

50 Voices of Disbelief

Why We Are Atheists

Edited by

Russell Blackford and Udo Schüklenk

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Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	ix
Introduction: Now More Important than Ever – Voices of Reason <i>Russell Blackford and Udo Schüklenk</i>	1
Unbelievable! <i>Russell Blackford</i>	5
My “Bye Bull” Story <i>Margaret Downey</i>	10
How Benevolent <i>Is</i> God? – An Argument from Suffering to Atheism <i>Nicholas Everitt</i>	16
A Deal-Breaker <i>Ophelia Benson</i>	23
Why Am I a Nonbeliever? – I Wonder . . . <i>J. L. Schellenberg</i>	28
Wicked or Dead? Reflections on the Moral Character and Existential Status of God <i>John Harris</i>	33
Religious Belief and Self-Deception <i>Adèle Mercier</i>	41
The Coming of Disbelief <i>J. J. C. Smart</i>	48
What I Believe <i>Graham Oppy</i>	50

vi Contents

Too Good to Be True, Too Obscure to Explain: The Cognitive Shortcomings of Belief in God <i>Thomas W. Clark</i>	57
How to Think About God: Theism, Atheism, and Science <i>Michael Shermer</i>	65
A Magician Looks at Religion <i>James Randi</i>	78
Confessions of a Kindergarten Leper <i>Emma Tom</i>	82
Beyond Disbelief <i>Philip Kitcher</i>	86
An Ambivalent Nonbelief <i>Taner Edis</i>	97
Why Not? <i>Sean M. Carroll</i>	105
Godless Cosmology <i>Victor J. Stenger</i>	112
Unanswered Prayers <i>Christine Overall</i>	118
Beyond Faith and Opinion <i>Damien Broderick</i>	123
Could It Be <i>Pretty Obvious</i> There's No God? <i>Stephen Law</i>	129
Atheist, Obviously <i>Julian Baggini</i>	139
Why I am Not a Believer <i>A. C. Grayling</i>	145
Evil and Me <i>Gregory Benford</i>	157
Who's Unhappy? <i>Lori Lipman Brown</i>	161
Reasons to be Faithless <i>Sheila A. M. McLean</i>	165

Three Stages of Disbelief <i>Julian Savulescu</i>	168
Born Again, Briefly <i>Greg Egan</i>	172
Cold Comfort <i>Ross Upshur</i>	177
The Accidental Exorcist <i>Austin Dacey</i>	182
Atheist Out of the Foxhole <i>Joe Haldeman</i>	187
The Unconditional Love of Reality <i>Dale McGowan</i>	191
Antinomies <i>Jack Dann</i>	197
Giving Up Ghosts and Gods <i>Susan Blackmore</i>	200
Some Thoughts on Why I Am an Atheist <i>Tamas Pataki</i>	204
No Gods, Please! <i>Laura Purdy</i>	211
Welcome Me Back to the World of the Thinking <i>Kelly O'Connor</i>	220
Kicking Religion Goodbye . . . <i>Peter Adegoke</i>	226
On Credenda <i>Miguel Kottow</i>	230
“Not Even Start to Ignore Those Questions!” A Voice of Disbelief in a Different Key <i>Frieder Otto Wolf</i>	236
Imagine No Religion <i>Edgar Dahl</i>	252
Humanism as Religion: An Indian Alternative <i>Sumitra Padmanabhan</i>	259

viii Contents

Why I Am NOT a Theist <i>Prabir Ghosh</i>	263
When the Hezbollah Came to My School <i>Maryam Namazie</i>	270
Evolutionary Noise, not Signal from Above <i>Athena Andreadis</i>	274
Gods Inside <i>Michael R. Rose and John P. Phelan</i>	279
Why Morality Doesn't Need Religion <i>Peter Singer and Marc Hauser</i>	288
Doctor Who and the Legacy of Rationalism <i>Sean Williams</i>	294
My Nonreligious Life: A Journey From Superstition to Rationalism <i>Peter Tatchell</i>	300
Helping People to Think Critically About Their Religious Beliefs <i>Michael Tooley</i>	310
Human Self-Determination, Biomedical Progress, and God <i>Udo Schüklenk</i>	323
<i>About the Contributors</i>	332
<i>Index</i>	338

Russell Blackford and Udo Schüklenk



Introduction: Now More Important than Ever – Voices of Reason

Why did we come together to edit a volume of humanist thought? Why did we ask some 50 scientists, philosophers, science fiction writers, political activists, and public intellectuals from across the globe to put down in writing the reasons that convinced them personally that there is not an all-powerful, all-knowing, good and loving God watching over us?

The answer to this is surprisingly simple: we think it is important for Voices of Reason to be heard at this point in our history. Religious fanaticism seems to have become ever more successful in preventing even multicultural societies from discussing the merits, or otherwise, of religious ideologies versus humanist alternatives. Cartoonists and authors of books critical of religion have become popular targets for death threats by religious fanatics. Each week, it seems harder to keep the candle of reason alight. Yet, “respect” for the intolerant ideologies’ teachings has, it seems, become the order of the day, when intolerance of intolerance would arguably be a more appropriate response to religious fundamentalism (German speakers might compare the views of Henryk Broder). As philosopher Laura Purdy, and other contributors to this volume, argue, it is important to speak out when religious ideologies and their lobbyists encroach on our individual freedoms.

As we write, concerted attempts are being made at the level of the United Nations to cement a new concept into international law, the dangerous idea of “defamation of religion.” If successful, these efforts would make it even more difficult to criticize religious dogma,

religion-based repression of individual rights, or the many cruel practices that are shielded, from time to time, by invocations of religion and culture. Defamation law exists to protect individuals from slurs that might destroy lives or careers, not to protect systems of belief or prevent the exposure of evils done in their name. Religious dogmas and organizations are legitimate targets for fearless criticism or satire.

It is worthwhile stating the painfully obvious: namely, the emperor really is naked. The political influence enjoyed by the world's religions notwithstanding, we have no good reason to believe that God exists, and we should not accept the action-guiding maxims of religious ideologies on the authority of someone as elusive as God. Like other ideologies, religious teachings and policy stances must be subjected to searching critical analysis. Competition in the marketplace of ideas must be fair; there must not be special treatment for religious ideas of any kind.

It was to be expected, given human nature, that there would be a backlash against the "God Delusion," as Richard Dawkins described it so aptly. Authors such as Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris, Austin Dacey, Daniel Dennett, and others have published influential and often bestselling books (see the references below) in which they have outlined why we should not believe in God, and indeed why such beliefs, all other things being equal, are likely to produce more harm than good. They follow in the honorable tradition of Bertrand Russell and others, dating far back to the Carvakas and Epicureans of Eastern and Western antiquity, critical of religion and its claimed authority over our lives. We see this book as a contribution to a long and admirable humanist tradition.

Most people have given serious thought to the possibility that God exists. Some of the deals that God seems to offer do appear enticing – perhaps too enticing. Who of sound mind would really say "no" to eternal life? Who would not mind trading earthly problems for eternal life in paradise? Atheists do. We reject the deal on the table not because we believe that eternal life would necessarily be a bad thing; no, we do so because we know that the deal is not as good as it looks. We refuse to overlook the inconvenient fact that there is no evidence of eternal life.

It seemed worth asking thoughtful people, like the contributors to this book: "Why is it that you are an atheist today? What is it that convinced you that there is no loving, all-powerful, all-knowing God who has created the universe and still spends his time watching over

us, his less than perfect creation?" In response to our challenge, we received an amazing collection of original, often very personal answers. Unsurprisingly, these answers find common ground on some issues and are in conflict on others.

As editors, we had neither the power nor the inclination to force our authors to adopt some party line. We are not the Vatican, after all. Even more than the editors, the 50-odd contributors to the volume are all very different from each other. None accepts the existence of the Abrahamic God (or any other deity on offer), but there the commonality ends. Some are openly hostile to all religion, while others hope to explore common ground with liberal theologians. As they explain, some are even wary of the words *atheism* and *atheist* – words that can carry unwanted connotations in many social contexts. But we aim to show, in a multitude of voices and personal experiences, that it is perfectly reasonable not to believe in a God of the kind that monotheistic religions have been marketing to humanity for centuries.

The absence of God does not mean that we are lost at sea as far as living a meaningful life – a life that is worth living – is concerned. Secular ethics has much to offer to those of us who have chosen to live an ethical life (Singer). Hence, there is no need for guidance from documents such as the Bible or the Qur'an, products of the human imagination dating from pre-scientific and often barbaric eras. Modern science has answered most questions that, in years gone by, were "answered" with a respectful reference to the almighty God. Science, of course, moves on and opens up new questions, but the genuinely cutting-edge issues of physics or biology, for example, are now far remote from the questions that our ancestors asked themselves.

It is high time we took charge of, and responsibility for, our own destinies without God, or God's priestly interpreters, coming between us and our decision-making. The Voices assembled in this volume have a great deal to offer regarding these questions.

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4 Russell Blackford & Udo Schüklenk

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Russell Blackford



Unbelievable!

When I was no older than 9 – for I recall the modest house in Belmont South, near Newcastle, Australia, where my family lived at the time – I concluded that the Bible stories I'd been exposed to were merely the mythology of our Christian age. The citizens of a future age, perhaps thousands of years hence, would, so I thought, have no more inclination to treat the stories as true than my relatives and teachers were disposed to believe in the gods of the Greeks and Romans. As it seemed to me, moreover, those future citizens would be *justified* in their blasé atheism.

Four decades and more later, I see much wisdom in that small child's conclusion, but for a time – roughly spanning my adolescent years – I attempted to *believe* Christianity's implausible claims. I can blame it on peer-group pressure, perhaps, since I fell in with a religious group of kids at high school, but at any rate I struggled for some years to find cogent reasons for Christian belief. My efforts at self-deception bore fruit, and I eventually became the Vice-President of the Evangelical Union (the EU) on my university campus. Yet I always had serious doubts at the back of my mind – often, in fact, rather closer to the front of it. Much about the whole worldview of evangelical Christianity (and all the other sorts that I knew of) seemed unbelievable.

I never did rise to the EU presidency, or to whatever loftier heights might have revealed themselves beyond it: perhaps some Christian ministry. Toward the end of my one-year term of office – I was then 19 or 20 – I concluded once and for all, but not without anguish, that

I couldn't subscribe to the Christian worldview. I quietly dropped out of evangelical activities, concentrated on my studies and the complications of my youthful love life, and made little fuss about my hard-won disbelief. Since then, I've often thought back to that formative period of my life, but I've never seriously wavered.

* * *

It's not one single fact that makes orthodox forms of Christianity, and with them the entire tradition of orthodox Abrahamic theism, so unbelievable. There are innumerable tensions between (on the one hand) Abrahamic theism's image of the cosmos, our own planet, and humanity's exceptional place in the natural order and (on the other) the image that is gradually being revealed by well-corroborated, mainstream science. That said, my most serious problem was, and still is, with any view of the world that posits its creation by a loving and providential, yet all-powerful and all-knowing deity.

This, of course, relates to the traditional problem of evil: the difficulty involved in squaring God's power, knowledge, and perfect goodness with the presence of evil in the world. Note, however, that it is almost a cliché in current academic philosophy that the *logical* problem of evil can be solved, since, for a start, there is no formal contradiction in merely asserting the following:

- 1 God is all-powerful and all-knowing.
- 2 God is perfectly good.
- 3 There is evil in the world.

Further premises have to be relied upon if we are to produce a formal contradiction, but these are always open to challenge. Say, for example, that we postulate that an all-powerful, all-knowing being would be *capable* of removing or preventing evil, and that a perfectly good being would *wish* to do so. There is every prospect of employing additional premises something like these in a deductively valid argument that God, as described, does not exist. But are the additional premises acceptable?

It is often suggested by apologists for religion that a perfectly good being would *not* wish to remove or prevent all evil. Perhaps the risk (at least) of evil actions and events is logically necessary if human beings are to possess and exercise free will. Or perhaps the presence of some

evil is logically necessary for certain (allegedly great) goods to exist. For example, it might be logically necessary that there be at least some suffering in the world if it is going to contain feelings and acts of compassion. Even God must defer to logical necessity.

Well, perhaps. But at least two points must be made here. First, I see no evidence that the required form of free will – some sort of ultimate independence from the causal order that shaped us – is ever actually possessed by human beings in any event. We possess many abilities that it's rational to value: the ability to deliberate; the ability to reflect on our own values (but not from an Archimedean point outside them all); the ability to act in ways that are expressive of our values; and (often) the ability to affect the world by our choices. It may make sense to call these, compendiously, a capacity for "free will." But we are not ultimate self-creators, and we never possess free will *all the way down* below the events that shaped how we *are* (such as our genetic potentials and early childhood experiences).

Second, the ways of God can always be justified in one far-fetched manner or another. Despite all the horrific pain, suffering, and misery that we see in the world, it is always possible to identify *something* that logically depends on it, and then assert that this "something" is so stupendously valuable as to justify the pain, the suffering, the misery. When we think otherwise, might we be too squeamish? Might our values be too bland and shallow when we want people and other sentient things to be happy, not to be forced by circumstances to endure horrific pain, and so on? Perhaps we should actually want a world much like what we have: a world that is rather tigerish, with the constant prospect of pain, and suffering, and misery never far away (not to mention individual and mass death), but also with derring-do and heroism. Whatever *we* may think, so this approach suggests, God is justified in allowing all the horrors that he does in order to achieve what is greatly and truly valuable.

All this, I submit, is logically consistent – but what kind of mentality would actually *believe* it, while also taking the horrors seriously?

As we survey the vast abundance of the world's awful circumstances, the endlessly varied kinds of exquisite pain, the deep suffering and sheer misery, inflicted over untold years on so many human beings and other vulnerable living things, it is not believable that a *loving* and *providential* (yet all-powerful and all-knowing) God would have remotely adequate reasons to permit it all. It is not, I emphasize, *logically impossible* that such a God could have his (mysterious) reasons.

But what is the evidence for this picture, or anything remotely like it? Until we can be convinced, by cogent arguments, of a loving and providential God's existence, our best response to callous-sounding theodical rationalizations of pain and suffering is one that blends intellectual incredulity with moral repugnance.

Moreover, the cogent arguments have never been offered. Even the most promising arguments for the existence of some transcendent Creator (such as those which refer to an alleged fine-tuning of fundamental physical constants) go nowhere near establishing the existence of a *loving* and *providential* God.

* * *

On further reflection, the theists' problems become even worse. Why would a loving and providential (as well as all-powerful and all-knowing) deity leave us in such doubt as to its very existence, requiring us to rely on, at best, ambiguous experiences, doubtful evidence, and murky arguments? Why, in particular, would such a being leave us without clear assurance of its presence and love, and with no definitive explanation of its reasons for allowing the world's continuing horrors?

Why, moreover, has this being employed biological evolution to bring about rational life forms like us, when its choice of the slow and clumsy methods of mutation, survival, and adaptation has foreseeably led to untold cruelty and misery in the animal world, imperfect functional designs, and a timeframe of billions of years for rational life to eventuate? An all-powerful and all-knowing being could have chosen the outcome it wanted, then brought it about, with no functional imperfections, in a blink of time or in a timeframe of mere days and nights, such as described in the opening verses of Genesis.

Again, answers can be attempted, and it is perhaps not *logically impossible* that a loving, providential (etc.) God could have good reasons for all this. But once again, unless we have independent evidence that such a being exists, we should look upon the excuses offered on God's behalf with open-mouthed incredulity.

In short, the arguments *against* the existence of a loving and providential (etc.) God are convincing, and no truly persuasive argument has ever been advanced *for* the existence of such a being. If the latter argument ever becomes available, we might then be swayed to accept that this being exists, while lamenting that its full motivation is so opaque

to mortal men and women. But as things stand, we should conclude that there is no loving and providential (etc.) deity looking over us. At least with respect to *this* portrayal of God, it is most rational to be an atheist.

* * *

Earlier, I mentioned that my initial reaction to renouncing Christianity was a quiet one. I dropped out of evangelical activities, but made no fuss about it. That may have been partly from a sort of cowardice, a wish to avoid confrontations, but it was partly, too, from a heartfelt wish to protect the feelings of friends and loved ones. In any event, my life had other priorities.

But times have changed. In the 1970s, or even the 1990s, it was possible to think that further challenges to religious philosophies, institutions, and leaders were unnecessary. All the heavy work had been done, and religion was withering after the scientific revolution, the Enlightenment, Darwin, and the social iconoclasm of the 1960s. The situation is now very different, even in the supposedly enlightened nations of the West: a revived Christian philosophy is well entrenched within Anglo-American philosophy of religion; deference is frequently given to specifically religious moralities during the policy-making process over such issues as stem-cell research and therapeutic cloning; and well-financed attempts are made to undermine public trust in science where it contradicts the literal Genesis narrative.

The struggle of ideas is far from over, and this is a good time to subject religion and all its claims to searching skeptical scrutiny. Those of us who do not believe now have more than enough reason to dispute the unwarranted prestige enjoyed by the many variations of orthodox Abrahamic theism (and other religious systems). We should challenge the special authority that is accorded, all too often, to pontiffs, priests, and presbyters. This is a good time for atheists, skeptics, and rationalists, for humanists, doubters, philosophical naturalists – whatever we call ourselves – to stand up openly and start debating. There's no time like now to voice our disbelief.

Nicholas Everitt



*How Benevolent Is God? An Argument
from Suffering to Atheism*

*Nothing begins, and nothing ends
That is not paid in moan,
For we are born in other's pain,
And perish in our own.¹*

When I say to people that I am an atheist, some of them say to me, "But you can't *prove* that there's no God, can you?" My reply is, "The short answer is 'yes' and the long answer is 'it depends'." The short answer is necessary because some people think that if you can't give a definite "yes" or "no," you are expressing some doubt or hesitancy, something less than full-blooded atheism, and I want to make clear to such people that I am a fully convinced atheist. But the long answer is also necessary, for reasons of intellectual honesty. The answer to the original question *does* depend on several other important factors, the most important two being what we understand by "proof," and what we understand by "God."

To take the first question first: there are several possible standards of proof – mathematical proof, proof beyond all reasonable doubt (as in a criminal court), proof on the balance of the probabilities (as in a civil court), and so on. I believe that the non-existence of God can be proved beyond all reasonable doubt.

As for the second question, amongst philosophers and philosophically minded theologians, God is standardly defined in terms of a string of metaphysical properties: he is omniscient, omnipotent, perfectly good,

eternal, omnipresent, the creator and sustainer of the universe, etc. No doubt other definitions are possible, in which case other arguments, both pro and anti, would become relevant. But for present purposes, it is the existence of God as standardly defined that I deny.

So how might we show beyond all reasonable doubt that such a being did not exist? A thorough job would have to show that none of the arguments in favor of God's existence is successful, and then also to show that at least one argument against his existence succeeds. Here, I will take the first part of that task as given, and consider only the second. And in relation to that second task, there are two possible strategies. The first would be to show that there is a contradiction in God's defining properties, so that to say God exists would be like saying that there are four-sided triangles, or that there is a highest prime number. I believe that this strategy can succeed, but the route is technical, controversial, and would probably be regarded by some as hair-splitting. (I've never understood the almost universal bias against hair-splitting. When the difference between truth and falsity is less than a hair's breadth, hair-splitting is precisely what one needs.) The second strategy would be to show that the existence of God, so defined, is incompatible with some undeniable fact about the universe or its contents; and I believe that this can also be done.

Some atheists pick on the reality of human free will as incompatible with God's omniscience. If God knew yesterday that today I would drink coffee for breakfast, how can my choice of coffee be free? But I believe that we can construct a more compelling line of argument for atheism by focusing on the existence of evil, in particular the occurrence of suffering – suffering which is very widespread, is often very intense, and is completely unrelated to desert.

The initial line of argument is easily stated: if God is omniscient, he knows about all the evil in the world; if he is omnipotent, he has the power to prevent the evil from occurring; and if he is perfectly good, he would wish to prevent all the evil. But there is evil; therefore, there can be no God. We see here the importance of having in place a relatively exact specification of what we mean by the word "God." The proof of his non-existence depends precisely on the properties which he would have to have, were he to exist.

This simple and intuitively powerful line of argument is more than 2,000 years old; and, of course, over that time theists have developed a range of possible objections. The most common is the so-called "greater good" defense. It consists in denying the bald statement that

God as perfectly good would wish to prevent all evil. In its place, the greater good defense substitutes the more modest claim that God as perfectly good would wish to prevent all evil, *except such evil as he could not prevent without also preventing some more than counterbalancing good*. If the theist can then find some good which more than counterbalances the evil in the world, a good which could not be achieved without the existence of the evil, then she will have defeated the objection from evil.

But what could such counterbalancing goods be? Here the theist camp divides into two factions. The first faction, sometimes called skeptical theists, says baldly: "We do not know what these counterbalancing goods are. But there must be some." This may sound like irrationality on the part of the theist. "Why *must* there be some?" a skeptic will ask. But the theist would have an answer to this question if she had very strong independent reasons for thinking that God exists, for if it is already certain that God exists, then we could reasonably infer that there must be good reasons why he tolerates the evil, even if we do not know what they are. By analogy, if I hear that someone whom I much admire has done something apparently awful, I may quite rationally say: "She must have had good reasons, because I know that she is not the sort of person who behaves in an awful manner. But I have no idea what those good reasons are."

To undermine completely this line of defense by the theist, we need to show that none of the arguments advanced in favor of God's existence does give good reason to accept his existence; and that is why I said earlier that a complete case for the atheist requires the demolition of pro-God arguments as well as the defense of pro-atheist arguments. But, as I said above, we are here focusing on the second of these tasks.

But if there must be some counterbalancing goods, why can't the theist tell us what they are? The standard answer is. "Because even although there are some such goods, there is no reason to think that we with our poor limited understanding and weak moral development would be able to say what they were." This appeal, when the going gets tough, to the limitations of human understanding is always suspect, but let us lower the bar for the theist. Let us ask not what the divinely ordained counterbalancing goods actually *are*, let us ask her only for a list of what she considers to be at least *possible* candidates. But skeptical theists have been unable even to dream of any possible counterbalancing good.

In part this is a tribute to their moral good sense, and in part it reveals the extreme implausibility of their position. It is a tribute to their

morality in as much as they are saying: “We cannot think of anything, *anything at all*, that could *possibly* counterbalance the evil of the Holocaust, of the transatlantic slave trade, and all the other horrors of which human history is full.” But their position then becomes untenable beyond all reasonable doubt. They are in the position of an accused person who says: “I know that my fingerprints were on the murder weapon, I know that the victim’s blood was all over my clothes, I know that I was seen running from the scene of the crime by many reliable and independent witnesses, but nonetheless there must be an explanation for all of this which shows my innocence. I have absolutely no idea what the explanation is, and cannot even think of any *possible* explanation; I just believe that there must be one.” If that is the best that can be said in the accused person’s defense, she would rightly be found guilty beyond all reasonable doubt.

So, what about the second attempt to invoke goods to counterbalance the evils in the universe, by invoking the existence of human free will? God, it is said, has given human beings the gift of free will, and it is because of human misuse of this gift that evils arise. Any world in which the great good of morally praiseworthy action is possible must also be one in which morally evil action is equally possible. And for our choice of actions to matter morally, it must be the case that the consequences of action can be very good or very bad. There cannot be compassion unless there is suffering, there cannot be forgiveness unless there is wrongdoing, there cannot be help unless there is need, and so on.

This only has to be stated to appear at once as a strikingly unconvincing line of thought. If a thug shoots me in the leg, it is certainly good if there is a compassionate person to care for me – but it would be absurd to say that the good of the compassion is so great that it justifies the thug in shooting me in the first place. The world would be a better place with neither the shooting nor the compassion.

Further, the evil that wrongdoers create often harms not themselves but the innocent. A thug shoots the cashier and makes off with money; a petro-chemical company maximizing its profits contaminates a lake and deprives the local fishermen of their living. In short, the victims of the misuse of free will are often innocent. It is anyway clear that a great deal of evil has nothing to do with humans misusing their free will. The tsunami of 2004 killed about 225,000 people, and left many more homeless and destitute. But it was not caused by humans misusing their free will – nothing that anyone could have done would have had the consequence that the tsunami did not occur, or the consequence

that, if it did occur, it miraculously caused no suffering. If there is a God, then he *chose* to let the tsunami occur, knowing that it would cause huge suffering. How could a perfectly good God create a world in which that sort of natural disaster regularly happens, and regularly brings huge misery to humanity?

For the tsunami was not unique. By some reckonings, in the last 700 years there have been 13 disasters, each of which killed more than one million people.² Suppose a human had the power to prevent a million innocent people from being killed, yet coolly refused to do so. She would rightly be judged a monster. Why should the situation be any different if the agent is divine rather than human? Even if we filter out *some* contribution to these disasters made by human free will (for example, by people choosing to live in what they know is a flood plain, or next to what they know is a volcano, or in what they know is an earthquake zone, etc.), there remains a massive amount of apparently gratuitous suffering, occurring beyond human control.

An even more striking example of evil occurring without any human free will to blame is found in the suffering of animals before the emergence of mankind. Suppose we make the conservative assumption that for one hundred million years before the appearance of man, there existed species that were capable of suffering pain. Most of those creatures must have died painful grisly deaths. They would have been eaten alive, died of dehydration or starvation, been burnt alive in forest fires, buried beneath volcanic eruptions and earthquakes, and afflicted with awful diseases. Here is one tiny fragment, reported recently in the press, in the huge mosaic of animal suffering:

Farmers have reported a rise in the number of calves, lambs, and sheep pecked to death [by ravens]. Animals not killed have been left in agony as the birds eat their eyes, tongues and soft flesh of their underbelly.³

What counterbalancing good justifies allowing this universal misery to run on?

Furthermore, this colossal animal suffering cannot be seen as a kind of very long run of very bad luck for animals, something which was avoidable in the world as God has created it. For God (if he exists) has created an animal world which is divided into herbivores and carnivores. One consequence is that the flourishing of some *absolutely requires* the suffering of others. Either some animals will die of starvation, or other animals will be torn to pieces and eaten. The animal world

has been set up in such a way that widespread and extreme suffering in it is *absolutely inevitable*; and it is suffering which has nothing to do with any supposed benefits arising from the possession by humans of free will. At least in the case of humans, the flourishing of some does not *require* the suffering of others, even if in practice the two go hand in hand.

So, the position we reach is this. Even theists recognize that the existence of the suffering in the world is at least *prima facie* evidence against the existence of God. For about 2,000 years they have struggled to find a plausible explanation for it, but without success, and it therefore remains as a compelling reason for denying the existence of a God who is omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good.

A Final Reflection

I have described above the position as I see it logically. But I also have to admit to certain nagging doubts, which are not doubts about the arguments themselves, but about the relationship between the arguments and my own convictions. A few autobiographical remarks will make this clearer. After a period in my early teens, in which I embraced theism of a simple-minded kind, during my late teens I was an agnostic. From the age of about 19, I then slid into atheism. There was no conversion experience, no sudden intellectual upheaval. It was more like an organic process: I grew into atheism. The transition was not the product of my discovering a new and powerful objection to theism, nor of my coming to attach greater weight than previously to any argument with which I was already acquainted. It was, rather, one of those intellectual shifts which occur, and which in retrospect seem to have been shifts in the right direction, but which did not occur *because* the move was in the right direction.

Having once become an atheist, I have remained one for the rest of my life, and I have done so in spite of coming across arguments for theism, and theistic replies to atheist arguments, of which I was wholly unaware when I first became an atheist. Of course, I think that these later theistic arguments are demonstrably weak, and the atheist arguments (for the most part) stronger. But I sometimes cannot help wondering whether my rejection of the arguments for theism is as much the product of a prior commitment to atheism as to an intellectual insight into their faults. F. H. Bradley famously remarked that “metaphysics

is the finding of bad reasons for what we believe on instinct.”⁴ I don’t believe that the reasons above which I have advanced for atheism are bad, but I do suspect that they support what I anyway believe on instinct.

Notes

- 1 Francis Thomson, “Daisy,” available at: www.poemhunter.com/poem/daisy-2/.
- 2 <http://across.co.nz/WorldsWorstDisasters.html>.
- 3 *Observer*, London, May 4, 2008, available at: www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2008/may/04/wildlife.
- 4 F. H. Bradley, *Appearance and Reality* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), p. x.

Ophelia Benson



A Deal-Breaker

One compelling reason not to believe the standard-issue God exists is the conspicuous fact that no one knows anything at all about it. That's a tacit part of the definition of God – a supernatural being that no one knows anything about. The claims that are made about God bear no resemblance to genuine knowledge. This becomes immediately apparent if you try adding details to God's CV: God is the eternal omnipotent benevolent omniscient creator of the universe, and has blue eyes. You see how it works. Eternal omnipotent benevolent omniscient are all simply ideal characteristics that a God ought to have; blue eyes, on the other hand, are particular, and if you say God has them it suddenly becomes obvious that no one knows that, and by implication that no one knows anything else either.

We don't know God has blue eyes – we don't know God has red hair – we don't know God plays basketball – we don't know God drinks coffee. We have no clue. But then, how do we "know" God is omnipotent, or eternal? We don't. It's just that the monotheist God is supposed to have certain attributes that make it a significant grown-up sophisticated God, better than the frivolous or greedy or quarrelsome gods like Kali or Loki or Athena. (Oddly, this does leave room for one particular: we do "know" that God is male. God is more ideal and abstract and generalized than Aphrodite and Freyja and he's also not that particular, earthy, blue-eyed, coffee-drinking sex, he's that other, general, abstract sex: the male.) We don't know that God is omnipotent, we simply assume that anyone called God has to be omnipotent,

because that's part of the definition, and we know that God *is* called God, so therefore God must be omnipotent. That's a fairly shaky kind of knowledge. It also provides hours of entertainment when we ask ourselves if God has the power to make a grapefruit that is too heavy for God to lift.

The knowledge is shaky, yet it's common to hear people talking as if they do know, and can know, and have no reason to think they don't know. A lot of people think they know things about "God" which they have no good reason to think they know, and even which seem to be contradicted by everything we see around us. It's odd that the discrepancies don't interfere with the knowledge.

People seem to know that God is good, that God cares about everything and is paying close attention to everything, and that God is responsible whenever anything good happens to them or whenever anything bad almost happens to them but doesn't. Yet they apparently *don't* know that God is responsible whenever anything bad happens to them, or whenever anything good almost happens to them but doesn't. People who survive hurricanes or earthquakes or explosions say God saved them, but they don't say God killed or mangled all the victims. Olympic athletes say God is good when they win a gold, but they don't say God is bad when they come in fourth or twentieth, much less when other people do.

That's the advantage of goddy epistemology, of course: it's so extraordinarily flexible, so convenient, so *personalized*. The knowledge is so neatly molded to fit individual wishes. God is good when I win and blameless when I lose, good when I survive the tsunami and out of the equation when other people are swept away and drowned.

This is all very understandable from the point of view of personal fantasy – there's not much point in having an imaginary friend who is boring and disobliging and always picking fights – but peculiar when considered as a kind of knowledge, which is generally how believers treat it. The winning sprinter doesn't say "I think God is good," she says "God is good"; the survivor doesn't say "I believe God saved me," he says "God saved me." Claims about God are *treated* as knowledge. Hence the frequent thought – "but you don't know that. . . ." If one is rude enough to make the thought public, the standard reply is that God is mysterious, ineffable, beyond our ken, hiding.

And that's one major reason I don't believe in the bastard, and would *refuse* to believe even if I did find God convincing in other ways. I'd refuse on principle; I'd say: "All right then I'll go to hell," like Huck Finn.

Because what business would God have *hiding*? What's that about? What kind of silly game is that? God is all-powerful and benevolent but at the same time it's *hiding*? Please. We wouldn't give that the time of day in any other context. Nobody would buy the idea of ideal, loving, concerned, involved parents who permanently hide from their children, so why buy it of a loving God?

The obvious answer of course is that believers *have* to buy it for the inescapable reason that their God *is* hidden. The fact is that God doesn't make personal appearances, or even send authenticated messages, so believers have to say *something* to explain that obtrusive fact. The mysterious peekaboo God is simply the easiest answer to questions like "Why is God never around?"

The answer however has the same flaw that all claims about God have: nobody knows that. Nobody knows God is hiding. Everyone knows God is not there to be found the way a living person is, but nobody knows that that's because God is a living person who is hiding.

Nobody knows that, and it's not the most obvious explanation of God's non-appearance. The most obvious, simple, economical explanation of God's non-appearance is that there is no God to do the appearing. The "God is hiding" explanation has currency only because people *want* to believe that there is a God, in spite of the persistent failure to turn up, so they pretend to know that hiding is what God is up to. The wish is father to the thought, which is then transformed into "knowledge."

It's a pretty desperate stratagem, though. The fact that we wouldn't buy it in any other context shows that. If we go to a hotel or a restaurant and everything is dirty and falling apart and covered in broken glass, we want a word with the manager; if we're told the manager is hiding, we decamp in short order. We don't forgivingly hang around for the rest of our lives: we *leave*.

We're told, in explanation of these puzzles, that we're merely humans and we simply don't understand. Very well, but then we *don't* understand – we don't know anything about all this, all we're doing is guessing, or wishing or hoping. Yet we're so often told things about God as if they were well-established facts. God is "mysterious" only when skeptics ask difficult questions. The rest of the time believers are cheerily confident of their knowledge. That's a good deal too convenient.

It's too convenient, and it produces a very repellent God. It's odd that the believers aren't more troubled by this. (Many are, of course.

It turns out that even Mother Teresa was. We'll find out that the Pope has doubts next.) It's odd that the confident dogmatic believers don't seem to notice what a teasing, torturing, unpleasant God they have on their hands. A God that is mysterious, yet demands that we believe in it (on pain of eternal torture, in some accounts), is a God that demands incompatible things, which seems like a nasty trick to play on a smaller weaker species.

It all turns on faith. God doesn't want us to know God exists the way we know the Sun exists; God wants us to have "faith." But why? That's perverse. It's commonplace, because it gets rehearsed so often, but it's perverse. That doesn't fly in human relations, and it's not obvious why it should fly in any other relations. A kind friend or sibling or parent or benefactor doesn't hide from you from before your birth until after your death and still expect you to feel love and trust and gratitude. Why should God?

As a test of faith, comes the pat answer. Well God shouldn't be testing our faith. If it wants to test something it should be testing our ability to detect frauds and cheats and liars – not our gormless credulity and docility and willingness to be conned. God should know the difference between good qualities and bad ones, and not be encouraging the latter at the expense of the former.

But then (we are told) "faith" would be too easy; in fact, it would be compelled, and that won't do. Faith is a kind of heroic discipline, like yoga or playing the violin. Faith has to overcome resistance, or it doesn't count. If God just comes right out and *tells* us, beyond possibility of doubt, that God exists, that's an unworthy shortcut, like a sprinter taking steroids. No, we have to *earn* faith by our own efforts, which means by believing God exists despite all the evidence indicating it doesn't and the complete lack of evidence indicating it does.

In other words, God wants us to veto all our best reasoning faculties and methods of inquiry, and to believe in God for no real reason. God wants us *not* to do what we do in all the rest of life when we really *do* want to find something out – where the food is, when the storm is going to hit, whether the water is safe to drink, what medication to take for our illness – and simply *decide* God exists, like tossing a coin.

I refuse. I refuse to consider a God "good" that expects us to ignore our own best judgment and reasoning faculties. That's a deal-breaker. That's nothing but a nasty trick. This God is supposed to have made us, after all, so it made us with these reasoning faculties, which, when functioning properly, can detect mistakes and obvious lies – so what

business would it have expecting us to contradict all that for no good reason? As a *test*? None. It would have no business doing that.

A God that permanently hides, and gives us no real evidence of its existence – yet considers it a virtue to have faith that it does exist *despite* the lack of evidence – is a God that’s just plain cheating, and I want nothing to do with it. It has no right to blame us for not believing it exists, given the evidence and our reasoning capacities, so if it did exist and did blame us, it would be a nasty piece of work. Fortunately, I don’t worry about that much, because I don’t think it does exist.