

## The Skeptical Inquirer

*If Only Atheists Were the Skeptics They Think They Are*

EDWARD TINGLEY

Unbelievers think that skepticism is their special virtue, the key virtue believers lack. Bolstered by bestselling authors, they see the skeptical and scientific mind as muscular thinking that the believer has failed to develop. He could bulk up if he wished to, by thinking like a scientist, and wind up at the “agnosticism” of a Dawkins or the atheism of a Dennett – but that is just what he doesn’t want, so at every threat to his commitments he shuns science.

That story is almost exactly the opposite of the truth.

### MEN OF TRUTH

The story is right about virtue: the smoothly muscled skeptical-scientific mind is a gorgeous thing – picture the Apollo of Olympia, a poised young athlete in a throng of centaurs, passion-driven half-men. Science is a virtue: a perfection of the human creature gifted with a mind, a use of the mind that, says Aquinas, “perfects the speculative intellect for the consideration of truth.” But to be “men of truth,” in the words of Exodus, is to be vulnerable to truth.

Richard Dawkins speaks as a genuine scientist when he insists, “What I care about is what’s true; I want to know, *is there* a God in the universe or not?” Perfect. Truth is awaiting you, with its painful grip.

But on the question around which Dennett, Dawkins, Hitchens, Harris, Grayling, Onfray, and voices still to come are now springing up – the question of God – the successor of Apollo is not the atheist or the agnostic. Both lack the great virtue of the scientist, the *skeptical* virtue. Here *they* are the hankerers after comfort, the

scrawny ones who prefer their own commitments over reason.

No matter how excellent these thinkers might be on other questions, on this question they nimbly shift their allegiance: between the life they like and the demands of vocation (submission to the question), they choose their lives – ironically, the very failing for which they ridicule believers. A seeker of truth has to go where the truth can be found, and to go on until it is found, and both the atheist and the agnostic are early quitters.

Dawkins is right that “the question of the existence of God or gods, supernatural beings, is a scientific question,” straight from the mind hungry for truth. On that question the path of the scientist was shown to us at the dawn of modernity by a consummate scientist: Blaise Pascal. Here was a scientific mind that brushed aside the medieval proofs of God (which did little for him) to attack the question anew.

People may think it just an odd coincidence that the author of the *Pensées*, a work of apologetics, also came up with Pascal’s law, on the transmission of pressure in confined liquids, but one mind seeking one thing generated both. Pascal was a lifelong seeker of truth: “I should ... like to arouse in man the desire to find truth, to be ready, free from passion, to follow it wherever he may find it,” he says in *Pensée* 119. But the scientists who have asked Pascal’s question after him are rarely scientist enough for that.

They do not follow truth wherever they may find it. On the topic they have promised to illuminate, they are the defenders of Ptolemy in the age of Galileo: resisters and avoiders of scientific

thought inflexibly wedded to their own commitments, and it is not hard to show this.

#### THE SKEPTICAL THEIST

There are skeptical theists; Pascal was one. Skepticism and theism go well together. By a “skeptic” I mean a person who *believes* that in some particular arena of desired knowledge we just cannot have knowledge of the foursquare variety that we get elsewhere, and who sees no reason to bolster that lack with wilful belief.

“Believing is not something you can decide to do as a matter of policy,” as Dawkins says – though it is odd that he does so in a discussion of Pascal, who, like him, is a skeptic. A complete misunderstanding of Pascal, however, is crucial to the way that Dawkins and every one of his fellows (past and future) always think.

Evidence is just not available to *demonstrate* the existence of God, said Pascal, who called himself one of those creatures who lacked the humility that makes a natural believer. In that, he was of our time: we are pretty much all like that now. Three hundred and fifty years ago he laid out our situation for us: modern man confronts the question of God from the starting point of *skepticism*, the conviction that there is no conclusive physical or logical evidence that the God of the Bible exists.

“I have wished a hundred times over that, if there is a God supporting nature, [nature] should unequivocally proclaim him, and that, if the signs in nature are deceptive, she should suppress them altogether” – but nature prefers to tease, so she “presents to me nothing which is not a matter of doubt” (429). “We desire truth and find in ourselves nothing but uncertainty” (401). “We are ... incapable of knowing ... whether he is” (418). This is where the modern person usually starts in his assault on the question, *Is God real or imaginary?*

This is base camp, above the tree-line of convincing reasons and knock-down arguments, at the far edge of things we can kick and see, and it is all uphill from here. Thus it is astounding how many Dawkinses and Dennetts, undecideds and skeptical nay-sayers – that sea of “progressive” folk who claim to “think critically” about religion and either “take theism on” or claim they are “still looking” – who have not reached the year 1660 in their thinking. They almost never pay attention to what Pascal said about this enquiry though it is right down the skeptic’s alley.

Instead, the dogmatic reflex, ever caring for human comfort, has flexed and decided the question already, has told them what to believe in advance of investigation and rushed them away from Pascal and back to the safety of life as usual.

The modern thinking person who rightly touts the virtues of science – skepticism, logic, commitment to evidence – must possess the lot. But agnostics are not skeptical, half the atheists are not logical, and the rest refuse to go where the evidence is. None measures up in these modern qualities to Pascal.

#### A HIDDEN GOD?

Pascal says that from base camp we must try to find a *non-dogmatic* route of assault upon the question. Think about it logically, he says: if we do not know that God even exists, we hardly know how he behaves. So we cannot begin this ascent with any dogmatic presumption about his behaviour.

Maybe, if he exists, God would show himself directly to our senses. But maybe he wouldn’t. Maybe he would hide from us – maybe he is a *Deus absconditus*, Pascal says, following Isaiah 45: “Truly, thou art a God who hidest thyself.” What evidence do we have by which to rule that out? We can’t be dogmatic, can’t say that God is this way or that way: everything possible is possible.

But we have, in fact, already tested one hypothesis about how God behaves: that he shows himself directly to our senses. That is what got us up here past the tree-line in the first place. We now have evidence for a conclusion that all our fellow seekers of truth ought to draw: Either God does not exist or he exists but does not show himself to our senses.

Our skepticism *rejects* the likelihood that things we can see will resolve our doubts; that is progress already made. The Humean idea so nicely put by Carl Sagan – that “extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence” – was hardly worth resurrecting, given that it was *passé* before Hume was in diapers. “If this religion boasted that it had a clear sight of God and plain and manifest evidence of his existence,” said Pascal, then “it would be an effective objection to say that there is nothing to be seen in the world which proves him.... But ... on the contrary it says that men are in darkness” (427).

A hundred years earlier Pascal had already ruled empirical theism a dead end, a foolish hope for what we ought by now to know we were not going to get: clear material evidence of clearly immaterial being. By 1660 there were only two options left: either God does not exist or he is not a gift to our senses.

Pascal the skeptic has ruled out a fruitless path, the path to God via logic or concrete evidence: the easy route to the summit, sought for centuries but never found. The only way forward is up from where we are, onto the icy slopes out past the limit of concrete evidence. *If* that is possible.

At this point, of course, the venture is not looking especially promising. The mind is *made for* hard evidence. It gets traction on rough ground, but what stretches before us is sheer ice (minds are not issued with crampons). *Is* there a way forward?

That is now the question. If we care about the truth more than we care about some favoured means of data-collection we need to discover whether there is any other way, up here where the air is thin and the ice treacherous, that a rational person could use to settle the question of God.

#### A QUESTION, NOT AN ANSWER

“Is there anything more?” is the scientific question, but as Pascal asks it, the “scientists” vanish.

The agnostics ski down the mountain into the woods, searching for hard evidence on the basis of which to decide whether God exists – which is very odd, given that a moment ago they were standing here with us, ready to climb as declared skeptics. Agnostics, plainly, are wafflers in their skepticism: As the team gets going they U-turn back to the foothills, where every true skeptic knows there is nothing to find. They do not care about the truth.

But even more astonishing than that, the atheists have just gone home. They are not down in the valley looking for evidence; they are not looking at all: they have packed in the science without lifting a boot, as if the summit were already taken, the question answered.

The atheist is the team-member who was always talking up the loftiness of the mission, but after all his fervid urgings to “search for what is true, even if it makes you uncomfortable,” to go on no matter how hard and painful the going gets, he is the chap who grandly announces, without bending a knee, that victory is ours: “God should be readily detectable by scientific means.” “Absence of evidence is evidence of absence.” We now “rule out the God worshiped by most Jews, Christians, and Muslims.” The climb is done and the atheist scampers back to town to meet the press.

The great logician Bertrand Russell is a model of this illogic. The famous quip he offered to explain his atheism – “Not enough evidence, God, not enough evidence” – only snaps every person eager to quote him (e.g., Dawkins) back to a day before buckled shoes, when material solutions were still worth discussing.

To talk like Russell after Pascal only makes you quaint and silly, because what the lack of evidence delivers is logically a question, not a conclusion. Skepticism *raises* the question, Is there any way forward after we have given up on material evidence? It certainly doesn't *answer* it.

To clamber from skepticism to atheism without embarrassing yourself is only possible with support from another premise – *If we cannot know it via the senses, then it cannot exist* – and there is a lot to be embarrassed about if you call yourself a skeptic and believe that. There is no sign in Russell of the skeptic who will instinctively ask, What reason do I have to subordinate the possibility of God's existence to the powers of my senses?

#### EMPTY DEMANDS

All of those people who insist that they would reasonably believe on the basis of “a range of confirming evidence corroborated by a community of inquirers,” or if there were no other way to explain the universe, or if there were “evidence of miracles,” or if there were predictions of “natural disasters ... using non-ambiguous language,” or archeological traces of biblical events, and all the rest of it, are truly not worth listening to.

Why? Because in all of this they are refusing to go where their own skeptical-scientific questioning actually points: not back to concrete evidence but on to the question of whether there is another way to answer the question, which they reject without further thought. Rather than ask it, they balk, they flinch, they bluster – they do

everything that in their own eyes signals the dogmatic refuser of science.

Given the options that logic delivers, the one thing it is utterly ridiculous to do is to keep going on about “strong, compelling evidence [for] the existence of God.” Yet that is what both the agnostic and the atheist never stop talking about: the agnostic, so that he can believe; the atheist, as the crux of the belief he has already raced to. Pascal has left both of these characters behind him: this is patent “folly,” he says.

All of the people who say that they are “atheists *through skepticism*, because they see no evidence that God exists,” are patently unthinking people since by virtue of turning skeptic no one has ever *done* anything – employed any logic, gathered any evidence, found any way forward – to reach a conclusion about whether God exists. So these atheists have not reached a conclusion; they have made a commitment.

What the scientific skeptic ought to say is this: “Having examined the hard evidence, we declare that route to be exhausted. The only kind of evidence for God's existence that counts will have to be of some other kind – *if there is any other kind.*”

That would be reasonable. And it would be a fine thing for a skeptic to *doubt that there is any evidence besides the standard, demonstrable kind* – and there are skeptics who do so. But all those who, just because they doubt it, run home with the question answered are frauds like their agnostic brethren if they still call themselves scientists.

Hunches are starting points, not arguments. We need “to inquire, to investigate, to think critically about any subject” before we settle our minds, as they so love to tell us. But where are the skeptics who go up the mountain with Pascal? Nowhere.

## THE INSTRUMENTAL HEART

When the smart scientist of the seventeenth century was asked, “Is clear water pure?” he did not go with his gut and answer “yes” or “no.” “The naked eye says yes,” he answered, “but is there an instrument better than the naked eye with which to see?” We need to listen to the scientist who claims that there is, and that scientist is Pascal.

That instrument is the heart. “It is the heart which perceives God, and not the reason” (424). “The heart has its reasons, which reason does not know” (423). Pascal’s reasons of the heart are meant to take over from an intellect that operates on hard evidence but has run out of it. “The heart has its order, the mind has its own, which uses principles and demonstrations. The heart has a different one” (298).

We are not talking here about feelings, which love to cheat us. Pascal says that the heart *convinces*, makes us *rightly* sure. “Demonstration is not the only instrument for convincing us” (821).

Many of his readers miss this and so see him as Kierkegaard, preparing us to leap – but conviction is not a leap. Dawkins takes him to say that when the evidence runs out you just throw in your lot with belief in God, because that is logically prudent; he credits Pascal with “the ludicrous idea that believing is something you can *decide* to do.” But the heart, Pascal is saying, is not a springboard to choice; it charts a path to conviction about God. It is not all done for us by logic and by sight. There is still the *reasoning of the heart*.

The scientist Pascal claims to know a route that will take us over the ice to convincing discovery. It is the refusal to test his thinking that betrays the faith of atheists and agnostics.

No no, they will say, point to something *material* on which to base belief and then I will look at it.

“Give us solid evidence!” They *insist* that every belief about reality must be accepted on the basis of evidence (“experience or logic”). On what basis do they accept *that*? Evidence? But there is none.

There is no evidence at all that everything reality might contain can be apprehended by this faculty or that one, this instrument or that. There is no reason at all to pick a horse here – except as a matter of hope or “mood and attitude.” But atheists have always insisted that hope, mood, and attitude are the impulses of religion by contrast with science. How could they avail themselves of that and take a position on the question of how reality has to be known.

But atheists and agnostics pick. *They commit, where there is no evidence.*

They never fail to stew at “the weary old canard that atheism is ‘a faith proposition’,” but “commitment to a belief in the absence of evidence supporting that belief” is their own definition of faith, and that is what they do.

## SIGNS TO BE SEEN

Ask any sensible person if it is possible that God exists, does not present himself to us by way of material evidence, and yet seeks our acknowledgment on some other basis, *one in which we are more deeply invested*. Could there be a God who does not want to be known the way the facts of nature are known or sums are known? The rational person will say, “Yes, it is possible.”

Isn’t it possible that God does not dance us into his presence by puppetry? Clearly, he did not do that physically: He did not give us freedom to move and then drop us onto an inclined plane that rolled us to his feet. It is possible that God does not move us to him intellectually, either, by the locomotion of evidence, so that merely by opening eyes and possessing minds we wind up acknowledging him. Maybe he grants to our minds the freedom he gives our bodies.

That would explain why he “hides” – and also why “hiding” is not the right word for this. *In effect* he hides, but “hiding” is trying-not-to-be-found, whereas this is trying-to-be-found-only-by-the-free-man, the man who has muscled up with virtues and risen to the point of readiness for him, genuine readiness *to know*.

That was the idea in Arthur C. Clarke’s “The Sentinel,” the basis of Stanley Kubrick’s film *2001*, in which the superior alien intelligence wishes to be discovered by the higher man, the man so ready for discovery that he can make the voyage into deep space and so eager for contact that he will risk it. (Interesting that during the filming of *2001* Clarke went to see a movie about Michelangelo, after which he jotted in his diary, “One line particularly struck me – the use of the phrase ‘God made Man in His own image.’ This, after all, is the theme of our movie.”)

It is not so crazy after all, this *Deus absconditus* business. It is not so hard to understand why, as Pascal notes, God might display “signs which can be seen by those who seek him and not by those who do not” (149). The signs *can be seen*, he is telling us.

#### REFUSING THE FACTS

It logically follows that our most crucial decision might now have to rest on something other than solid evidence. It is *rational* to wonder about some other kind of evidence that it remains for us to find, whatever confounded trouble that will put us to. In science you may well curse the direction the investigation is taking you in, but you will follow it if you want to know. “I can only approve of those who seek with groans,” says Pascal (405).

We are told we should face the facts. Well here they are: the only world in which strictly empirical evidence is the road that we should take in our views about God is a world in which God either shows himself by such evidence or

simply does not exist. Those are the options that the agnostic and the atheist *like*, and it is because they like them that they never pay any attention to the further fact that accompanies these: God might await us down another road. There are three options, not two.

In a world in which God both exists and hides, relying upon conclusive evidence is the way to be wrong about God. Reason delivers three options, but the agnostic and the atheist are not listening to reason; they hear only the options they like and simply pick the one that suits them. Which is pretty much their story about the believer.

#### SETTLED OR SEEKING

We agree about the virtues of science. It is a virtue to be reasonable. But the person who flees the above logic is plainly not reasonable. On the question of the way in which the truth about God might be found he is openly illogical and Pascal is aghast at him.

There are only two kinds of people one can call reasonable: those who serve God with all their heart because they know him and those who seek him with all their heart because they do not know him. As for those who live without either knowing or seeking him ... it takes all the charity of that religion they despise not to despise them to the point of abandoning them to their folly. (427)

Those are better categories than the *a*-words I have employed because it is never clear whether a self-confessed “atheist” or “agnostic” is settled or seeking.

There is only one thing that is in any way real to the settled kind and it has nothing to do with evidence or reason or science or truth. He *likes* the world that he has painted for himself, the world that demonstration alone reveals.

He likes a world in which he can stop thinking about something when the hard evidence for it

gives out: that is a beautifully simple world. “If I had to sum up my own atheism, I would have to say that it amounts to this: I have no interest in the supernatural.” Let’s “simply dismiss the whole issue of whether ‘God’ exists as not worth any discussion.” “It isn’t just that I don’t believe in God and naturally hope there is no God! I don’t want there to be a God; I don’t want the universe to be like that.”

He likes a world in which he can hold at bay the spectre of religion (with its insane demands), which he feels bearing down on his life ready to suck out its vitality. Like Van Helsing he can hold it at bay with ridiculous ease just by crossing two random sticks: the two twigs of his skeptical gambit and his credo about evidence, which he has cobbled into a principle for the purpose of backing religion off. (As is here becoming apparent, it is no credo he lives by.)

He likes a world in which he can feign disability – “I wish I could believe in a god of some kind but I simply cannot” – and then be left alone at every such sad-faced confession of impotence.

But it is not true that he cannot believe. What he cannot do is believe in God in the posture that he has adopted, since he demands to believe on the basis of the specific kind of evidence he is not getting. (Perfect! – the one way never to believe.) He demands that God show himself to senses or logic, and when God does not oblige, he considers the matter closed and ceases to think.

#### THE DISSENTER’S HEART

If belief on the basis of senses or logic is the one rational option, why does the dissenter not get all his beliefs that way? On other questions – in fact, in his most fundamental commitments, in his credo – he *does* believe without evidence, since there is no evidence to support the belief that the divine must knock at the doors of eye and mind.

He ceases to care about what is logically possible because he has flatly refused to accept that it is possible. And how has he done this? He has denied it *in his heart*. He has answered the question of God first – not by recourse to evidence but by consulting his heart, which has turned in on itself, which seeks no God. “He hath said in his heart, I shall not be moved” (Psalm 10). Because he simply “does not buy it,” he will not engage the logic by which it can be bought, and in that disordered posture he cannot unclench his heart and face the disturbing and painful logic that leaves the possibility of God open.

He *could* do so, though. He could see that the way is open, if he were really wedded to logic, if he could resist the apparently irresistible reflex of dismissal and mockery. And looking then into his heart he might find that he wished to climb with Pascal, out onto the ice, just to see, making “every effort to seek [the truth] everywhere” (427).

What is the way of the heart? What effort is required? It is, with the mind truly set on the way things are – with question of God truly open in one’s mind – to try everything that all those who have found the evidence advise you do. There is a book in which all of those things have been written down.

The dissenter could do this, but he does not, because he cannot follow the skeptic where scepticism leads. Instead he has not a moment to waste on the way things might be, and on what it might mean to fail to discover a God who refused his presumptions, because he doesn’t really care what it would mean, and he doesn’t care because all that he can picture is a world without God. He wholly inhabits question-begging. His logic is sketchy and his *logos* is lame: his rational power of imagining has atrophied from selective use in the service of his pleasure.

## THE MASK OF THE UNBELIEVER

Who, then, is this person? He is clearly not a skeptic (someone who, for want of solid reasons, refuses to commit): he commits. He is not a lover of reason over passion: he chooses the possibilities he cares about because those are the ones he likes. He is not a skeptic who in the absence of evidence withholds belief: he is a believer.

You cannot even call him selectively non-committal, committing to some reasoning of his own but refraining from ours, because the instrument he is using is the very one he disparages. He denies Pascal's reasons that do what hard intellect cannot ... on the strength of reasons of the heart that push religion off his path, as reason fails to do.

The final self-description this character offers is this: that without evidence he *cannot believe* – but now we must kick away this last support of his

identity too. It is not true at all that he cannot believe without evidence; he has already done so, having arrived at his commitment to evidence without evidence. Evidence is *not* his only vehicle of locomotion, and he should admit it. He should notice what his heart is already doing for him, when he lets it.

But the chance is that he does not want to. He has accomplished by his heart the thing he wants, which is to free himself from further thinking about God, and he does not want to know how he got there. (The entire text of *Pensée* 886 is, “Skeptic for obstinate.”)

He could very well believe other things on the self-same basis, but he does not want to. He likes the world that he has installed himself in, and that is what tells us who he is: a lover – a lover of his own life, a believer in the path that his heart has charted for him, a dogmatic believer in the world under the sun.

### OBSOLETE INSTRUMENTS

*We need evidence that God exists.*

Agreed. What kind? Is there only one kind?

*Scientific evidence.*

And what is that: material evidence? Is that how science works? Didn't the nature of evidence expand as science went deeper into what is? Aren't there new and *unexpected* kinds of evidence?

Even scientists don't quit when the old sort of evidence runs dry. *Not quitting* – going beyond the established sort of evidence – is a virtue of science.

What would we say to the pre-Darwinian who did not believe that biodiversity could be explained? (“It all had to be *put* here,” he insisted. “There is no material evidence for a mechanism of biodiversity.”) Was natural selection *material* evidence?

The researcher who quit that project, enthralled by his “absence of evidence,” is what we would call an uninspired, even a bad scientist. We would say to him that scientists do not



seek only data: sometimes they seek a way to get data, and when they find it, they may find that it does not mimic the procedures they followed before.

It is a bad scientist who says that nothing can possibly orbit Jupiter when the means of discovery are absent – when there is simply no telescope by which to check (the naked eye being deficient). It is a bad scientist who says that metal is not crystalline when the fact is that there is no microscope fit to show its structure (the light microscope being deficient).

Maybe what the nay-sayers ought to do is to stop pronouncing in the absence of evidence and start looking for new instruments by which to get some. That is science. *Modern* science, especially, advances by the discovery of new means by which to acquire what is, to be sure, also concrete, measurable evidence. But it is not always “material evidence,” “the evidence of the eye.”

The lesson science teaches is the pitfall of fetishizing past means of seeing, the kinds of thing that have convinced us thus far. It is a primitive thinker who models the world on our present and standard abilities to perceive and who presumes to know the means of testing for *x* before he has even considered what nature *x* might have.

## SOURCES

The numbers given for the *Pensées* refer to A.J. Krailsheimer’s translation, published by Penguin. Unattributed quotations throughout cite, verbatim, the words of atheists and agnostics: In addition to Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett, quoted are Julian Baggini, author of Oxford’s *Atheism: A Short Introduction*; R.T. Carroll, philosophy professor and author of *The Skeptic’s Dictionary*; A.C. Grayling, philosophy professor at the University of London and author of *Against All Gods*; Paul Kurtz, founder and chairman of the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry and Fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science; John W. Loftus, proprietor of the Debunking Christianity blog, labelled “one of the better anti-Christian sites on the net”; Georges Rey, philosophy professor and author of *Meta-Atheism: Religious Avowal as Self-Deception*; and Victor Stenger, author of *God: The Failed Hypothesis*.

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