

On Being an Atheist

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IN this article I wish to remind fellow atheists of the grounds upon which theists base their belief in God, of the inadequacy of these grounds, why we believe that there is no God, and then I shall look at the claim that theists commonly make that atheism is a cold, comfortless position, that, as one Christian recently put it to me, 'It's harder if you don't believe in God.' I shall offer reasons why I believe that atheism is a much more comfortable belief than theism, and why theists should be miserable just because they are theists. I shall therefore be making points familiar to most thoughtful atheists, but I make no apology for doing so, as it is useful for us to remind ourselves of the reasons for and virtues of our belief. This is especially true in respect of the superiority of atheism to theism as a source of strength, for the theist's claim that theism gives benefits which do not come with atheism is gravely false, yet atheists are not uncommonly deceived by it. I shall not attempt to consider all the benefits theists claim to come with belief in God. For example, I recently heard a Christian seriously commending Jesus Christ as the supreme tranquillizer, as being better for one's nerves than any tonic or tranquillizer. Such claims are so absurd and so disrespectful of thoughtful religious belief, it would be discourteous to serious theists to consider them.

A Christian colleague and friend has often observed to me that our philosopher colleagues attribute too much importance to the role of the proofs of the existence of God as a basis for religious belief, that most theists do not come to believe in God as a result of reflecting on the proofs, but come to religion as a result of other reasons and factors. This is probably true of most proofs, especially those which so occupy the attention of philosophers. Proofs such as the ontological proof carry no weight with the ordinary theist. And while such proofs may confirm a doubting theist in his belief if he accepts them as sound, they seem not to be causes of the initial religious belief, even in those who take them

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seriously. I shall therefore pass over these more exotic proofs. There are, however, three proofs which do seem to me to move ordinary theists to their theism, and indeed, to constitute major motivations towards a belief in God, namely the cosmological proof, the teleological proof, and the argument from design. (The latter are distinct, although they are commonly confused and advanced in conjunction as one proof. Because they have similar defects, I shall discuss them together.)

People are moved to a general, if vague, theism by reflection on the cause of it all. They feel that there must be a first cause, a creator, who brought everything into being, and who now 'holds the whole world in his hands'. They do not think far enough nor hard enough about the problem of an uncaused cause, who must be a necessarily existing being, to see that this argument is less conclusive than it seems at first sight. And people are, to my mind, even more frequently moved to a belief in God by what they take to be evidence of design and purpose in the world. One is constantly hearing theists, the parson more perhaps than the theologian, alluding to design and purpose as facts which necessitate a belief in God. It is not surprising that this is so. If one knows nothing about evolution it is easy to fall into the error of seeing adaption to environment as evidence of design and purpose. I shall therefore briefly remind my readers of the defects of these arguments, as they bear on why I think theism to be a comfortless, spine-chilling doctrine.

I propose to treat *the cosmological argument* as being the argument its name suggests it to be, namely an argument from the existence of the world as we know it, and not as it is often set out as simply an argument from the existence of something. The defects of this argument are many. There is the difficulty already alluded to, that the first cause must be explained as an uncaused cause, otherwise we are left with an infinite regress of causes, gods in this case, the very sort of regress this argument seeks to avoid. This means that the first cause must be explained as being a necessarily existing being, one who cannot not exist. The mere existence of the world constitutes no reason for believing in the existence of such a being. If we use the causal argument at all, all we are entitled to infer is the existence of a cause commensurate with the effect to be explained, the universe, and this does not entitle us to postulate an all-powerful, all-perfect, uncaused cause. The most it would entitle one to conclude is that the cause is powerful enough and imperfect enough to have created the sort of world we know.

The world we know does not reveal itself to us as the handiwork of an omnipotent, all-perfect being. This objection is one way of putting

Kant's criticism that the cosmological proof involves the ontological proof. Other difficulties, for instance, that it is illicit to extend the causal argument in this way, for after all, why must we postulate some ultimate cause, might be pressed here. However, I shall pass them over and note a related objection to that which has just been discussed. It is that the world we know is a world containing a great deal of evil, in particular, avoidable suffering endured by innocent human beings and animals. If we argue from the existence of this world to its creator, we must endow this creator with attributes which explain how he came to create such a world. We must conclude that he is either a malevolent powerful being or that he is a well-intentioned muddler, that the creator and ruler of the universe is either not a god but an evil spirit or a well-intentioned finite being whose limitations result in very disastrous consequences. A belief in the existence of either is hardly a source of strength and security.

The teleological argument and the argument from design are no more satisfactory, and for exactly the same reason as the last noted above, and for many other reasons as well. One can reject the argument from design by rejecting its premise, that there is evidence of design and purpose. So many things which were, before the theory of evolution, construed as evidence of design and purpose, are now seen to be nothing of the sort. To get the proof going, genuine indisputable examples of design or purpose are needed. There are no such indisputable examples, so the proof does not get going at all. However, disregarding this very conclusive objection, we may note how our last objection to the cosmological arises equally fatally for the teleological argument and argument from design. One cannot legitimately argue, as do the exponents of this argument, from there being some sort of evidence of purpose or design to there being an all-powerful, all-perfect planner or designer. Even if we uncritically accepted the examples of purpose and design pointed to by exponents of this argument, all we should be entitled to conclude was that there was a powerful, malevolent, or imperfect planner or designer.

The problem of evil is a real and persistent problem for the theist. Even theists who use this argument and treat it as a conclusive one worry about the solution to the problem posed by the existence of evil. Yet, when formulating this argument they carry on as if the existence of evil in the world did not seriously tell against the perfection of the divine design or divine purpose as revealed in the world. We must look at the world as it is, and if we argue from what apparent design and purpose

there is, the most we could legitimately conclude is that there is a supreme malevolent designer, or a supreme, well-intentioned, bungling, or finite designer, who muddles along with the best of intentions and the most unhappy results.

Thus I suggest that two considerations which lead theists to a belief in God provide no grounds for such a belief. Even if a number of important, valid, conclusive objections are ignored, they then at most would suggest the existence of beings, the existence of which would be a source of concern, dismay, and anxiety rather than of comfort and security.

Other theists come to their belief in God through what they call 'faith'. Tillich speaks of faith as the state of being ultimately concerned, as claiming truth for its concern; and as involving commitment, courage, and the taking of a risk. It does involve taking a risk, a reckless, irrational risk. The theist suggests that to have faith in the existence and goodness of God is like having faith in the goodness of a friend one has known to be a man of honour and integrity all his life and against whom there is now circumstantial evidence that he is a criminal. To have faith in one's friend on the basis of past knowledge is reasonable, even though it may involve a risk of error. However, the situation with God is not like that at all. There is not the past knowledge of a good and perfect being. All we know of God is through his alleged works; and his alleged works are such that we cannot conclude from them that he is all-perfect. Rather, we must conclude that if there were a god he would be seriously imperfect. To have faith in his existence and perfection in the face of the existence of evil is to be irrational and foolish. Hence it is that faith cannot provide grounds for rational belief in God.

In bringing out the weakness of these arguments and the appeal to faith, I have stressed the fact of *the existence of evil*. This is a fact it is vitally important to stress. There is physical evil, such as pain, privations of appropriate goods, and the like, and there is moral evil, as evinced by people such as Hitler and Eichmann on a grand scale and by most of us in more modest forms. It is because evil exists that we believe God does not exist. No being who was perfect could have created a world in which there was avoidable suffering or in which his creations would (and who could have been created so as not to) engage in morally evil acts, acts which very often result in injury to innocent persons. Theists seek to solve the problem these facts pose in a wide variety of ingenious ways. Their 'solutions' are discussed at some length by me elsewhere. (See *God and Evil*, edited by N. Pike, Prentice Hall, Ch. 6, pp 61-84;

also 'The Problem of Evil', *Journal of Bible and Religion*, 1962.) Here it is sufficient simply to note some of the more common of these 'solutions' to see how threadbare they are.

We are told by some that pain is unreal, by others that it is not a positive evil, but simply a privation of a proper good, that it is God's punishment for sin (even of the 'sins' of animals and newly born children, presumably), that animals and young children who are innocent of sin do not really experience pain, that pain is God's way of reminding men of his existence and of warning them to mend their ways (suggesting a bungling God, for he in fact thereby leads many to deny his existence, for they cannot reconcile the evil they see with his alleged goodness), that pain makes the world a better world, being like an ugly element which contributes to the overall beauty of the painting, that pain is a means to higher goods such as courage and benevolence (and hence, presumably, that we act immorally in using anaesthetics and in combating disease), that pain results from the operation of natural laws which are the best God could devise and which lead to greater good over all (as if a God who is all-perfect could not have devised a world in which the operation of the natural laws resulted in less suffering), and many other stories are offered.

And of moral evil the usual story is in terms of free will (or free will and the goods free will makes to be possible), that God in conferring free will could not guarantee that we abstain from evil, for to do so would be to limit freedom. But have we free will? And if we have, is it so valuable as to justify all the evil caused by men's morally evil acts, i.e. would it really be a worse total state of affairs for us to be rational automata? More basically, is it not the case that complete virtue is compatible with the possession of free will, might not God have very easily so have arranged the world and biased man to virtue that men always freely chose what is right? Clearly theists cannot consistently argue that free will and necessitation to virtue are incompatible, for they represent God himself as possessing a free will and as being incapable of acting immorally. If this can be the case with God, why can it not be so with all free agents?

The existence of evil is therefore fatal to the claims that there is a Supreme Being who is perfect in every respect, i.e. the fact of evil is fatal to the claims of orthodox Roman Catholics, who postulate such a God. Protestants sometimes seek to solve the problem by explaining God as a finite being who is all-good but not all-powerful, who does the best he can and who needs our help because his best is often disastrous.

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The fact that the proofs provide no reasons for believing in the existence of such a god, and that there are positive reasons which it is not convenient to go into here for disbelieving in such a being, and even more for not worshipping, holding in awe, and generally treating such a being as a god, makes this view one which merits little attention (see my 'Would Any Being Merit Worship?', *Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 1964). However, it is none the less worth reflecting on whether one would feel very happy and secure in the thought, as the song puts it, that such a being 'holds the whole world in his hands'.

Let us now consider more explicitly whether belief in God would bring comfort and security of which a denial of the existence of such a God would deprive us.

What are the occasions on which we are told that religion is a great source of comfort? Most of us accept the loss of our loved ones after a long and full life if their deaths do not involve suffering; and we feel the same about our own deaths. The occasions upon which we need strength and comfort are when we or our loved ones are jolted by 'acts of God'. They are occasions such as when we lose a loved one as a result of a natural disaster, flood, fire, famine, earthquake, storm, or, as is more commonly the case, as a result of a disease. Or we may need comfort and support when our near and dear to us is smitten by a grave disease, a paralysing stroke, a coronary, cancer, rheumatoid arthritis, meningitis, encephalitis, or the like. Or we may need strength and help if we are parents to a gravely defective, newly born child, or if we find our son is going blind and there is nothing that can be done for him, or if our child or spouse or friend goes insane. We typically feel the need for comfort and support when we or our loved ones are victims of these evils which are commonly, and for the theist accurately, called 'acts of God'. It is true that morally evil acts and accidents may hurt us or our loved ones, and render us in need of comfort and support, but since, for the reasons alluded to earlier, God must be held ultimately responsible for these too, it is better to concentrate on those blows of fate which render us in need of comfort and which are so properly described by theists on the basis of their beliefs as evils resulting from acts of God.

If one's loved one or oneself were smitten by 'an act of God', if for example, one's daughter at the age of two months falls victim of meningitis, and suffers permanent impairment for the rest of her life, would and ought one to be comforted to believe that there is a God who caused your daughter's condition? Would and ought you to be comforted to

think that this God—and here I remind you of theists' accounts of evil—thought your daughter so evil as to deserve such severe punishment, or that he simply chose to allow the world to be governed by inferior laws of nature which he, being omniscient, foresaw would have this precise effect? Would you be cheered to think that God had arbitrarily chosen your daughter as his vehicle to remind the world of his existence and of their duty to worship him? Would the thought that your daughter's suffering was an evil, ugly component which heightened and increased the beauty and goodness of the overall plan reconcile you to her suffering? And would you accept her suffering more happily because it provided you and others with opportunities to engage in acts of higher virtue, and thereby to promote more total good? I suggest that a belief in God in such a situation would and should be a source of great distress and worry. A man could not reasonably be happier for thinking that God had knowingly brought about the harm to his daughter.

Consider alternatively if you were the victim, if you suffered a stroke which deprived you of all power of movement and even of speech while leaving your mind unaffected, would and ought you to gain comfort and strength from the thought that your condition was a deliberate foreseen result of God's will? I myself should be utterly dispirited by the thought; and if I saw it as my duty to respect God's wishes I would decline medical aid in so far as my condition allowed me to do so, as being something which would frustrate God's will. Allusion to an immortal existence would not help here, as a God who so arranges things in this world can hardly be counted on to arrange things better in the next; and many theists in any case offer us reasons for believing that for most of us things will be much worse in the next life. The suggestion that God is all-good but imperfect, that he does not deliberately bring about these evils, that he is doing his best and cannot prevent them, is scarcely more comforting than the view that he deliberately arranges things so that these evil effects occur as part of his divine plan.

Clearly, in the examples cited above, whether one be the father of the victim or the victim himself, one must feel much happier in the knowledge that there is no God, that God had nothing to do with the blow one had suffered. And instead of cold comfort in religious belief, the atheist in such a situation would seek and receive strength and comfort where it is available, from those able to give it, his friends and men of good will. If I were the father of the afflicted daughter, as an atheist I should exert myself rationally, seeking for her the best help mankind could provide, instead of piously telling her to seek comfort from God,

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who brought about her unhappy condition. And, knowing that there is no God, I should and do support the efforts of mankind to reduce the occasions on which such comfort is needed. It is at least in a large part because there have been atheists who have opposed reactionary and conservative religious influences which have resisted the use of anaesthetics, vaccinations, enlightened treatment of the insane, acceptance of abortion to save a mother's life or to prevent a defective child being born, the use of effective methods of birth control for the same reasons, voluntary euthanasia and suicide, there are now fewer occasions on which people need the comfort and help of others than in former times. Atheism, adopted by a thoughtful and sensitive person, leads to a spirit of self-reliance, to a self-respect which demands that we comfort and help those who need such support, and to a furthering and supporting of all measures which will reduce or moderate the blows of fate.