among many others). How, for example, do we draw conclusions about the factual likelihood of an occurrence in the future from an *a priori* calculus? What of the logic of the presumption that the explanations that

have worked until now, will continue to work in the future, let alone in ways which come *close to proof*? If probability, as Hume pointed out, is based on an analogy between objects which we have had some experience of, and objects that we have had no experience of, how then can presumptions of resemblance be justified? And how can such inferences be “rational” if they *cannot* be justified? Indeed, what precisely do we mean when we say “*x* is probable” (or “improbable”)—that it is *reasonable* to believe this about *x*, or that we do not know if it is true that *x* exists, or that the statement is merely *performative* (as Ayer thought) and in no way implies anything about the actual existence of *x*, or something else again? Is Ayer not correct when he argues that we “measure likelihood in terms of the theories that we accept” and that “whatever the evidence, we always have some latitude in the choice of our hypotheses which we are going to project” (1990; p. 179)? In any case, these debates, and analogous ones, will need to be set out and argued through carefully and rigorously, just as the questions that arise from appeals to assertion, “explanation,” “probability” and/or meaning will need to be answered clearly, coherently and conclusively, if the mountain we are to climb is to be other than Mount Unintelligible.

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