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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

seriously. I shall therefore pass over, however, three proofs which do seem to support their theism, and indeed, to constitute a basis for belief in God, namely the cosmological argument and the argument from design. (The cosmological argument is commonly confused and advanced in a variety of forms. Because they have similar defects, I shall treat them together.)

People are moved to a general, if not a specific, belief in God, because of it all. They feel that there is a cause of it all. They feel that there is a being which has brought everything into being, and that this being is 'God'. They do not think far enough to see the problem of an uncaused cause, or of a being which is its own cause, to see that this argument is self-defeating. And people are, to my mind, moved to a belief in God by what they take to be the evidence of the world. One is constantly hearing of the wonders of the world, than the theologian, alluding to the wonders of the world, to necessitate a belief in God. It is not so much the evidence of nothing about evolution it is easy to see that the world is to environment as evidence of design. I shall briefly remind my readers of the defects of the cosmological argument on why I think theism to be a comfortable belief.

I propose to treat *the cosmological argument* as the name suggests it to be, namely an argument for the existence of the world as we know it, and not as it is in itself, from the existence of something. The cosmological argument. There is the difficulty already alluded to, namely, that the world is explained as an uncaused cause, or as a cause which does not regress of causes, gods in this case, to which the world seeks to avoid. This means that the world is a necessarily existing being, one whose existence of the world constitutes no reason for its existence. Such a being. If we use the causal argument, the world is the existence of a cause which explains the world, the universe, and this does not explain the powerful, all-perfect, uncaused cause. The conclusion is that the cause is powerful, all-perfect, and has created the sort of world we know.

The world we know does not reveal a necessarily existing, omnipotent, all-perfect being. The

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 legit-
supreme malevolent designer, or a
or finite designer, who muddles along
most unhappy results.

Thus I suggest that two consid-
in God provide no grounds for suc-
portant, valid, conclusive objectio-
would suggest the existence of being
source of concern, dismay, and
security.

Other theists come to their be-
'faith'. Tillich speaks of faith as the
as claiming truth for its concern, and
and the taking of a risk. It does
rational risk. The theist suggests th-
goodness of God is like having faith
known to be a man of honour and
there is now circumstantial eviden-
in one's friend on the basis of past
it may involve a risk of error. Ho-
like that at all. There is not the p-
being. All we know of God is throu-
works are such that we cannot con-
Rather, we must conclude that i-
ously imperfect. To have faith in h-
of the existence of evil is to be in-
faith cannot provide grounds for

In bringing out the weakness o-
faith, I have stressed the fact of
vitally important to stress. There is
of appropriate goods, and the lik-
by people such as Hitler and Eich-
us in more modest forms. It is be-
does not exist. No being who was
which there was avoidable suffering
who could have been created so a-
acts which very often result in in-
to solve the problem these facts
ways. Their 'solutions' are discus-
(See *God and Evil*, edited by N. I.

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.

The fact that the proofs provide of such a god, and that there is no convenient way to go into here for disbelief, for not worshipping, holding it to be a being as a god, makes this view of 'Would Any Being Merit Worship?' (1964). However, it is none the less true that a being who would feel very happy and secure in the knowledge that such a being 'holds the whole world in his hand' would not feel that such a being would deprive us.

Let us now consider more closely the claim that God brings comfort and security of worship. God would deprive us.

What are the occasions on which we seek a source of comfort? Most of us seek a long and full life if their deaths are the same about our own deaths. Strength and comfort are when we are in the hands of God'. They are occasions such as a natural disaster, flood, fire, or more commonly the case, as a result of a disease, a paralysing stroke, a meningitis, encephalitis, or the like. If we are parents to a gravely disabled child, if our son is going blind and there is no hope, if our child or spouse or friend is in need of comfort and support when we are in the hands of evils which are commonly, and for the most part, the work of God'. It is true that morally evil actions, and render us in need of comfort for the reasons alluded to earlier. If we are responsible for these too, it is better to be responsible which render us in need of comfort than to be scribed by theists on the basis of the work of God.

If one's loved one or oneself is in need, for example, one's daughter at the age of 10, and suffers permanent impairment, and ought one to be comforted to see your daughter's condition? Would

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,

who brought about her unhappy fate. If I knew that there is no God, I should and do support all measures which reduce the occasions on which such comfort is needed, not least for the part because there have been atheistic influences which have weakened conservative religious influences which have opposed such measures as abortion, the use of effective methods of birth control, voluntary euthanasia and suicide, which people need the comfort and support of. Atheism, adopted by a thoughtful person, leads to a sense of self-reliance, to a self-respect which helps those who need such support, and to the adoption of all measures which will reduce the occasions on which such support is needed.



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