

# **A Critique of The New Atheism**

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## **Introduction**

Atheism in the United States is on the rise, although their numbers are relatively small as compared to organized monotheistic religions. Nevertheless, this trend is disturbing because of the zeal with which proponents of atheism have gone about to spread their “gospel” of no God. More recently, a movement called New Atheism, championed by its most vociferous propagators; Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, and Sam Harris has gained currency. Recognizing that the arguments for the existence of God are compelling, and that in fact God’s existence cannot be disproved by logical arguments, the new atheist resorts to invectives without logical consistency against God’s existence. The New Atheism argues that one should not believe in God, or alternatively that no compelling or discernible good reasons exist for believing in God says Robert Bishop. The New Atheism movement got its impetus from what Yannick Imbert called “a very specific cultural and political climate: the so-called return to the religious in the supposedly secular West.” According to Imbert, following 9/11 there emerged a heightened fervor and visibility of religion in Western societies which was the impetus for the New Atheism. Given Islamic fundamentalism that is blamed for the attacks on 9/11, and the backlash, the New Atheism has enthusiastically embraced the opportunity to point out the egregious evil done in the name of religion, which for them argues for the irrelevance of religion. This paper is guided by the thesis that the New Atheism as a worldview is bankrupt, and when compared to Christianity it falls flat because it lacks internal consistency.

## **Defining the New Atheism**

The task of defining the New Atheism is not a simple one. It is not always clear what is “new” about the New Atheism. From what may be surmised from the literature, there is nothing new at all about this movement. It is more of the same; the denial of a personal and transcendent being, the disavowal of an intelligent Creator, a belief that random, natural evolutionary forces brought about the order we observe in the universe, natural selection, the survival of the fittest, and faith in the regulating forces of technological advances. God does not exist in this worldview. And if he does exist, he is not needed. In fact, the New Atheism holds that the evil in the world argues against the existence of a loving, all-powerful personal God.

But what is the difference between the New Atheism and atheism as we know it? There seems to be nothing there but the same warmed over arguments. Imbert sees no difference. He observes: “I, for one, do not think it has more to offer as criticism of religion, and Christianity in particular, than previous atheistic philosophical movements.” To the new atheist, religion has not only failed, but also is responsible for all sorts of evil in the world. Instead of a loving God who sent his Son to save mankind, they “promise a new hope and unlimited horizons, once we have shed the delusion of God.” This is not unlike the “old” atheism.

## **Identifying Four Major Elements of the New Atheism**

Here four elements of the New Atheism is identified; the source of ultimate reality (its view on the existence or nonexistence of God); its views on morality, the problem of evil in the world, and the miraculous. A brief overview of each is presented in this section, with a critique

provided in the following section.

#### Ultimate Reality: On the Existence of God

Sam Harris posits that there is no evidence that can serve as a reasonable justification for the existence of Yahweh and Satan “than there was to keep Zeus perched upon his mountain throne or Poseidon and churning the seas.” Citing the statistics about the percentage of Americans who still believe in a personal God, Harris observes that in America 17 percent doubt that a personal God, in his infinite wisdom, is likely to have authored the Bible or created the earth. He refers to religious belief as myths and observes, that we as a species “have grown almost perfectly intoxicated by our myths.” Harris believes that those who believe in God have deluded themselves to thinking that their beliefs about the world can “exist free of reason and evidence.”

Richard Dawkins is quite clear on his view about God. He believes among other things that 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. . . .” Dawkins presents his God hypothesis as: “any creative intelligence, of sufficient complexity to design anything that comes into existence only as the end product of an extended process of gradual evolution. So instead of an intelligent Designer God who sets in motion the process of microevolution, it is evolution that creates a designer. Ultimate reality therefore is not to be found in a personal God but in the naturalistic process of evolution.

Dawkins employs the argument from improbability which he claims comes close to proving that God does not exist. He named this The Ultimate Boeing 747 Gambit. He explains this as, “the probability of life originating on earth is no greater than the chances that a hurricane, sweeping through a scrapyard, would have the luck to assemble a Boeing 747.”

#### Morality

Harris rejects the idea that religion is the source of our ethical intuition. He believes that our sense of what is cruel is no more derived from the Bible “than we get our sense that two plus two equals four from the pages of a textbook on mathematics” Instead he holds that our sense of what is moral, “our ethical intuitions” have their roots in biology. Our efforts therefore, “to ground ethics and religious conceptions of “moral duty” in the Bible, or God, are misguided.

Harris sees the imperfections in nature, such as a child born without limbs, the sightless fly, and the vanished species as arguments against a designer God. Dismissively Harris observes that if God created the world and everything in it, then he is responsible for smallpox, plagues, and all sorts of diseases. To him God is not the source of ethics. He observes: “the deity who stalked the deserts of the Middle-East millennia ago– who seems to have abandoned them to bloodshed in his name ever since– is no one to consult on questions of ethics.” Our ethical sensitivities derived for natural processes and from our socialization. It is not the Bible or some other religious book that is responsible for our morality. Dawkins argues that morality or ethical principles are a product of liberal consensus. In other words morality is human-centered rather than God-centered.

#### The Problem of Evil

The problem of evil in Harris’ view emanates from our moral communities. He argues that the Nazi could kill Jews in the daytime and go home at night to be loving fathers because the Jews were not a part of his moral community and therefore not his moral concern. Ethics therefore based on religious principles are the source of evil in the world. Harris states: “needless to say, the suffering of those who are destined for hell can never be as problematic as the

suffering of the righteous.” In other words, when viewed from a religious perspective, the unbeliever, the infidel deserves what he gets. And if a religious person is inclined to inflict pain on others not of his religious persuasion, he can justify his actions on religious grounds.

Christopher Hitchens similarly strenuously argues that religious fervor is the cause of so much evil in the world. He lists a number of atrocities that were done in the name of religion. Referring to the impetus for the 9/11 attacks he writes that those nineteen hijackers were arguably the most religious persons on those planes on that fateful day.

#### Miracles

The New Atheism rejects miracles because by nature miracles are contradictory to science. Dawkins argues that whether or not there was an immaculate conception, whether or not Lazarus was raised from the dead, or whether Jesus himself was raised are matters of science. So if those phenomena cannot be proved by the scientific method, they must be dismissed as myths. He writes that “miracles provide the strongest reason many believers have for their faith; and miracles, by definition, violate the principle of science.” Scott Hahn and Benjamin Wiker critiquing Dawkins offer that he [Dawkins] believes that it is irrational to believe in miracles because they are impossible. But at the same time Dawkins’ stance against miracles boils down to an “irrational belief in the powers of chance, a belief that has its origins in his intense desire that God does not exist.”

Harris’ disdain for God and of faith is also manifested in his dismissal of the miraculous. In his work, *The End of Faith*, he boldly declares that faith “is an imposter.” Harris goes on to argue that this is demonstrated in the way “all the extraordinary phenomena [*miracles*] of religious life— a statue of the Virgin weeps, a child casts his crutches to the ground— are seized upon by the faithful as confirmation of their faith.” Italics added. To the New Atheism therefore, all extraordinary phenomena must have a scientific explanation. Where no scientific explanation can be found the New Atheism is prepared to leave such phenomena as mysterious, thus precluding the miraculous.

### **Critiquing Four Elements of the New Atheism**

#### New Atheism’s View Ultimate Reality: On the Existence of God

The New Atheism either denies the existence of God or where it cannot logically disprove his existence, offers that the evil in the world argues against one putting his trust and faith in God. Yannick Imbert observes that to “the New Atheists, Old Testament violence has always been an argument of choice to support the impossibility of belief in God.” But what does it offer in place of a personal God? Nothing but hopelessness. Ravi Zacharias comments on the despair he sees even on the campuses of the world’s most prestigious universities. Many young students admit to contemplating suicide. Zacharias rightly notes that “no amount of philosophizing about the world without God brings hopes.”

But more to the point, the New Atheism, despite its vociferous attempts to disprove God’s existence, or unworthiness of worship, has not proved the God does not exist. The presence of evil in the world is not sufficient argument for the non-existence of God. And how does the New Atheism deal with the various philosophical arguments for the existence of God? Take for example the design argument. Gary Habermas correctly points out that New Atheism falters on the most fundamental question; what or who started the whole evolutionary process? Critiquing Harris, Habermas observes: “Harris mostly limits his comments to the truth of evolution and the inability of Intelligent Design to bring God into the process. But along the

way, he stumbles at various philosophical points. For example, it does not help his case to acknowledge freely that, “How the process of evolution got started is still a mystery”” If one is going to admit that the whole process of evolution is mysterious, at the very least one has to consider all possibilities. New Atheism rejects out of hand that God is a possibility, and therefore it is unscientific, for true science does not reject any hypotheses without testing it.

After all its invectives against a Designer God, and its belief in naturalism the New Atheism movement cannot articulate the fundamentals of their own “faith.” That is, it has not provided a coherent argument for how things get started in the first place. The only conclusion that one can make is that the objection to intelligent design is based on a dogged bias against the supernatural and an unsupported preference for the macro evolutionary process.

[William Lane Craig cogently observes that the](#) Christian theist’s view on an intelligently designed universe is superior to the atheistic view that the universe, “when it popped into being uncaused out of nothing, just happened to be by chance fine-tuned to an incomprehensible precision for the existence of intelligent life.” Douglas Groothuis argues that there is structure in biology. The molecular structure present in living organisms cannot be explained by mere chance. Groothuis argues for what he calls cosmic fine-tuning. He states:

1. Molecular machines evidence specified complexity (i.e. they are contingent, complex and specified).
2. Specified complexity cannot be explained on the basis of chance or necessity, or the combination of chance and necessity.
3. Intelligent agency is a known cause which produces specified complexity.
4. Therefore, the best explanation of the origin of specified complexity in molecular machines is intelligent design.

The New Atheism will need more than just saying there is no God. No matter how loud the new atheist screams that there is no God, or that God does not deserve to be worshiped, that simply does not make it so. The design argument for the existence of God has not been solved by the New Atheism. It takes too great an imagination to conclude that there is no God. One must delude himself in thinking that the obvious design in the universe, including the biological processes is by chance. The psalmist rightly observes, “The fool has said in his heart “there is no God”” (Ps 53:1).

#### New Atheism’s View on Morality

One’s view on God would also dictate his view on morality. Here too, the New Atheism attempts to disparage religion, and particularly Christianity for what it sees as immoral acts sanctioned by the God of the Bible. Nancey Murphy indicates that the New Atheism rejects the notion that good morals depend on religion. Instead, they attempt to demonstrate that most of the evil in the world is spawned by religion. A proper view of the Bible however, would demonstrate that God does not support immoral actions. Human sin is the cause of God’s retributive actions. It seems evident from Scripture that God never acts in a punitive way without issuing repeated warnings. Even his own people Israel suffered punishment at God’s hands but not before he had warned them for centuries.

It is true that immoral acts have been done, and continues to be done in the name of religion. The Crusades and the Inquisition are only but two examples. But is God to be blamed for human actions? Human selfishness drives him to performing evil actions. But do we blame God for that? Most people would agree that the invention of the airplane benefits

the world tremendously. We can take long trips in a matter of hours that in the past would have taken months. The fact that misguided individuals decided to use airplanes as missiles, to fly into buildings and kill as many as they could, is no reflection on the manufacture of the airplane. Could the Boeing Company or Airbus be blamed if for whatever reason some fanatic decided to misuse their invention? Most reasonable minds would give a resounding no to such questions. Human freedom is a wonderful gift of God, but if in the name of religion, or any other movement, human beings misuse such freedom, then the blame rests squarely at the feet of those perpetrating those actions, not on God.

The new atheist must realize that religion is not the only endeavor that may be misused. Ian Markham observes that science has also been hijacked for evil purposes. The Nazi, Fritz Lenz, with a specialization in eugenics was responsible for coming up with racial hygiene in Germany that resulted in millions of Jews be exterminated in concentration camps. While it is true that some Nazi professed to be Christians, their understanding of what Christianity was is a far cry from that which is laid out by Jesus Christ. Both the Old and New Testament tell us that we should love our neighbors as ourselves. The Nazi or any other person for that matter, who in the name of Christianity, or any religion, hurts other people, has hijacked that religion.

#### New Atheism's View on the Problem of Evil

On the problem of evil, the New Atheism argues that God does not exist who would allow natural disasters and man's inhumanity to man to persist. The new atheist argues that an atheist can be just as moral as a person of faith. But the New Atheism cannot justify his adherence to an objective standard of morality. Since the New Atheism holds that ultimate reality is grounded in the evolutionary process, it is inexplicable how a naturalistic process could engender moral standards. In critiquing Harris, Habermas states: "If he maintains his belief in objective moral standards, then theism is the most likely result of his belief, because objective morality backfires into a probable argument for God's existence."

The New Atheism's objection to God on the basis of the evil he or she observes in the world seems to amount to the logical problem of evil. The logical problem of evil argues that it is not possible for God and evil to coexist simultaneously. If one exists, the other cannot exist. Since we know that evil exists, therefore God does not exist. Craig points out that the flaw in this argument is that nothing dictates that God and evil are logically incompatible. "There's no explicit contradiction between them. But if the atheist means there's some implicit contradiction between God and evil, then he must be assuming some hidden premises which bring out this implicit contradiction." Could that hidden premises be God although the new atheist would be loathed to admit it?

The Bible provides a much better explanation for the problem of evil. The Bible teaches that the fall of mankind is the reason for the evil that we see in the world. According to Groothuis, the biblical doctrine of the fall, accounts for the abnormality or dysfunction of humans and the world in a deeper and more systematic way than is possible through either mythology or philosophical speculation. Christianity response to the problem of evil in the world by demonstrating that not only is God not the author of evil, but that he limits the effect of evil by the death of His son Jesus Christ to bring redemption to mankind.

#### New Atheism's View on Miracles

It has been earlier noted that the New Atheism has no use for miracles. All extraordinary phenomena as would seem to defy conventional thinking must be regarded as mere chance. Their denial of God dictates that they must conclude that miracles do not exist. For to admit that

the extraordinary phenomena is anything other than a fluke of nature, or mere chance would be to admit that there is some hand at work in nature superimposing such anomalies. The New Atheism promotes secularism and natural processes over intelligent design or divine intervention in human affairs or nature. Richard Cimino and Christopher Smith states that: "Secularism, understood as the dominance of naturalistic and scientific thought over supernatural explanations of reality, was seen as the future for America." The Christian theist can do more than hope that this is not true. Christians must engage in vigorous apologetic efforts against the New Atheism. While the New Atheisms truth claims can be easily refuted by superior arguments for God's existence, if Christians retreat to the safety of the four walls of their churches or to their particular religious communities, instead of facing this challenge head on, then this battlefield of ideas would be left to the new atheists to do as they please.

The New Atheism's denial of miracles is grounded in their disbelief of a God. But the arguments for the existence of God are many and are sound. Take for example the case for the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Christians recognized this as a miracle from God. But the Christian can only defend the resurrection if he or she has previously successfully defended the existence of God. Groothuis observes that if the case has been made for a supernatural Perfect Being, Creator, Designer, and Lawgiver, who intervened miraculously in our history, then a case for the resurrection which is a miracle itself can be made. Groothuis quotes Anthony Flew as saying "certainly given some beliefs about God, the occurrence of the resurrection does become enormously more likely." So a defense of miracles in general, and of the resurrection in particular, should begin with a defense of the Christian God who manifests himself in the person and work of Jesus Christ. For the new atheist to dismiss miracles in general, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ in particular is to ignore the myriad of philosophical arguments for God's existence.

The intelligent design argument for the existence of God postulates the view that the things that we observe are caused by God. God does in fact intervene supernaturally in nature and human lives. The New Atheism follows a purely naturalistic understanding of science which is biased in favor of materialism. Groothuis observes that the popular definition of science today is: "science pursues materialistic explanations for natural phenomena through empirical observation and rational theorizing." Anything that is outside the natural realm is excluded as unscientific. Groothuis proposes another definition of science, "science pursues the best explanation for natural phenomena through empirical observation and rational theorizing." Groothuis correctly observes that with his proposed definition the best explanation for some natural events that seem out of the ordinary may include intelligent causes. The New Atheism proves to be quite unscientific, for to be a true scientist, one must follow where the data leads. With a foregone conclusion that there is no such thing as a miraculous, the New Atheism has unwittingly, or more cynically, deliberately shut down the scientific process.

### **Commending and Defending the Christian Worldview against the New Atheism**

In his article titled, "Why The New Atheism Shouldn't Be (Completely) Dismissed," Gregory Peterson observes that: "To read the recent works on the evils of religion by Donnett, Sam Harris (*The End of Faith*, 2004), and Richard Dawkins (*The God Delusion*, 2006) is to expose oneself to heavy doses of hyperbole, sarcasm, and outrage, sometimes all in the same paragraph." Indeed, the cries against the religious are loud, and some of the authors in the fields are prolific, nevertheless, the Christian theist need not fear. We are armed with convincing

arguments for God's existence. Whether one uses the ontological arguments, cosmological argument, the design argument, the moral argument, or the argument from religious experience, each has a sound philosophical basis for God's existence.

It has been argued here that the design argument is perhaps the best for the explanation of the existence of the universe. If one accepts that the universe is designed by an intelligent, personal, and yet transcendent Designer, then one can more easily embrace the idea for example of miracles. Getting to know the God of the Bible as expressed in Jesus Christ will immediately lead one to recognize that God is not a revengeful angry God who cannot wait to inflict maximum damage upon his disobedient children. If one accepts the notion of a Creator one would necessarily have to embrace the notion that he has the right to direct the lives of his creatures, and to punish them for their transgressions. But God's love, expressed in Jesus Christ, is evident that God is doing something about the evils in the world, particularly those which are the result of man's corrupt thinking.

Take also the ontological argument for God's existence. This rests upon the notion of a personal being who gives to his human creatures their personality. Could it be credibly argued that a person's ability to love, his sense of justice, etc. simply evolved out of materialistic processes? That seems a great stretch. If that were true, why do the wild beasts of the field, which are products of the natural world, not adhere to the same standards as to humans? Humans are different than the wild beasts because our very existence reflects that of God. Groothuis observes that: "A personal being is higher or greater than an impersonal being. This rests on the fact that a personal being is an agent who brings about states of affairs according to his thoughts and designs. An impersonal being would lack consciousness and so lack agency and the possibility of exemplifying love, justice, mercy, forgiveness and so on." The best explanation for the creation and sustenance of the universe is the biblical view that says: "All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being" (John 1:3); and, "for in Him we live and move and exist" (Acts 17:28).

### **Conclusion**

The New Atheism has several philosophical and epistemological problems that remain unresolved. To be sure the new atheist makes many rants against religion, and especially Christianity, but without a sound foundation for such rants. To properly engage Christianity the New Atheism must go back to the drawing board and develop arguments that have internal consistency and which can stand up under intellectual scrutiny. I suspect that the New Atheism will not be able to do so. "Let God be true, and every man a liar" (Rom 3:4). Jerome Baggett observes that the New Atheism is fundamentally flawed. He wrote that it "lacks a nihilistic sensibility and thus they do not address the epistemological and ethical problems that accompany their atheistic and humanistic assumptions.

Thomas White argues that perhaps the New Atheism is a blessing in disguise as it drives true believers to examine their faith closer. White states that its "avowed goal is the exposé of Spirituality and Religion as the Great Delusions of History, but paradoxically the result is the opposite." It is not surprising that notwithstanding its appeal to a growing minority of persons, it will not prevail. This is true because this New Atheism will crumble because of its irrational and inconsistent philosophical foundation. Loud and emotional tirades do not win philosophical arguments; sound arguments do.

As regards to the evil in the world that the new atheist takes as a sign that there could be no God, they seem to forget the notion that men are free agents, endowed with the ability to make choices. Evil in the world is evidence of man's freedom rather than disproof of God's existence. Markham notes that God created a universe "in which life with the capacity for freedom could emerge." As free agents God does not at every moment restrains our behaviors. He sent his Son to die on our behalf, thus providing a way of making the right choices. But God does not take away our freedom even when such freedom wreaks all sorts of havoc in the world. It is doubtful whether any of these new atheists would be willing to live under a system that allows them no freedom at all.

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The term New Atheism, which first appeared in the November 2006 edition of Wired magazine, is frequently applied to a movement spawned by a series of six best-selling books by five authors that appeared in the period between 2004 and 2008. These authors include Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett and Victor J. Stenger. Richard Dawkins said about New Atheism, "[O]ur struggle is not so much an intellectual struggle, as a political one: What are we going to do about it?" Before I begin my critique of your comments, I think you should know that I am currently writing an exegesis about "God, religion, and the Bible. But I am not anti-God. In fact, I wrote in the preface of my work, "As a proviso, you should know that, although not a deist, I am, conversely, a stalwart supporter of religion. The "New Atheism" moniker suggests that there is a movement embodying "new doctrine". When Dawkins et al began the latest wave of writing and discussion on the subject, someone came up with the name and is now bandied about carelessly and means only whatever the speaker wants it to mean. Its a critique of the 'scientism' and bourgeois rationalism of the new Atheist 'movement'. cheers. Atheism, as the denial of this unreality, has no longer any meaning, for atheism is a negation of God, and postulates the existence of man through this negation; but socialism as socialism no longer stands in any need of such a mediation. It proceeds from the theoretically and practically sensuous consciousness of man and of nature as the essence. Socialism is man's positive self-consciousness, no longer mediated through the abolition of religion (Marx, 1844). In the course of this essay I will be attempting to formulate a critique of the "New Atheist" movement, exemplified in the writings of New Atheism is a contemporary intellectual movement uniting outspoken atheists. The New Atheists' philosophies and arguments are generally consistent with those of their predecessors; what's "New" is the profitability and the style. Most of the prominent New Atheists have had at least one book become a bestseller, which was almost unheard of for atheistic literature in the past. New Atheists consider belief in God erroneous as well as detrimental to society, and espouse their views frequently and "This new enlightenment would put the old metaphysical views and attitudes to rest and replace them with the new mode of doing philosophy." [1]. The collapse of the Verificationism was undoubtedly the most important philosophical event of the twentieth century. As vanguards of a new philosophical paradigm, theistic philosophers have freely issued various critiques of atheism. In so short a space as this entry it is impossible to do little more than sketch some of them and to provide direction for further reading. These critiques could be grouped under two basic heads: (1) There are no cogent arguments on behalf of atheism, and (2) There are cogent arguments on behalf of theism. No Cogent Arguments on behalf of Atheism. Presumption of Atheism.