

## **“New Atheism”—A Response**

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In the 1947 film “Miracle on 34<sup>th</sup> Street”, an endearing old man fortuitously wanders into the midst of Macy’s Thanksgiving Day preparations. After finding the hired Santa Claus drunk, Doris Walker asks the kind old man (who looks strikingly like Santa Claus) if he will work the float instead. Because of his popularity, he is later employed at Macy’s as the store Santa. After meeting Doris’ Daughter, Susie, he finds that Susie’s world has been demythologized by her mother to the point that she no longer believes even in using her imagination. He takes it upon himself to prove to her that there really is something worth believing in and that he in fact is really Santa Claus and not merely “a nice old man with real whiskers”.

A seminal moment in the movie occurs when Doris realizes that it is important for her daughter to believe in Santa in the sense that the idea of “Santa” stands for something needed by humanity. Echoing the definition given to her earlier by the lawyer representing Santa in court, Doris exclaims “Susie, faith is believing in something when common sense tells you not to”. Susie then repeats the phrase “I believe. It’s silly but I believe”, clearly unconvinced until the end of the film which leaves the question open as to whether Kris Kringle really was Santa Claus.

Now, it would be a mistake to argue that New Atheists like Richard Dawkins are rehashing 1940’s Hollywood pop theology, but there is a striking resemblance to the way the New

Atheists define faith, especially in regards to its relationship with reason. Dawkins, speaking about the dangers of radical Islam's tendency to shun serious theological reflection, writes, "More generally (and this applies to Christianity no less than to Islam), what is really pernicious is the practice of teaching children that faith itself is a virtue. Faith is an evil precisely because it requires no justification and brooks no argument. Teaching children that unquestioned faith is a virtue primes them—given certain other ingredients that are not hard to come by—to grow up into potentially lethal weapons for future jihads or crusades" (*God Delusion* 307-308). The idea of faith endorsed here seems to be belief in something in spite of or perhaps even because of lack of evidence. This is as good as any place to start.

In *The God Delusion*, Dawkins gives the God Hypothesis and what I call the God Alternative. The God Hypothesis states that "there exists a super-human, supernatural intelligence who deliberately designed and created the universe and everything in it". The God alternative is that "any creative intelligence, of sufficient complexity to design anything, comes into existence only as the end product of an extended process of gradual evolution" (78). So far, so good. So, the first question that needs asking is whether or not Dawkins (or New Atheist) has the notion of faith correct such that one could only hold the God hypothesis blindly and that there is no reason available that could justify such a belief (except for perhaps that it comforts one in the trials of life). That is, it is the denial that faith itself can be a rational act. Given the number of debates he has had with theology, philosophy, and math scholars, there are a number of theists who deny this definition outright. Since we are at a Catholic university, it may be helpful to give a brief description of Aquinas' view of the relationship between faith and reason to see if we can make some headway in this debate.

In the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Thomas argues that there are two ways one can come to truths about God. He grants that there are certain truths that are certainly beyond our ability since we are limited creatures with limited intellects, intellects that are dependent on the senses for their starting point. Thus, one would expect that if there was a personal God that took an interest in one's life, and God being far greater than the intellect that can conceive of him, God may need to disclose this to us since reason alone could not discover it. This would include things such as the Trinity, etc. Alternatively, there are some truths about God that are open to reasonable investigation. Thomas puts in this group beliefs such that He exists and certain attributes that a First Principle must have.

Already there seems to be a problem. It seems that the New Atheist will deny the first claim outright (why should we expect this disclosure?), and the second claim on the basis that there is no possible evidence that could justify it. What is interesting is that the God Hypothesis as quoted in Aaron's presentation or that which I quoted from *God Delusion* seems to be a combination of these two modes. Bracketing Alvin Plantinga's notion that belief in God may be properly basic, this second claim seems to be the one attacked, at least by Dawkins. Aaron may be able to speak as to whether or not the others do the same.

There are two ways Dawkins attacks it, both essentially related. In the *Blind Watchmaker*, Dawkins lists rival theories to Darwinism that try to show how evolution happened or that, as he says are "against the very spirit of Darwinism" (287). These include Lamarckism, neutralism, mutationism, and creationism. With regard to creationism, he states that the enlightened creationist either gives God a supervisory role in evolution or has him "meddle" in day to day

events. He writes, "If we want to postulate a deity capable of engineering all the organized complexity in the world, either instantaneously or by guiding evolution, that deity must already have been vastly complex in the first place. The creationist, whether a naïve Bible-thumper or educated bishop, simply *postulates* an already existing being of prodigious intelligence and complexity. If we are going to allow ourselves the luxury of postulating organized complexity without offering an explanation, we might as well make a job of it and simply postulate the existence of life as we know it!" (316). That is, there is no causal role for God because he would need a cause as well. I actually heard him make this argument against Dr. Lennox on a radio debate late last year.

The second related argument is his rebuttal of Aquinas' famous proofs for God's existence in *The God Delusion*. I won't write them all down but the first three are related: for example, the uncaused cause argument goes something like this. Nothing is caused by itself, every effect has a prior cause, and we are pushed into a regress. This has to be terminated by a first cause, we call this God (this is a synopsis that Dawkins gives p. 77). As he writes in response to this argument, it would be more parsimonious to conjure up a Big Bang Singularity or some other physical concept as yet unknown. "Calling it God is at best unhelpful and at worst perniciously misleading" (78). After all, he gives the example of cutting gold into smaller and smaller pieces: one would expect a natural terminus to this activity. Once again, even though it is an argument for an Uncaused Cause, God still seems robbed of his explanatory role.

The reason I say both of these examples are essentially related is that there is an attempt to argue against any causal, or perhaps more aptly put, explanatory role God may have in the

world. Both examples presuppose a certain kind of causal agency that the theist must say God exercises in the world: God either tinkering in creation (for either an evolutionary effect or just plain God of the gaps reasoning) or him being the unflicked Flicker, the cue ball that starts the universe ticking (which consequently seems to be Dawkins' understanding of the first Mover proof given the Big Bang comment).

Oddly, most defenders of Uncaused cause argument in its articulation in either in Aquinas or Aristotle see it as an infinite regress of explanations, not of pushes and pulls. As Stephen Barr relates, Thomas' argument doesn't rely on temporal antecedents and consequents (in fact, there was nothing he saw logically contradictory about an infinite regress of a temporal chain of causes like fathers begetting sons). In fact, Thomas was thinking more of simultaneous acting causes of the type Searle talks about where water molecules, vibrating in a lattice structure, *causes* solidity. It's not as if the lattice structure happens before the solidity, but nevertheless it explains it. The infinite regress is one of explanation, where if we can't terminate the series of explanations, the system itself cannot be explained. It's the cosmological equivalent of Ned Block's causal drainage argument. And, it's really an attempt to answer the more basic questions of "Why does the universe have the nature that it does?", "Why is there a universe?", or "Why is there something rather than nothing?"

The overall point here is that Dawkins doesn't seem to engage this understanding of the argument at all. This conception, while perhaps contentious, is widely held by scholars in the both the Aristotelian and Thomistic traditions and seems to make the notion that God would need an explanation somewhat nonsensical. Explanation itself requires God in the deepest

sense. My concern here is that it doesn't seem like Dawkins is either aware of this way of understanding of the argument or has chosen not to engage it. Either way, it would require an argument of another fashion to dismantle it since, by the Thomist's lights, even Dawkins' position requires it to be intelligible.

To ask these kinds of questions is, by Richard Swinburne's understanding, actually demanded by what rationality is and hence a highly rational endeavor.

So, my question for the New Atheist is twofold. Is defining faith as irrational really an argument that it is so? Do people here think that, on balance, they take the strongest (and hence, most charitable) reading of the theists argument and attack that rather than merely ridicule it?