

Atheism and Argument

GRAEME HUNTER

The classic formal arguments for the existence of God were over-rated for several centuries and today are suffering from compensatory neglect. Like great beauties they are hard to treat fairly. But perhaps their most effective use is neither to convert the heathen, nor to refute the atheist, but to comfort the believer. They are there to keep us from doing anything foolish in weak moments when atheism's false economy attracts us.

The most attractive intellectual attribute of atheism is indeed economy. This it achieves by discarding the troublesome concept of God. Candid Christians will admit that it is not always easy to justify or defend the ways of God and most of us can recall situations in which we have envied atheists the apparent conceptual economy of their position. They appear to be defending so much less than we are, and therefore to be exposed to fewer dangers. Sometimes in their own mythologies they see themselves as intellectual ascetics, as lean, mean men of the mind, and at times they can easily seem to us to be just so. For example, when the mystery of evil is raised and the question arises of how it can be compatible with the existence of a loving God, the atheist is able to wave the problem aside, since he supposes no such benevolent deity in the first place. Or again if there is a question about the meaning of Genesis or its compatibility with contemporary biology, he will dismiss it with characteristic urbanity, since to him the Bible is nothing but a collection of tales, edifying at best, superstitious at worst.

Atheism is attractive in the same way skepticism is, for it entails at the least skepticism about God.

Like the skeptic, the atheist seems to conserve his intellectual energies, to commit himself only to the incontrovertible. In the mirror of this atheistic economy, Christian believers may come to see themselves as Quixotic defenders of the indefensible. As we wrestle with God we sometimes envy those who seem to have no opponent.

In a similar way a man fighting to meet his mortgage payments may look wistfully at those who only rent, or a woman struggling to raise and educate a family may wonder whether childlessness might not be the more blessed state after all. When we find ourselves with scant rights and heavy obligations, we sometimes would consider changing places with those who seem to bear lighter loads.

But the operative words in these cases are 'sometimes' and 'seem'. Men with mortgages, like women with children, were not born in that condition. In most cases they got there by choice, because they were unsatisfied with the simpler state when they were in it. The man without a house may have been oppressed by his rootlessness; the childless woman may have felt spiritually, as well as physically, barren. Both of them recognized in different ways that life was inviting them to a deeper engagement with it than they had yet made. It is true that by responding to that invitation they have accepted responsibilities that could have been avoided and that sometimes seem overwhelming, but the acceptance also has brought them satisfactions which their earlier state could by no means have conferred. When our burdens are uppermost in our mind it can SEEM as if the move toward

deeper engagement with life was a bad one. In such cases, however, it usually suffices to examine the alternative in order to be reconciled once again to our more demanding but also more fulfilling course of life. To surrender the house, to give up the children, would rescue us from onerous commitments, but only at the cost of impoverishing our lives. At least in the everyday matters of home and children a candid comparison of the relative advantages of a full life over one of less responsibility usually suffices to make our burdens precious to us once again.

Such homely parables shed a suggestive light on religious belief and its opposite. They raise the possibility that the economy achieved by the atheist is likewise a false and impoverished one. To establish this suggestion as a fact, however, no exercise is more profitable than to reconsider the historic proofs of God's existence, which too many Christians dismiss too quickly as mere mental puzzles fit only for the undergraduate curriculum.

THE 'FIRST CAUSE' ARGUMENT

Take for example the 'first cause' argument, the one which proves that only an existent God sufficiently explains the existence of the world. It also implies that without God we cannot know for certain that the universe is intelligible. Intelligibility demands a sufficient explanation for whatever happens. Yet without God there is no explanation for the primary event of all: creation. And with that missing, such partial explanations for particular events as science may from time to time provide must also turn out to be deficient, if followed back to first principles.

We may well ask: is the world then at the deepest level intelligible to atheists? Paradoxically, it can only be so, if they are prepared to make an ungroundable leap of faith. Moreover, being atheists, they must place their faith in something

inherently questionable, the world, which their own observations and theories tell them to be groundless and arbitrary. The faith of the Christian believer, by contrast, has a worthy object, namely God, whose existence and self-grounding character can be rigorously demonstrated. The intelligibility of the world is for the believer rooted in the intelligence of its Creator.

That original and essential intelligibility of things makes science in principle possible, and enables Christians to occupy the wise middle ground in our assessment of the prospects of the human quest for understanding. We need neither join the irrationalists who attempt to deny the obvious progress and success of the scientific method nor succumb to the uncritical enthusiasms of scientism. The world is not fundamentally groundless or arbitrary; on the contrary, it is infused with order from the beginning. Yet that order is not man-made, as idealists say, nor ultimately subject to man's control – it depends wholly upon God. We should therefore expect a part of it always to remain, like its maker, inscrutable to us. Therefore no Christian should ever make science an idol.

Thoughtful atheists would no doubt agree that we need to be cautious in our theories about how the world works. They no less than we can recognize that we are finite and fallible and therefore that it is always possible that we are wrong. But believers alone can be certain about the relationship of God to the world and therefore about nature's fundamental intelligibility. Uncertainty is not our final word, as it must be for the thoughtful atheist.

I do not draw this sobering moral FOR atheists; it comes directly from them. It is stated frankly by the philosopher Richard Robinson in his classic,

though bleak, credo entitled, *An Atheist's Values*. He writes:

Those who think that human reason suffices [for certainty], and those who think that only a god and faith in him suffice, have in common that they all think that something suffices. And in this they are all mistaken, for nothing suffices. We are always, in any case, going to have mistakes and sufferings, and finally we are going to cease existing.

For Robinson, uncertainty, like death, is an inescapable feature of our human being, a worm of doubt, gnawing at everything we can claim to know. For Christians, on the other hand, uncertainty occupies a smaller and less frightening place. It is part of our fallen condition, like an opaque glass through which God now permits us to see darkly until the day comes when we shall see face to face. Our sight may be dim, but a pillar of light goes before us. To look into atheism, however, is to find dimness at the core of its picture of the world and cloudy doubt around it.

THE ARGUMENT FROM PERFECTION

If the world of the believer is more intelligible than the atheist's world, it is also from a moral viewpoint more attractive, for believers recognize the perfection of God. The notion of perfection is the key to another famous proof often called the 'ontological' argument. Despite its being the most profound and challenging of all the demonstrations of God's existence, it can be stated with (deceptive!) simplicity: 'Since God, by definition, is perfect, he must exist.'

To put the argument a little differently, what it shows is that if God does not exist, perfection is impossible. But if there were no perfection, there would be no absolute goodness, and without that, no standard by which goodness could be measured. And some bold atheists are prepared

to go that far. Richard Robinson is quite categorical in rejecting standards, which he sees as harmful to creativity. He writes:

If we adopted a standard good, we should be rejecting all future novelty and creativeness of the highest sort. We have seen too much already of new kinds of good thing being despised because they did not conform to adopted standards, and we want no more of it.

What is particularly striking in this passage is the misleading talk of our ADOPTING some particular good as a standard. Of course we should not do that! It would be arbitrary. To that extent Robinson is right. But Christians did not adopt the perfectly good God as their standard; the perfectly good God adopted them as his children and disciples.

The option that Robinson leaves undiscussed is precisely the one that he pretends to be refuting, according to which there is an absolute – and for that very reason UN-adopted – good, not something we vote on or whimsically decree, but something that is wholly and supernaturally given. Brilliant as he is, Robinson seems not to have considered the possibility of absolute standards whose function is to measure us, standards before which we must humbly give an account of ourselves.

Absolute standards are signs on life's way, distinguishing the true path from innumerable false ones. Without signposts of that kind, atheists are condemned to wander in a landscape of mists, out of which may come from time to time things terrible or things attractive, but in which they will find nothing true. That is why the Bible speaks of the intellect as darkening when it turns away from God.

Without perfection, all goodness would be relative. Many people today, for want of

meditation on the idea of perfection, believe in the 'relativity of values' and their belief bears bitter fruit. In the moral sphere it results in increasing social anarchy that modern society has been forced to accept and against which secular remedies have proved ineffectual. Relativism dismantles the wall of civility that once confined our darkest impulses and most violent desires. Old demons revive and find only the moral imbecility of relativism blocking their path.

Relativism causes us to lose what Dante calls 'the good of the intellect'. The philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre portrays our condition as one of forgetfulness: we have forgotten the moral absolutes which governed the lives of our forebears; moral terms, to us, have become empty incantations. We are therefore easily manipulated, shaped by the psychological and managerial fictions which human ingenuity has put in place of moral absolutes. We are led astray, he tells us, by the deceitful language of rights, of utility, and of social engineering. We have wandered far from the intelligible, moral world of orthodox believers, who conquered evil under the sign of God's perfection.

THE ARGUMENT FROM DESIGN

Believers, by contrast, have hope. Believers can find comfort in the world, because it is intelligible, and in God because he is perfect and therefore an absolute standard. A further emblem of our hope is fixed for all to see like the rainbow in the cloud. It is the LOVELINESS of the cosmos, which believers instinctively understand in a way that atheists do not even acknowledge. God reveals himself in the fearful and wonderful make of his creatures, and in the gratuitous beauty of his world. For centuries the self-evident design of things was regarded as an irrefutable argument for the existence of God.

In the current century however, except in esoteric sciences like microbiology and cosmology, where solidarity is beginning to crack, scientific orthodoxy has declared design to be an illusion. The atheistic philosopher Bertrand Russell is speaking for many scientists when he tells us that "nature is indifferent to our values, and can only be understood by ignoring our notions of good and bad."

Yet though atheistic thinkers assure us that we live intrinsically meaningless lives in a universe without design, they will not usually draw the conclusion that we must therefore give ourselves up to madness or melancholy. Richard Robinson, after describing mankind as friendless, fatherless, unloved, insecure, destined for extinction and destitute of any comforting ritual, adds that "we have good things to contemplate and high things to do." The friendless, fatherless, unloved and insecure will no doubt be glad to hear of the "good things" that lie in store for them, but one fears that Robinson's brave summons to brotherly love, self-realization, and creativity will not rouse many to battle. His trumpet sounds a hollow and depressing note.

The nineteenth century atheist Friedrich Nietzsche saw more clearly when he said that there is no HUMAN remedy for the poverty of atheism. If we have killed God, Nietzsche says very reasonably, then we must become gods ourselves in order to be worthy of it. And Nietzsche was realist enough to admit that not many were rising to the challenge. Nietzsche would not admit, however, that between the 'deicide' he celebrated and the heaven he aspired to a great gulf is fixed.

The common response of an atheistic age to the enduring problem of human misery is far less heroic than Nietzsche called for. We hear everywhere from noisy groups of self-styled

victims, brothered by the bonds of tribe, sex, orientation, or complaint, seeking to achieve through clamour and malice the sort of affirmation that could only be won by industry and restraint. These will never be Nietzschean supermen. Yet if they could but lift their eyes unto the hills around, we sometimes think, beauty itself might lead them out of the ugly little worlds they choose to inhabit.

But for now they are, in the words of St. Paul, without God in the cosmos. And without God's power, the world is inexplicable; without his perfection, it is immeasurable; without his beauty, it is unendurable. Arguments for God's existence may occasionally convert the atheist but, when properly understood, they speak more deeply to Christians themselves, enabling them to explain, to measure, and to endure.

Graeme Hunter is former professor of Philosophy and Literature at Augustine College; he currently teaches at the University of Ottawa.

This article was originally published in *Touchstone*, November/December 1999.