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My Dogma Ran Over My Karma

Five conversation-stopping myths behind the New Atheism and how dialogue can be restored.

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"People who want to share their religious views with you almost never want you to share yours with them." – Dave Barry

"Fools find no pleasure in understanding but delight in airing their own opinions." – Prov. 18:2 (NIV)

I've been a Christian for 41 years now. One of the things believers like me get used to after a while is being discounted by otherwise well-meaning folks ("Oh, he's one of *them*... well, I suppose he's entitled to his beliefs..."). You may be liked and accepted, perhaps even admired. But regardless of what you say, think or do, you'll be taken for a simpleton and behind genuinely sincere smiles 90% of everything you say will be quietly discarded. Even so, I've had the pleasure of knowing people who didn't share my faith but took a genuine interest in it and valued open-minded dialog. Like me, they knew they had much to learn and saw the value in walking beside those with differing views in a common journey for understanding. My library is filled with the works of Atheist scholars who've been hugely influential in the formation of my own beliefs—not for the sparring practice they offered, but by expanding my knowledge in ways believing writers had not, and rightfully challenging aspects of my worldview that were less well-grounded than I'd imagined. I owe these people a debt I'll never be able to repay.

Then there were the rest... Atheists of a very different sort.

In the wake of 9/11 an understandable but regrettable anti-Islam backlash gave birth to a movement that has come to be known as *New Atheism*. In content it offers nothing of consequence beyond traditional Atheist thought—what sets it apart is its attitude and methods. For the most part traditional Atheists hold their views for rational and experiential reasons. To them, knowledge seeking is something to be *practiced* rather than merely preached. They tend to assume the same of those they disagree with, and as such are given to dialogue with people of faith. New Atheists like Richard Dawkins (2008), Sam Harris (2005; 2008), Christopher Hitchens (2009) and other like-minded ideologues will have none of this. According to them all religions are morally bankrupt delusions regarding which dialogue of any kind is a waste of time. They'll discuss religion with believers but only to spar with, or correct them (or as a friend once said on Facebook, to "shame them into changing their irrational ways"). Under no circumstances will they consider the possibility that anything of value might be learned from anyone outside of their own circle. I've invested countless hours discussing religious topics with these folks hoping to share with them what my faith means to me and perhaps get beyond this iron curtain that separates us. But despite my best efforts, every one of these conversations followed the same basic script...

Religion is "mythology," I was told—an irrational belief in imaginary gods that were inevitably compared to some suitably over-the-top straw man (common choices include "flying elephants," the Greek Pantheon, and the "Flying Spaghetti Monster," the latter of which was invented by a New Atheist specifically to fill this need). Atheism on the other hand, is grounded in science. When asked for this alleged "science" none was ever produced, nor was I ever asked for what evidence led me to my beliefs. I would provide it anyway whether they liked it or not (usually as personal reflections, formally arguments, citations to peer-reviewed science and other scholarship, and the most thoughtful religious works I know of), only to have all of it studiously ignored. This cycle would repeat for a while... I'd offer more arguments and evidence and make further requests for the same, receiving nothing but increasingly monotonous repetitions of the "no evidence" mantra in return. At no point was there any indication that my offerings had even been read, much less considered (a few even admitted they had no intention of doing so). The more I provided the more dismissive the responses were. Sooner or later my patience would wear thin...

"What's the damn problem? I would ask. "Why aren't you addressing my arguments or evidence?" I'd point out that my sources had been made available to them (in most cases with links to the abstracts and/or full-text content, and at times even the raw data). If their views are as rational and scientific as they claim, why would they refuse to allow reason or science in a dialogue about worldviews? (Trusting soul that I am, I was still assuming these actually *were* meaningful dialogues. I was about to discover otherwise...)

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The response was always the same... (Rolled eyes... patronizing sigh...). "I *have* considered your evidence, and it doesn't prove anything! Religions is irrational foolishness!" (Apparently "considering" doesn't involve actually reading the source material much less directly addressing any of its content, or for that matter even learning anything about the subjects involved...). If I took issue with being patronized I was accused of being too sensitive. (As though you can call someone's worldview irrational foolishness without calling them irrational fools...)

"Why are you being so defensive...?" they would ask. "Are you threatened by the advance of science?" (*What* science? *What* scientists? Do these people have *names*? Is any of this published somewhere? Where the hell *is* this alleged "science" of yours, and why isn't it on the table yet? Due diligence must be a sign of intellectual weakness as well...)

Atheism isn't a belief system, I was told—it's just the *rejection* of religion so it doesn't *need* to be defended. (How convenient!) It was up to me to prove my case, not them. (Care being taken, of course, to insure that standards of proof remained vague enough to deflect any possible response, especially those that might involve a trip to a university library...) This would be followed by the predictable litanies... "Science is advancing..." "Religion is retreating..." after which I was smugly told that I was still entitled to cling to the "God hypothesis" if I pleased (another New Atheist label crafted to give the appearance of scientific inquiry without having to actually set foot in said university libraries).

Now I would love to be more patient but like everyone else I'm mortal and I have my limits... and this is where they were usually reached... "Enough already with the cop-outs! If your arguments are even half as sound as you claim you should have no trouble demonstrating that... so quit wasting my time and get on with it! Man up and address my arguments properly or have the courage to admit that you can't!" Confronted with a direct challenge, all responded like cornered animals and the cycle would end. Any further attempts at discussion would only have jeopardized the friendship.

Notice how this game is played...

- 1) One starts by defining religion as mythology (thereby isolating it from all real-world knowledge and experience, particularly science). A few cheap caricatures (e.g. "flying elephants") are tossed in for emotional effect to weld the dungeon door closed.
- 2) Truth is then defined as scientific knowledge alone (thereby excluding any attendant metaphysical or existential claims and isolating it from religion as defined in 1).
- 3) Finally, Atheism is defined as nothing more than the rejection of 1) given 2) and declared to be the Null Hypothesis, thereby excluding any assertions of the aforementioned types that would otherwise come under scrutiny.

You have to admire the devious ingenuity at work here! *By definition*; Premise 1) isolates religion from science, so any science a theist might offer is disqualified before it can even be considered; Premise 2) isolates truth from religion, preemptively disqualifying all other knowledge as well (including the theist's own beliefs and experiences, and any attempt to question the validity of either premise); Finally, Premise 3) shifts the entire burden of proof onto anyone who even considers disputing any of this...

And in one fell swoop the New Atheist renders his/her views indefeasible, dodges all responsibility for a proper defense of their claims, and positions him/herself as an unassailable neutral skeptic. And the beautiful part is... all of this is accomplished *before any sort of fact-checking or rational inquiry has taken place*. If we dare to object (or God forbid, take offense at being told that our most cherished beliefs are those of unthinking idiots) then like Socrates they become noble, misunderstood martyrs for "reason" and we their intolerant Inquisitors... simply because we had the audacity to expect some due diligence.

If there's a better formula for propaganda I can't imagine what it would be. (Hmmm... I wish I'd known about this when I was in graduate school! Who knows? With a similar approach I might have convinced my thesis review committee to grant me my Masters in Applied Physics without having to do any actual work... Or not. ;-)

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What makes these tactics so insidious is that they deal with issues that impact us all—morality, justice, meaning, our very humanity—by *shutting down any possibility of dialogue*, and that in an age when it's needed more than ever. Even so, for the most part I do not believe this is being done deliberately. The New Atheists I know are all decent, intelligent people who genuinely care about the well-being of others and their communities. They long for meaningful dialogue and resolutions to these issues as much as anyone. But they don't seem to realize that they've adopted a stance that prevents that from happening.

The Atheists that influenced my intellectual and spiritual development bore little resemblance to their New Atheist progeny. These men and women were *scholars*. Throughout their careers they made meaningful contributions to human knowledge, one could learn much from their works. Nearly 70 years after it was first published, Bertrand Russell's *History of Western Philosophy* is still one of the finest such works in print. Antony Flew's *God and Philosophy* was one of the seminal works (if not the seminal work) that defined 20th Century Atheist philosophy and laid the groundwork for decades of productive philosophical study.¹ These and other such works are still regularly assigned reading in many undergraduate history, philosophy and theology programs. I didn't find their arguments for Atheism convincing, but at least they *had* arguments—ones they had thought through to some degree and weren't afraid to put on the table. They had no patience for New Atheism's incivility and straw men—the kind which require no intellectual honesty or courage to face—and they made an honest effort to learn something about the religions they rejected. Most of what I know of the theologies of St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Augustine I learned from Russell's works, and Isaac Asimov's *Guide to the Bible* is to this day one of my favorite and most dog-eared Bible commentaries.

By contrast, having read numerous works by Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, and other New Atheists I honestly can't point to a single thing I learned from them. Nowhere did I encounter any real information relevant to their core claims—No science, no history, no philosophy or comparative religion... not one properly researched fact or idea that might have challenged me to rethink my beliefs. The best were restricted to civil, but hubris-laden op-ed directed at straw men. The worst were nothing more than narcissistic rage. The first time I finished Russell's *History of Western Philosophy* I stuffed it back into my bookshelf and ran straight to the bookstore. I couldn't wait to get my hands on more of his work. The only thing I got from Dawkins and Harris was comic relief, and Hitchens' *God is Not Great* was like having raw sewage thrown in my face. I still recall putting it down and feeling like I had to take an hour-long shower just to wash the stench of pure undiluted hate off my soul.

Carl Sagan once said,

“It is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness.”

If we want to give our children a world worth living in we must relinquish darkness cursing no matter how satisfying or ego-boosting it may be, and commit ourselves to lighting candles. This will not be possible unless New Atheists are willing to relinquish this conversation-stopping game and engage in open-minded dialog with those they disagree with. The good news is that despite all appearances to the contrary, it's a house of cards founded on five philosophical myths. Once these have been dealt with they will be able to enjoy the same understanding and dialogue traditional theist and Atheist scholars have for many years, if they so choose. Let's examine each in turn.

Myth 1: Religion is “mythology”

The world's religious traditions are rich beyond description, built upon the searching and insight of countless people who have worked out their salvation daily over many millennia wrestling with countless questions in countless ways. What is the nature of reality...? Where did the universe come from and what is our place in it...? What are we here for...? Are we loved, and does love even matter...? Does *anything* matter...? Some of these questions are metaphysical while others address the physical world and our experience of it. The answers they offer are as varied as the hearts and minds of the people who practice them... and those answers come at a price. Disciples are often called to go where they would rather not, let go of things they would rather cling to, be patient with mystery where answers have not yet been given (and may never be). Understanding these experiences and traditions, and the doctrines they shaped is the work of a lifetime. The world's libraries are filled with works of comparative religion, metaphysics, the history of religion, and studies of science and religion as well as sacred texts. Therein one finds the knowledge and stories of countless scholars, scientists, poets and lay people who have faced these questions thoughtfully and prayerfully.

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But spiritual struggles and moral dilemmas are messy issues. There are few, if any easy answers and even life's blessings are often given in ways we would not chose. Few of us realize the extent to which we protect our hearts with clenched fists, but only open hands can receive a gift. Confronting such realities is more costly than many of us want to face, and there will always be those who would rather not have to do all that work. The writer Milan Kundera once said,

“Man desires a world where good and evil can be clearly distinguished, because he has an innate and irrepessible desire to judge before he understands.”

Straw men are easier to dispose of, and have the added advantage of allowing one to retain the appearance of intellectual superiority. And for those who would rather not face the hard questions head on, what could be an easier target than the silliest mythological gods and fairy tales one can think of? So it comes as no surprise that New Atheists insist on forcing the history of every world religion into that mold. Richard Dawkins says,

“I have found it an amusing strategy, when asked whether I am an Atheist, to point out that the questioner is also an Atheist when considering Zeus, Apollo, Amon Ra, Mithras, Baal, Thor, Wotan, the Golden Calf and the Flying Spaghetti Monster. I just go one god further.” – (Dawkins, 2008, Pg. 53)

Amusing is hardly the word for it. As of 2010 religious believers account for over 88% of the human race (roughly 6.3 billion human souls) of which 69% (5 billion) are Christian, Muslim or Hindu (ARDA, 2010). By comparison, Atheists are a mere 2%. Take Dawkins' list of “gods” to any public library, and even ten minutes in the Comparative Religion and Philosophy sections will be more than enough to reveal it for the illiterate nonsense that it is. To anyone willing to do so, the reasons why are extensive and self-explanatory so we needn't belabor them here. It's a safe bet that most, if not all of the world's believers understand their own traditions and doctrines far better than any New Atheist, so Dawkins list will only be convincing to his acolytes... and their minds are already made up. Nevertheless, some comments on it are in order.

To start with, it's based on a logical fallacy known as the *Pluralistic Fallacy*—multiple versions of idea **A** are possible, including some that are clearly false; Therefore **A** does not exist and statements about it are false. New Atheists think that as long as they can dream up a silly caricature of God they've proven that the *concept* of God or anything like Him is nonsensical. This is incorrect.

Atheism is by definition exactly what the word implies. *A-Theism*—that is, the rejection of anything or anyone that fits a formal definition of god and/or the supernatural. Theism, properly defined, is the claim that there exists an omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent being, or agent who is rational and self-aware (that is, possesses personhood), regardless of who that agent is taken to be or how any particular religion chooses to worship Him. Typically (though not always) it's also assumed that this being created the material universe and all it contains, including us. The issue on the table is not whether this or that particular god exists, but *whether anything similar to the concept of God does*. Claiming to be “an Atheist regarding Zeus or Apollo” is like saying one is a human race non-believer regarding Capt. James T. Kirk or Harry Potter. It's a basic category error that distracts attention from the real question.

Then there's the question of Atheism itself. New Atheists vehemently deny that it's a religion on the grounds that it does not entail belief in any god or gods. If that were valid, then Buddhism would not be a religion, and neither would Jainism, Scientology, EST, or any of a number of other belief systems. Properly defined, a religion is any belief system with the following traits;

- A set of doctrines regarding the ultimate nature of reality (including the option of believing that the supernatural is not part of it).
- A concept of spirituality involving beliefs about the meaning and purpose of our lives (if any), and how we are to live as a result.
- An attendant moral code and concepts of righteousness based on it.
- A body of recognized leadership fulfilling most, if not all of the roles of clergy and/or ideological leadership.
- Some sort of machinery for evangelizing their cause.

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Atheism fills all of these requirements including doctrine (Dawkins, 2008; Harris, 2005; 2008), a moral code (Harris, 2011; 2013), spirituality (Harris, 2012; 2014), recognized leaders of the movement (e.g. Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett, Christopher Hitchens prior to his death, and more), and an elaborate evangelical network encompassing multiple organizations and lobbies. Dawkins' website includes a "Convert's Corner" for recently converted New Atheist disciples, and even sells apparel and lapel pins for "witnessing" modeled after the Campus Crusade for Christ ones I wore during my high school years (www.richarddawkins.net). Nope... no religious activity going on there! Incidentally, the Association of Religion Data Archives cited earlier maintains extensive global demographic data on Atheism (hence the 2% figure cited), as does the U.S. Census Bureau, the U.S. State Department, the United Nations Human Development Project, and other agencies from whose public datasets and reports it draw raw data. You see, that's because these institutions recognize what virtually everyone outside of the New Atheist community does—Atheism is in fact, *a religion*.

If nothing else, equating religion to mythology presumes that it never makes claims about this world or our experience of it. That rules out just about every major religion in existence, and what most of humanity actually believes. The Abrahamic religions (which comprise roughly two thirds of the human race) teach that *in the beginning* the universe was created (Gen. 1:1). This implies that the universe is not past-eternal—a claim which is physical, well within the purview of physics and cosmology, and as it turns out, *correct* (Borde et al., 2003; Craig & Sinclair, 2012).² Christianity claims that Jesus of Nazareth lived, died and was buried, and rose from the dead three days later. These are specific historical claims, the first two of which no historian of any repute would dispute, and for which a considerable case can be made for the latter.³ Countless similar examples could be provided. New Atheists stridently reject these claims of course, but only because most are untrained in physics and/or history.

Myth 2: If it can't be scientifically verified it isn't true

This claim is perhaps best seen in practice. A friend recently told me that the difference between he and I was that he "considers all religions to be false" and thus "can just focus on their impact to society" (my emphasis). I informed him that although I *believe* Atheism to be false (notice the difference in our terminology) my responsibility for self-examination and knowledge-seeking never ends and I am always ready to rethink my worldview in light of any new evidence. In response he said that I don't understand the meaning of the word *false*. According to him,

"'True' is a label which we apply to those things which can be *demonstrated to be accurate*... All religious claims are based upon the supernatural and often deal with things that are logical or physical impossibilities. Much like flying elephants, *these irrational claims are false until they are proven with evidence*... This is why I say all religions are false."

- (my emphasis, grammatical errors in the original corrected).

The sweeping generalizations and straw men speak for themselves (notice the obligatory reference to "flying elephants"). Other than that, this is a textbook statement of the foundational idea behind a school of philosophy known as *Positivism*.

In philosophy one distinguishes between the studies of *ontology* which has to do with statements about reality itself, and *epistemology*, which addresses knowledge of reality and its limitations. An ontological statement would be similar to; "There is an object (or substance) A which has the properties X and Y," whereas an epistemological one would be of the form; "We know that A with properties X and Y exists because knowledge of it has been apprehended in such and such manner." In everyday life this distinction might seem like picking the fly droppings out of the pepper. But when ultimate questions are on the table it becomes important very fast, and how we address the two to each other matters. Broadly speaking, philosophical schools have generally fallen into one of two camps: Those that emphasize *empirical* knowledge (derived from sensory experience), and those that emphasize *a priori* knowledge (innately perceived to be true apart from experience). David Hume and John Locke were representative of the former, and Immanuel Kant of the latter.

Positivism gained prominence during the 19th Century as a byproduct of the growing post-Enlightenment confidence in scientific empiricism. It dealt with these concerns by claiming that all authentic knowledge is based on observational science and mathematics alone, to the exclusion of intuition, emotion and all forms of metaphysics. It reached its apex just prior to World War II in a school of thought known as *Logical Positivism*, according to which statements that could not be verified were not only *false*, but meaningless (Logical Positivism is often referred to as *Verificationism*).

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By World War I Positivism had run afoul of numerous rational and practical issues and was increasingly under fire from philosophers. It never recovered from these issues, and by the mid-20th Century it was essentially dead as a viable school of school of philosophy, having been replaced by Antipositivism which struck more of a balance between the objective and subjective in human experience (Wikipedia, 2014b). Logical Positivism in particular was found to be self-refuting and in the end was rejected even by its founders. Today Positivism survives only in the practice of Sociology (as grounded in the 19th Century Positivist works of August Comte and Emile Durkheim), and surprise, surprise... in the beliefs of Atheistic scientists—who cannot seem to resist the temptation to ground all human wisdom in their chosen profession (a view known as *Scientism*) and few of whom are formally trained in Philosophy.⁴

Several factors led to Positivism. First, the claim that absolute reality can be grounded in evidence is based on a logical fallacy known as the Argument from Ignorance (formally, *Argumentum ad Ignorantiam*) which can assume both positive and negative forms;

- No evidence has proven statement A to be false. Therefore A is true.
- No evidence has proven statement A to be true. Therefore A is false.

Both statements are fallacious. Absence of evidence is not the same as evidence of absence. If it were, science itself could not progress. (Notice that the positive form also allows one to fallaciously “prove” that God *does* exist). In 1928 physicist Paul Dirac showed that a relativistic formulation of the Schrodinger wave equation led to the prediction of a subatomic particle identical in every respect to the electron except with a positive electrical charge. No such particle had ever been observed, leading to concerns about Dirac’s results and various proposals as to how they could be accounted for. Then, in 1932 Carl D. Anderson confirmed the existence of such a particle and dubbed it the positron. No one seriously believed that positrons didn’t exist prior to 1928. We simply hadn’t come across them yet in theory or practice.

If my friend had lived during the 18th Century and a Christian physicist (like Isaac Newton perhaps) had told him there was a tiny subatomic particle with a mass of 1/1836 that of a hydrogen nucleus that carried a positive electric charge, he would’ve dismissed that claim as false because it had not been “demonstrated to be accurate.” He would’ve been wrong.

Even where theory and evidence are available, “demonstrated to be accurate” can be a slippery claim. Science does not deal in absolute reality. It makes theoretical claims which by nature may gain credence from increasing evidence, but will never be beyond question. Some theories have enjoyed enough support that in practice we treat them as certain (no one seriously disputes Newtonian mechanics). However many have not. Einstein once said of general relativity that no amount of observational would ever prove him right, but a single observation could prove him wrong. In 2007 the Main Injector Neutrino Oscillation Search (MINOS) experiment at Fermilab in Chicago observed transit times for 3 GeV neutrinos that indicated they were travelling significantly faster than the speed of light (Adamson et al., 2007). If confirmed, that would’ve been the one experiment that brought relativity to its knees. Fermilab scientists took these results seriously enough to investigate further, and eventually firmware issues were discovered with the experiment’s detectors that once corrected, restored sub-light neutrino speeds (Fermilab, 2012). The point is that despite a century of observational confirmation, physicists still do not consider the “accuracy” of general relativity so well “demonstrated” that they may dispense with all further research and “just focus on its impact to society.”

In fact, the overwhelming majority of the physical universe cannot be known, *even in principle*. Our knowledge of its large scale structure and evolution is restricted to observations of the electromagnetic radiation that has reached us along our past *light cone* (the space-like hypersurface defined by all such radiation that has reached any point of observation at the speed of light), and then only as far back as the last scattering surface (the so-called *decoupling era*, roughly 379,000 years after the big bang).⁵ Gravity wave detectors such as the Caltech/MIT LIGO (Laser Interferometer Gravity-wave Observatory) project may one day extend this horizon back to the so-called grand unification epoch where gravity decoupled from other fundamental “gauge” forces (namely, the nuclear strong and electroweak forces) roughly 10^{-36} seconds after the big bang (Wikipedia, 2014c). The questions most relevant to religion take us back to the actual birth of the universe prior to the so-called *Planck time* (10^{-43} seconds after the big bang). Our theories of what happened during this epoch are based on theories of quantum gravity which are not only in their infancy and riddled with inconsistencies, but occur at energy scales that only be tested by constructing a supercollider larger than the solar system and operating it for an extended period. Until someone figures out how to do such a thing, any theories we may dream up to explain the birth of the universe will be unverifiable (Ellis, 2006).

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What about the future? Won't light from distant regions reach us eventually and thus be within our ability to investigate? No. In 1998 it was discovered that the universe is not only expanding, but *accelerating* (Adam et al., 1998; Perlmutter et al., 1999). Thus, in addition to particle and event horizons, the universe has a *future horizon* (Wikipedia, 2014d). That is, the vast majority of it is constrained not only to regions we cannot see yet, but to ones we will never be able to see... *ever*. We can still *infer* what these regions are like based on what we do see, and what our models tell us, but nothing more. And mere inferences are not accurate demonstrations—particularly when they're based on highly idealized models and observations of the universe's past that become progressively less reliable the further back we look (Ellis, 2006).

The use of models itself raises issues. Those that best describe the observable universe belong to a class known as Friedmann Lemaître Robertson Walker (FLRW) models. These describe a universe filled with a pressure-free "fluid" that is *homogeneous*—uniform at every location, and *isotropic*—uniform in every direction (the two need not be simultaneously true). Clearly this is not the case. Nevertheless, it is close enough to true that these models give us a robust understanding of the universe's large-scale properties. Even so, it's too easily forgotten that models are just that—*models*. They have their limitations, and those limitations must be kept in mind when extrapolating them to sweeping conclusions. Nowhere is this more true than in cosmology—the science that brings us closer to ultimate questions than any other. A great deal of nonsense is glibly preached as though it were sacred truth simply because too many cosmologists cherish their toy models enough to confuse them with reality itself. These days popular science books routinely speak of infinite universes, or an infinite multiverse spawning infinite child universes without realizing that both are based entirely on mathematical idealizations, in some cases even to the point of flatly contradicting the laws of physics.⁶ Yet the authors of these books blissfully ignore such considerations because they've become so enamored with the *idea* of science that they've lost sight of how real-world science is actually done. When I was in graduate school my thesis advisor often spoke (ranted actually) about how often experimental physicists like he had to reign in the reckless speculations of ivory-tower theoreticians. He was right.

Notice that in all of this we aren't talking about mere gaps in the progress of science, but *fundamental limitations imposed by the laws of physics themselves*. No so-called "god-of-the-gaps" arguments are involved. Unless everything we've ever learn about the physical universe over the last millennia gets overturned in the near future, we are permanently constrained by them. Don't hold your breath!

Yet no physicist of any repute truly believes that the universe doesn't exist beyond our visual horizon, or that that it didn't exist prior to the decoupling era. We simply accept that although our knowledge of it is progressing, it is, and always will be necessarily limited. If my friend's standard of "truth" is taken at face value then the universe beyond what we can see and directly demonstrate *doesn't exist*, rendering the very practice of physics and cosmology "irrational." To any reasonable person this is grandiose nonsense.

As for Logical Positivism, its final death blow came from something far more mundane than any of the previous considerations. By the start of World War II it had fully developed it into a formal truth standard codified in the so-called *verification principle*, which in essence was identical to my friend's claim: Truth is to be *defined* as that which can be observationally and mathematically verified. Any statement that cannot be (particularly metaphysical statements) is at best false, and at worst meaningless. No sooner had this been done than philosophers and scientists alike began asking the obvious question...

Can the verification principle itself be verified? If not, then it is self-refuting.

No satisfactory answer to this challenge was ever produced. Ultimately, the claim that science is the source of all truth is metaphysical, not scientific, and thus self-contradictory.

All of this is lost on New Atheists because for all their teary-eyed love of it, they're largely ignorant of the reality of how it's actually practiced in the trenches. The general public is no better off in this regard either. People tend to assume that being an expert in a scientific field like physics, cosmology, or evolutionary biology automatically makes someone an expert in history, philosophy, comparative religion, Elizabethan poetry, beer brewing, feminine hygiene, or any other subject he/she cares to have an opinion on regardless of whether they've been trained in it or not (logicians refer to this fallacy as the Argument from Authority, or *Argumentum ab Auctoritate*). But in science there are no authorities, only *experts*. There's a difference, and ignorance of it is why book stores are filled with popular science titles by New Atheist authors that are bestsellers despite being riddled with fallacies and inaccuracies that wouldn't get past any undergraduate philosophy, history, or comparative religion student.

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Myth 3: Confusion of opinion with fact

Consider the following statement,

- a) Water witching is pseudoscience.

Is this a statement of fact? No. It is an opinion. On the other hand if we were to say something like,

- b) Water witching has been subjected to controlled multi-variable, double-blind tests and results have never differed at statistically significant levels from the predictions of random chance.
(Citations to sources here)

That would be a statement of fact. It's likely we would have opinion **a)** because of it. Nevertheless, **a)** is an *opinion*. Only statements like **b)** can legitimately be called facts. Widespread misunderstanding of this has resulted in untold confusion and endless arguments going nowhere that accomplish little beyond spreading dissention and ill will, and New Atheists are notorious for this sort of thing. Consider the following statements;

"Now, if you think the worst possible misery for everyone isn't bad, or maybe it has a silver lining, or maybe there's something worse, I don't know what you're talking about. And what's more, I'm pretty sure you don't know what you're talking about either." – (Craig and Harris, 2011)

"Darwinian evolution, specifically natural selection... shatters the illusion of design within the domain of biology, and teaches us to be suspicious of any kind of design hypothesis in physics and cosmology as well." – (Dawkins, 2008)

"I have argued elsewhere that the ascendancy of Christian conservatism in American politics should terrify and embarrass us. And yet, there are gradations to the evil that is done in name of God, and these gradations must be honestly observed. So let us now make sense of the impossible by acknowledging the obvious: there is a direct link between the doctrine of Islam and Muslim terrorism." – (Harris, 2005b)

"What Darwinism does is to raise our consciousness to the power of science to explain the existence of complex things and intelligences, and creative intelligences are above all complex things, they're statistically improbable. Darwinism raises our consciousness to the power of science to explain how such entities - and the human brain is one - can come into existence from simple beginnings." – (Dawkins, 2008)

"The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully." – (Dawkins, 2008)

"It is also worth noting that one can obtain a PhD in any branch of science for no other purpose than to make cynical use of scientific language in an effort to rationalize the glaring inadequacies of the Bible. A handful of Christians appear to have done this..." – (Harris, 2005)⁷

Apart from the ad hominem, cherry-picking, and straw men, what these statements all have in common is that they're type **a)** statements—that is, opinions—yet all are uncritically treated as *facts* by the New Atheist community. Of all the New Atheists I've ever known or met, not one has ever in my presence made a statement of type **b)** in support of any belief he/she has regarding any religious topic.

At their worst such opinions can be downright reckless. For instance, take my friend's comment that he "consider[s] all religions to be false, and can just focus on their impact to society." This statement isn't merely wrong, it's incoherent. As we have seen, the study of Religion covers a vast range of belief systems rich in history, tradition and doctrinal claims covering the physical and metaphysical. The content could easily fill a public library. Relegating all of that to falsehood is like claiming that all medical specialty fields are false. Really? Which ones? Oncology? Psychiatry? Therapeutic Touch? And which parts exactly? That smoking correlates with lung cancer...? That Therapeutic Touch "energy" therapy reduces pain and anxiety...? No doubt many New Atheists would respond by pointing out that

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medicine is science and playing their “religion-is-mythology” card, but this begs the question. The point is that both encompass vast and diverse fields of study, the history and evolution of which include ideas ranging from insightful to demonstrated nonsense. Relegating the entire body of either to a sweeping generalization of falsehood merely demonstrates that one is illiterate in both.

The economist John Maynard Keynes once said,

“When my information changes I alter my conclusions. What do you do Sir?”

If we’re to learn anything at all in life, our information must determine our opinions—not the other way around. If opinion sparring was a viable path to knowledge there would be no lasting conflict in the world, 99 out of 100 people would have PhD’s, and there would be no market for reality TV or gossip magazines.

Myth 4: “Irrational” means “unscientific”

If there is a signature New Atheists mantra it’s the words *reason* and *rational*. Both turn up repeatedly on nearly every page of their publications (Richard Dawkins’ even named his own non-profit The Foundation for Reason and Science). But for all their preaching of both, they rarely use either in conjunction with any sort of formal analysis or scholarship. In practice, “reason” and “rational” are merely labels they apply to their own opinions, or more commonly, “irrational” is their label for anything they deem distasteful or unscientific (or more to the point, scientifically unpopular). This is of course, incorrect.

Properly defined, reason is *the capacity for consciously making sense of things, applying logic, establishing and verifying facts, and changing or justifying practices, institutions, and beliefs based on new or existing information* (Kompridis, 2010). Note the emphasis on *logic* and *changing beliefs based on existing or new information*. At a bare minimum, any claim that purports to be rational must meet the following conditions;

- A) A formal chain of logic beginning from clearly stated a’ priori or a’ posteriori axioms and ending with one or more specific conclusions consistent with them (including valid mathematics where relevant).
- B) Well-characterized data and/or reliable testimony for all a’ posteriori axioms (including properly cited source material where relevant).
- C) Freedom from all formal logical fallacies (e.g. Ad Hominem, Argument from Ignorance, Genetic, etc.).
- D) Comprehensiveness: The ability to account for a broad range of experience with a minimum of initial axioms and/or hypotheses compared to any competing claim.

No New Atheist I know has ever attempted a formal demonstration of their views that met any of these conditions much less all of them, or to prove that mine do not.

Someone once said, “Gravity has no effect on validity—in other words, BS cannot be converted into truth simply by dropping it from great heights.” Until New Atheists put something concrete on the table that does so, shouting “Irrational..! Irrational..!” is mere chest beating.

And by the way, claiming neutral ground and conveniently excusing themselves from any need to doesn’t prove anything either. Speaking of which...

Myth 5: Atheism is the Null Hypothesis

Finally, we come to New Atheism’s Get-Out-of-Jail-Free card: The claim that Atheism is the Null Hypothesis. Sam Harris minces no words when he says,

“‘Atheism’ is a term that should not even exist. No one ever needs to identify himself as a ‘non-astrologer’ or a ‘non-chemist.’ ... Atheism is nothing more than the noises people make in the presence of unjustified religious beliefs.” – (Harris, 2008)

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Or as a New Atheist friend once put it in a Facebook comment,

“An Atheist is one who rejects the claims made by theists. An Atheist is simply a person who is not a theist. *Atheism is not in itself a claim, and as such, simply cannot be false.* Only claims can be proven false; a lack of claim cannot be said to be false. How can I be wrong when I say 'you haven't presented a compelling argument for your case'?" (My emphasis)

Note carefully what's being stated here. *Atheism is not a claim at all.* It is the rejection of one—namely belief in God and the Supernatural. According to him, *it cannot be false, even in principle* (recall what I said earlier about how New Atheists avoid responsibility for due diligence by deliberately crafting their worldview to be indefeasible). Reasonable as this may sound at first blush, it has three fatal flaws.

First, recall the Argument from Ignorance on which Myth 2) is based. As we saw in that discussion, this fallacy assumes both positive and negative forms. Thus, it may be *corrected* in a similar manner as follows;

- No evidence has proven statement **A** to be false. Therefore it is possible that **A** is true.
- No evidence has proven statement **A** to be true. Therefore it is possible that **A** is false.

Both statements are true. An absence of evidence renders **A** potentially either true *or* false—The question cannot be decided one way or the other. The true Null Hypothesis is *Agnosticism*, not Atheism.

Second, this claim also assumes a Pluralistic fallacy similar to that behind Myth 1). Skepticism toward any given claim is neutral ground if, and *only* if, multiple alternatives are available. If a fishing buddy told me that the pond only had trout in it I could legitimately ask how he knows that. Is there a valid reason why it couldn't host bass, perch, walleyes, or numerous other species of fish as well? For that matter, do we know that it has *any* fish in it? Given that multiple scenarios are possible, I could reject my buddy's claim without committing myself to any of them and assuming a corresponding burden of proof. The existence of God is a radically different issue. In this case the question on the table is the very nature of ultimate reality itself—the totality of all that exists. Unless drugs or large amounts of alcohol are involved, no reasonable person would dispute that the natural world around us exists (although believe it or not, there are those who actually disagree). This leaves us with exactly two alternatives: The Supernatural exists (Theism), or it does not (Materialism). These are the only two rational alternatives possible, and as such *one cannot reject both without creating a logical contradiction*. In formal logic this is known as the *Law of the Excluded Middle*. Rejecting Theism necessarily commit one to Materialism—a formally defined worldview that at a bare minimum entails at least the following specific claims;

1) The physical universe either,

- Created itself out of absolute non-being, including the physical laws that describe it, or
- Is past-eternal.

Either way, it exists in all of its contingent complexity without regard for any principle of Sufficient Reason. The laws of physics alone can explain the high (even extreme) degree of fine tuning displayed in the large-scale structure of the universe, including all of its demonstrably contingent physical and cosmological parameters and their allowance for the possibility of intelligent life.

- 2) Everything that exists is the result of nothing more than the laws of physics operating according to blind, purposeless chance, including the full totality of all human experience and rational intelligence.
- 3) Consciousness is epiphenomenal (i.e. illusory).
- 4) Absolute morality is either non-existent, or is what it is just because it is (take your pick).⁸
- 5) Free will does not exist.
- 6) Regardless of 2) through 5), human beings are empowered, responsible moral agents who can, and do direct their own life choices.
- 7) Regardless of 2) through 5), meaningful human spirituality and self-transcendence are possible.

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- 8) Regardless of 2), reason, as properly apprehended by the human brain, is a reliable and authoritative source of knowledge.

Nothing in this list is a simple rejection of anything—all are positive, specific claims about the way the universe is that as such, carries a burden of proof their advocates do not have the luxury of shirking. Most importantly, rejection of a belief in God and the Supernatural *necessarily commits Atheists to each and every one of them.*

Finally, we must consider whether skepticism is truly merited, and why. "How can I be wrong," my friend asks, "when I say 'you haven't presented a compelling argument for your case?'"

Easily... He's wrong because *he's never backed that claim with reasonable standards of proof*, and neither has any other New Atheist. It's pretty difficult to tell someone they don't have a compelling case without having at least some idea of what one would actually look like. Nor are they in a position to claim that any evidence they have been shown is flawed until they've bothered to familiarize themselves with its content and learn whatever science or other knowledge is required for that (this may seem obvious, but in over 40 years I've never met an Atheist who was willing even read the scholarship I offered, much less attempt a proper response to it).

If New Atheists had relevant standards of proof it's reasonable to expect they would've provided them by now, especially since such standards *have* been provided to them on countless occasions (my friend included). For instance, I've already pointed out Christianity teaches that the universe, and all physical laws governing it were created (Gen. 1:1) rendering it very likely that they are not past-eternal. As we saw, the existence of a $t=0$ event at which all physical reality can be said to have begun falls within the realm of physics and cosmology, and thus open to scientific inquiry. Evidence for one counts in favor of a creation event, and contrary evidence would be a strike against it. And the evidence for such an event is robust. Likewise, Christianity also claims that Jesus of Nazareth was born, lived in First Century Palestine for approximately 30 years, was crucified and entombed, and rose from the dead after three days.

These are historical claims that fall within the realm of archeology, history and text criticism. Evidence can be, and has been provided for them. Whether New Atheists accept this evidence or not is beside the point. They've been shown this evidence on many occasions, in personal testimony and scholarly works (several of which have been cited here^{2,3}), and accompanied by proper standards of proof. If they want to dispute that evidence they're welcome to. But if they expect to be taken seriously they need demonstrate that it *can* be legitimately disputed. If they cannot, or will not do that, then shouting "No evidence! No evidence!" is just vacuous noise. Global warming skeptics and Creationists have been doing this sort of thing for decades. Creationists in particular are a case in point. By the 90's, when it had become clear that the "young earth" approach was going nowhere they rebranded themselves under the less obvious rubric of "Intelligent Design" and simply designated themselves as "skeptics of evolution." If my friend's argument flies then we're obligated to take them seriously too. After all, how can they be wrong when they say that we "haven't presented a compelling argument" for evolution... especially when they're free to define *compelling* any way they please?⁹

Consider following analogy.¹⁰ Thomas, Richard and Stephen, are away for the week at a remote wilderness cabin. One morning they go for a walk and discover an intricately crafted crop circle in a nearby field. They had visited that field the previous evening and it had been undisturbed. Later that evening they'd seen some lights through the trees in the direction of that field, the road in hadn't been travelled in days, and as far as they knew they were the only people within 30 miles. How did it get there? One explanation might be that a race of intelligent aliens exists and occasionally visits earth leaving such crop circles behind for some reason. Let's call the claim that intelligent aliens exist our "theistic" explanation. Thomas believes they do, making him the "Theist," Richard believes they do not (the "Atheist"), and Stephen is unsure (the "Agnostic"). Where does this leave them?

Clearly, Thomas has an explanation that accounts for everything they currently know, but Stephen can reasonably dispute it. True, the evidence can be explained by an alien visit so they may well exist. But there might be terrestrial explanations as well. If these are to be ruled out then certain standards of proof should be met. For instance, further investigation might reveal that the gas in their SUV was down to ¼ tank when it had been at ½ tank the day before. A previously unknown hiker or camper might show up on the road and report that they'd seen an SUV in the field last night. Closer examination of the crop circle might reveal tire tracks, or the vehicle itself might have grass or mud in the treads that hadn't been there before. Any such discoveries would be compelling counter-evidence to Thomas' case—namely, that one of the three had snuck out in the middle of the night and pulled a prank. This would not disprove Thomas' theory, but it would weaken it leaving him in the position of having to bring more to the table than the crop circle itself.

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Notice that Richard's stance is different than Stephen's. He isn't claiming that the existence of aliens is questionable—he says they *do not exist... period*. But like it or not, the crop circle is an indisputable brute fact. Thomas has a viable explanation for it, he doesn't. This leaves him with exactly three options;

- a) Concede Thomas's case and accept that aliens exist.
- b) Adopt Stephen's tentative stance with an open mind and provide equivalent or better standards of proof that would convince him.
- c) Provide a more compelling terrestrial explanation and further evidence supporting it.

These are the only rational options he has. Defending his current position with nothing more than a rejection of Thomas' evidence is merely an attempt to shoplift the credibility of Stephen's neutrality without having to earn his own by demonstrating something better. If he cannot, or will not do better than that, "No evidence! No evidence...!" is just the noises he's making in the presence of arguments he can't credibly address.

Conclusion

In his review of its relationship to science and theology, cosmologist George Ellis (2010) has identified the following key characteristics of Fundamentalism;

- a) A tendency to arrogance.
- b) Looking down on the outside world.
- c) Believing your specialty is all that matters.
- d) Believing you have sole access to truth.
- e) Overall: a lack of a holistic worldview.

Compare this list with the following statements by New Atheist writers;

"There is not a person in this room who has *ever met* a person whose worldview is as *narrow* as the worldview of Abraham, or Moses, or Jesus or Mohammed... These people knew *nothing*, next to *nothing*, of the facts that are now relevant to the 21st Century... And in moral terms, with a few notable exceptions, most of these people were *no wiser* than your average Afghan warlord today." - (Harris, 2011b. Emphasis present in the original speech)

"*Mock them! Ridicule them! In public!* Don't fall for the convention that we are all too polite to talk about religion. Religion is not off the table. Religion makes specific claims which need to be challenged and, if necessary *mocked, and with contempt.*" – (Richard Dawkins, from his speech at the Mar. 24, 2012 Reason Rally in Washington DC. Quoted in Jinn [2010] footnote 1. My emphasis)

"I think mockery of religion is one of the most essential things. One of the beginnings of human emancipation is the ability to laugh at things." – (Hitchens, 2010)

"Making fun of born-again Christians is like hunting dairy cows with a high powered rifle and scope." – (O'Rourke, 2000)

"I've always figured that if God wanted us to go to church a lot He's have given us bigger behinds to sit on and smaller heads to think with." – (O'Rourke, 2000)

"Some beliefs are so dangerous that it may be ethical to kill people for believing them." – (Harris, 2005)

"If I convert it's because it's better that a believer dies than that an Atheist does." – (Hitchens, 2012)

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"Scientists, with *their implicit trust in reductionism*, are privileged to be at the summit of knowledge, and to see further into truth than any of their contemporaries... there is no reason to expect that science cannot deal with any aspect of existence... Science, *in contrast to religion*, opens up the great questions of being to *rational* discussion..." – (Atkins, 1995. My emphasis)

"Although poets may aspire to understanding, *their talents are more akin to entertaining self-deception*. Philosophers too, I am afraid, have contributed to the understanding of the universe little more than poets... I long for immortality, but I know that my only hope of achieving it is through science and medicine, not through *sentiment and its subsets, art and theology*" – (Atkins, 1995. My emphasis)

"[Theologians] *have no right* to claim that God is an extreme simplicity ... Maintaining that God is an explanation is an abnegation of the precious power of human reasoning." – (Atkins, 1995. My emphasis)

Throughout all the New Atheist works I've read I find two recurring themes that more than anything else set them apart: *Absolute, unquestioning certainty*, and *A total lack of humility*. Nowhere is there any sign of tentativeness or self-reflection, no willingness to admit even the possibility of error in their views, and none of the genial selflessness characteristic of the sort of open mind that transcends differences making learning and community possible. The only faces these writers recognize are their own. The only discourse they will tolerate is agreement, or sparring with anyone who dares to question their authority. In the book of Psalms we find this prayer,

"Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting." – (Ps. 139:23-24 NIV)

This psalm is believed to have been written by King David—a man of many passions known for his checkered past and statements most of us today find shocking. Yet for all his single-minded passion, David knew his limitations in knowledge and character, and he was willing to seek the counsel of God and others. He knew all too well his own need for wisdom and redemption, and he wasn't too proud to reach out to others for help with the journey. As near as I can tell, the New Atheist commentators quoted above are psychologically incapable of making such a statement... to God or anyone else. They literally believe they have no shortcomings whatsoever in intellect or character, and no need to learn anything from anyone about anything at all.¹¹

What I find so disturbing in all this is that the New Atheists I know are among the most thoughtful and caring people I've ever met—hardly the sort who make a habit of being closed-minded or intolerant in other areas of their lives, and certainly not the sort who would ever advocate harming those who disagree with them. But when it comes to religion, all show this same conversation-stopping intransigence. I've been told countless times my beliefs are "irrational." Not once have I been asked what they actually *are*. They tell me I'm "unscientific" yet bare their teeth whenever I cite science to them and flatly refuse to show me any of their own. They accuse me of being "intolerant" and making "value judgments" even as they post Facebook memes ridiculing people like me and our beliefs and encouraging others to do the same. Not one has ever acknowledged any inconsistency or hubris in such behavior. They recognize it only when they see it in people of faith.

When otherwise decent, intelligent people can;

- Wax eloquent about the virtues of science, yet refuse to allow any into a discussion...
- Claim that Mother Teresa, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and the Dalai Lama have absolutely nothing of value to offer the human race beyond mere "sentiment..."
- Preach open-mindedness, yet refuse to address any specific statements of those who disagree with them and turn a deaf ear whenever they try to tell their own stories...
- Denounce intolerance and hypocrisy in believers yet call for anyone who disagrees with them to be ridiculed with contempt...

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A fundamental disconnect has happened. They've reach a state of mind in which they can dispense with rational inquiry and parrot a scripted party line divorced from the reality of their daily lives, yet still consider themselves "rational."

If there is anything that separates Fundamentalism from true holiness, it is *negation*. Fundamentalism is defined not by what it's for, but by what it's *against*. The 9/11 attackers were motivated by a hatred of America, not any love of Allah. "Islam" was merely a convenient justification for that hate rather than anything explicitly taught in the Koran.¹² The most public face of Christian Fundamentalists is that of opposition to perceived social ills (e.g. abortion, evolution, secular humanism, etc.) rather than a desire to embody the fruits of the Holy Spirit in their daily lives (Gal. 5:22-23). And New Atheists are defined by their opposition to religion (or more precisely, caricatures of it) rather than an affirmation of anything. They preach the virtues of science (sincerely I believe), but run the second any is put before them. They preach tolerance—"Imagine no religion..." they say, quoting John Lennon... "Imagine all the people, living life in peace..." But in the next breath they call everyone to mock religious beliefs and publicly ridicule anyone who holds them (Dawkins, quoted above).

True religion is, and always has been known for what it *affirms* rather than what it hates. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus tells us,

"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." - (Matt. 5:43-48 NIV)

The word "perfect" used here is translated from the Greek *teleios* (τέλειος), which literally *means finished, wanting nothing necessary to completeness, mature* (Strong's #5046). Likewise, the word most commonly translated as "sin" in the New Testament is the Greek word *hamartia* (ἁμαρτία), which means "to miss the mark" (Strong's #266). In the First Century it was commonly used in reference to archery. To *sin* is to fall short of the perfect maturity and humanity to which we've been called—to *miss the mark* (which is, of course, why the Bible says we're all sinners). Contrast these words as they were used by Jesus and His disciples with the way they're understood on the street today and in particular, contrast them with the way they're portrayed by New Atheist commentators.

Jesus calls us to *wholeness*—to a cup that runneth over with living water, loving action that inspires others (John 7:38). Fundamentalism call us to a reaction against what it negates. Even the word *A-theism* is a negation (non-Theism).

Mother Theresa once said, "Be the living expression of God's kindness; kindness in your face, kindness in your eyes, kindness in your smile." She won the Nobel Peace Prize. Jerry Falwell did not, and neither did Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris or Christopher Hitchens.¹³ There's a reason why.

In his classic work *Orthodoxy* (1908) G.K. Chesterton paints a lucid picture of insanity and the mark it left on many of the thinkers of his day. I quote him at length,

"Such is the madman of experience; he is commonly a reasoner, frequently a successful reasoner. Doubtless he could be vanquished in mere reason, and the case against him put logically. But it can be put much more precisely in more general and even aesthetic terms. He is in the clean and well-lit prison of one idea: he is sharpened to one painful point. He is without healthy hesitation and healthy complexity..."

That unmistakable mood or note that I hear from Hanwell,¹⁴ I hear also from half the chairs of science and seats of learning today; and most of the mad doctors are mad doctors in more senses than one. They all have exactly that combination we have noted: *the combination of an expansive and exhaustive reason with a contracted common sense. They*

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are universal only in the sense that they take one thin explanation and carry it very far. But a pattern can stretch for ever and still be a small pattern. They see a chess-board white on black, and if the universe is paved with it, it is still white on black. Like the lunatic, they cannot alter their standpoint; they cannot make a mental effort and suddenly see it black on white...

[If] we attempt to trace his error in exact terms, we shall not find it quite so easy as we had supposed. Perhaps the nearest we can get to expressing it is to say this: that his mind moves in a perfect but narrow circle. A small circle is quite as infinite as a large circle; but, though it is quite as infinite, it is not so large. In the same way the insane explanation is quite as complete as the sane one, but it is not so large. A bullet is quite as round as the world, but it is not the world. There is such a thing as a narrow universality; there is such a thing as a small and cramped eternity; you may see it in many modern religions. Now, speaking quite externally and empirically, we may say that the strongest and most unmistakable mark of madness is *this combination between a logical completeness and a spiritual contraction. The lunatic's theory explains a large number of things, but it does not explain them in a large way.*"

– (Chesterton, 1908 – My emphasis)

How does one respond to this logically complete, but small and cramped eternity? Chesterton continues,

"[If] you or I were dealing with a mind that was growing morbid, we should be chiefly concerned not so much to give it arguments as to give it air, to convince it that there was something cleaner and cooler outside the suffocation of a single argument...

I suppose we should say something like this: 'Oh, I admit that you have your case and have it by heart, and that many things do fit into other things as you say. I admit that your explanation explains a great deal; but what a great deal it leaves out! Are there no other stories in the world except yours; and are all men busy with your business...? How much larger your life would be if your self could become smaller in it; if you could really look at other men with common curiosity and pleasure; if you could see them walking as they are in their sunny selfishness and their virile indifference! You would begin to be interested in them, because they were not interested in you. You would break out of this tiny and tawdry theatre in which your own little plot is always being played, and you would find yourself under a freer sky, in a street full of splendid strangers."

'So you are the Creator and Redeemer of the world: but what a small world it must be! What a little heaven you must inhabit, with angels no bigger than butterflies! How sad it must be to be God; and an inadequate God! Is there really no life fuller and no love more marvelous than yours; and is it really in your small and painful pity that all flesh must put its faith? How much happier you would be, how much more of you there would be, if the hammer of a higher God could smash your small cosmos, scattering the stars like spangles, and leave you in the open, free like other men to look up as well as down!"

– (Chesterton, 1908)

The examples he gives are different, but the cramped eternity Chesterton describes is that of New Atheism. It reduces the riotous, bountiful beauty of all that is—quarks and galactic super-clusters, laughter and tears, burning sunsets, the wind in the mountaintops, the heart-aching beauty of a Bach cantata, a mother's loving arms, and much more—to the clean well-lit prison of one single idea. In so doing, it robs its acolytes of a richness they know nothing about and replaced it with a worldview they must contradict in their daily lives to remain fully human. New Atheists imagine

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themselves to be “free-thinking” moral agents living in a world where justice, mercy, kindness, and tolerance of others matter... where the hopes and dreams of the sentient creatures who walk that world are sacred... even though those creatures are nothing more than a blind collision of atoms in a purposeless universe driven only by laws that cares nothing for them—a world that will someday obliterate our very memories in the fiery conflagration of a quantum bounce or slowly grind us down to feeble Hawking radiation lost in an endless sea of empty space-time. If this is not the spiritually contracted insanity Chesterton describes I have no idea what is.

Einstein once said, “No problem was ever solved on the level of consciousness in which it was created.” In a world where extremists fly jet-liners into skyscrapers and blow up abortion clinics, we cannot rid the world of Fundamentalist hatred with more Fundamentalism—especially that which masquerades as a defense of “science” and “reason” but avoids genuine dialogue. There is no defense against such things like a clear, reasonable demonstration of something better. For this to be possible we must be willing to acknowledge our limitations and genuinely consider ideas contrary to our own. Information must take precedence over opinion; tolerance must replace “mocking, ridiculing... in public.” And most importantly, dialogue must replace mere sparring. Cursing the darkness might make us feel better, but it will never enlighten anyone or give our children a better world.

Though I often fail to show it in my words and actions, my New Atheist friends are precious to me. Whether they embrace my views or not, I long for them to be *whole*... to have worldviews borne of a soundness of heart and soul as well as mind. I haven’t the hubris to imagine they need me to lead them to that place. Lord knows, my own worldview is as much in need of work as anyone’s.

But this I do know: They cannot cling to their lives without losing them (Matt. 10:39).

If they truly desire a worldview that enlightens rather than impoverishes they must relinquish this clean, well-lit prison they’ve built for themselves. A prison that cannot survive without the five myths described above. These myths must be named for what they are and crucified once and for all. The hammer of a higher God must smash this small cosmos, scattering the stars like spangles, and leave New Atheists in the open, free like other men to look up as well as down.” It is my prayer that this may happen... that we may again walk beside each other, learn from each other, and bear one another’s burdens as we stumble toward whatever enlightenment and redemption await us.

Footnotes

- 1) Incidentally, in 2004 Flew converted to *theism* creating a nightmare New Atheists still haven’t recovered from, or been able to respond to with anything significant beyond cheap ad hominem. For more of why he decided to reject a lifetime of Atheism, see Flew (2009).
- 2) Various theories have been proposed to get around this. The best of these have severe theoretical issues, the worst are downright contrived, and none has any observational support to speak of—a fact that given the extreme energies of the underlying physics they presume isn’t going to change in the foreseeable future. For the obvious reason, all have been given far more consideration in New Atheist circles than their theoretical merits alone would otherwise justify, at times even bordering on desperation. In at least one case, New Atheist cosmologist Lawrence Krauss even went so far as to *deliberately falsify* a personal communication with one of the first source’s authors (Alexander Vilenkin) in a public exchange regarding the conclusions of that work (Craig, 2013). Incidentally, at least two of the three authors of that paper (Vilenkin and Guth) are Atheists. It’s also worth noting that this is only one of a number of theoretical problems with an eternal universe, although a full treatment is beyond the scope here.
- 3) The evidence for this is too vast to cite here and a proper treatment of it is beyond the scope of this essay. But the interested reader can start with Wikipedia (2014), Durant (1994), McGrew and McGrew (2012), Habermas and Flew (2009), Habermas (2009), and Craig (1998).
- 4) One case in point is Stephen Hawking, who despite being one of the greatest cosmologists of the last century (if not *the* greatest) considers himself a strong advocate of “the positivist approach put forward by Karl Popper and others...” (Hawking, 2001), blissfully unaware that Popper was one of Positivism’s strongest critics and even coined the term “the Popper Legend” for the widespread myth that he supported it (Wikipedia, 2014b).

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- 5) The *Last Scattering Surface* (LSS) is the space-like hypersurface that existed at that stage in the universe's evolution where it had cooled to a point where it could no longer sustain matter and radiation in plasma form. At this the two "decoupled" from each other allowing radiation to stream freely. Prior to this the universe was opaque to radiation, and thus shut off from observation via telescopes and detectors.
- 6) Most predictions of an infinite universe are based on FLRW models with *locally* defined space-time metrics that are naïvely infinite, but lead to an actually infinite global metric structure only if the universe is assumed to have a simply connected topology beyond our visual horizon—a claim which is not necessarily true, and forever unverifiable (Ellis, 2006). And the claim that such universes can be spawned by the underlying dynamics of a so-called Level I multiverse assumes inflationary models in which the quantum fluctuations that generate them occur at mathematical points. While this leads to models that are useful for studying large-scale inflationary dynamics, the assumption itself flatly contradicts real-world general relativity and quantum field theory (Ellis and Stoeger, 2009).
- 7) This statement is particularly revealing in that *this is precisely what Harris himself did!* In 2009, long after publishing *The End of Faith* and *Letter to a Christian Nation*, he received his PhD in Cognitive Neuropsychology from UCLA. His thesis, titled "The moral landscape: How science could determine human values," argued that neuroimaging can provide a basis for identifying moral regions of the brain. Barely a year after graduating he published the first (2010) edition of a popular book with the very same title (Harris, 2011) leveraging his new-found status as an expert neuroscientist to cynically argue that religious morality is bad and science can replace it. The hypocrisy is breathtaking.
- 8) Sam Harris made a valiant attempt to get around this in *The Moral Landscape*. But as interesting a read as it was, the entire project was a dismal failure. All he succeeded in doing was to show that someday neuroimaging may allow us to identify brain states consistent with behaviors that support his preferred values (namely the happiness and well-being of sentient creatures, including us). The real question—namely, why our happiness matters in a blind, purposeless universe—remains unaddressed. I will address this issue in more detail in an upcoming essay.
- 9) What's ironic about this is that unlike New Atheists, Creationists actually can hold such an argument somewhat credibly. This is because in the case of neo-Darwinian evolution, there are multiple alternatives (e.g. Lysenkoism, the seeding of terrestrial life by some alien intelligence, theistic evolution, Young Earth special creationism, etc.). Whether any of these are viable or not is beside the point. The fact is that as long as multiple proposals exist one can reasonably choose to be skeptical toward any of them without committing to a specific alternative. As we have seen, this is not the case with the existence of God.
- 10) Based on one from Jinn (2014).
- 11) Interestingly, this meets DSM-V requirements for a clinical diagnosis of Narcissistic Personality Disorder (Wikipedia, 2014f). To the extent that these writers can be considered representative of New Atheist thought, there's a credible case that it's pathological.
- 12) Contrary to popular myth, Islam is anything but a violent religion. The Five Pillars of Islam are devoted entirely to reflection, spiritual discipline, and charity, and in the Koran even the term Jihad literally means "to strive or struggle" (in the way of God)... to exert one's utmost power, efforts, endeavors, or ability in contending with an object of disapprobation." Only in a limited sense does it involve military warfare, and then is allowed only as a defensive posture (Wikipedia, 2014e). It's no coincidence that the primary recruiting base of Al Qaeda and ISIS are poor, uneducated, and disenfranchised people (predominately male) who feel culturally and politically disempowered. Few join such groups out of true religious devotion alone. The belief that Islam, all Islam, is violent Fundamentalism is due to Far-Right and New Atheist propaganda capitalizing on the post-9/11 rage of the American public. Even the popular term "Islamofascist" was coined by none other than Christopher Hitchens.
- 13) In fact, Hitchens is the only person I know who during his life was so poisoned by hate that he actually devoted an entire book to attacking Mother Teresa and everything she stood for amongst the dying and destitute in the streets of Calcutta (Hitchens, 1997). It seems the Nobel committee was more impressed by her values than his, and for good reasons.
- 14) In Chesterton's day Hanwell was a common reference for the Middlesex County Lunatic Asylum which was located near the town of Hanwell in East London.

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