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BEYOND ‘NEW ATHEISM’

BY NOTRE DAME PHILOSOPHY PROFESSOR, GARY GUTTING

(he claims to apply critical thinking to information and events that have appeared in the news).

*Led by the biologist Richard Dawkins, the author of “The God Delusion,” atheism has taken on a new life in popular religious debate. Dawkins’s brand of atheism is scientific in that it views the “God hypothesis” as obviously inadequate to the known facts. In particular, he employs the facts of evolution to challenge the need to postulate God as the designer of the universe. For atheists like Dawkins, belief in God is an intellectual mistake, and honest thinkers need simply to recognize this and move on from the silliness and abuses associated with religion.*

*Most believers, however, do not come to religion through philosophical arguments. Rather, their belief arises from their personal experiences of a spiritual world of meaning and values, with God as its center.*

Gary, you completely missed the mark on that one. But two of your commenters nailed it:

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"Excuse me, but I think most believers come to religion because, as small children, they learned it from their parents, rather than their personal experiences of a spiritual world."

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"... Rather than either philosophical arguments or personal experience, most believers come to their beliefs by having them passed down from their parents and having them reinforced by attending a house of worship. I come to this opinion by encountering virtually nothing ever mentioned, in public or private, about people's religious experiences. Instead: quotes from the Bible or Koran or a minister, descriptions of activities like "I went to church Sunday," and prayers. These are about what people read or heard or did or said -- but \*not\* what they experienced."

*In the last few years there has emerged another style of atheism that takes such experiences seriously."*

Gary, the only area of study that should take such experiences seriously is the field of psychology.

*One of its best exponents is Philip Kitcher, a professor of philosophy at Columbia. Instead of focusing on the scientific inadequacy of theistic arguments, Kitcher critically examines the spiritual experiences underlying religious belief, particularly noting that they depend on specific and contingent social and cultural conditions. Your religious beliefs typically depend on the community in which you were raised or live.*

Gary, that was the point of the 2 commenters above who put the whole issue right in the middle of the 10 ring.

*The spiritual experiences of people in ancient Greece, medieval Japan or 21st-century Saudi Arabia do not lead to belief in Christianity.*

Gary, why do you suppose God ignored them? Did their ancestors steal fruit from His favorite tree?

*It seems, therefore, that religious belief very likely tracks not truth but social conditioning.*

Gary, Bingo!

*This “cultural relativism” argument is an old one, but Kitcher shows that it is still a serious challenge. (He is also refreshingly aware that he needs to show why a similar argument does not apply to his own position, since atheistic beliefs are themselves often a result of the community in which one lives.)*

Gary, can you name one Atheistic community in America? No, you can't because you completely muffed another one. Atheists are found scattered all over the world ... in religious communities.

*Even more important, Kitcher takes seriously the question of whether atheism can replace the sense of meaning and purpose that believers find in religion.*

Gary, finding meaning and purpose in delusion *should be* replaced ... by finding meaning and purpose in reality.

*Pushed to the intellectual limit, many will prefer a religion of hope if faith is not possible.*

Gary, faith is belief in that for which there exists no evidence. In a rational world, faith would be treated as any other mental illness. But Gary, our planet is a *long* way from getting anywhere near being a rational world.

*For them, Tennyson’s “‘the stars,’ she whispers, ‘blindly run’” is a prospect too bleak to sustain our existence.*

Gary, we don't need delusion to sustain our existence, but a dose a rationality would sure help.

*Kitcher agrees that mere liberation from theism is not enough. Atheists, he maintains, need to undertake the positive project of showing how their worldview can take over what he calls the ethical “functions” of theism.*

Gary, Kitcher doesn't understand his own position: Atheism is not a worldview - it is a rejection of a worldview. That is not the same thing. Atheism has nothing to do with taking over ethical functions; it simply rejects the claim that religion can provide them ... and history proves it right.

*There are those — Dawkins, for one example; existentialists like Sartre, for another — who are invigorated at the very thought that there is no guiding power in the universe.*

Gary, a guiding power wouldn't necessarily be bad, in and of itself, but the guiding powers described in the Bible and in the Koran are brutal, horrible monsters who both threaten to eternally torture billions of humans. That is utterly sick.

*Many others, however, need convincing that atheism (or secular humanism, as Kitcher prefers) has the resources to inspire a fulfilling human life.*

Gary, as I just explained, Atheism has nothing to do with inspiring a fulfilling human life. But most Atheists believe our chances of achieving fulfilling lives will be greatly enhanced if we can free other humans from living under the threats of invisible monsters. I can think of nothing that detracts more from achieving a fulfilling human life than spending it terrorized by threats from the spirit world.

*If not, isn’t the best choice to retreat to a religion of hope?*

Gary, you could make the same claim for alcohol or cocaine. In fact, worldwide, millions have done just that. I would rate religion only a small step above the other two.

(did I say, above?).

*Why not place our bet on the only chance we have of real fulfillment?*

Gary, that was a was a false premise disguised in the form of a question, and simultaneously, one of the most naive assertions I have ever heard. Why do you preclude fulfillment through other means? Your "question" implies that the billion of nonbelievers on Earth lack any chance of real fulfillment.

*Kitcher has a two-part answer. First, he offers a refined extension of Plato’s famous dilemma argument in “Euthyphro” to show that contrary to widespread opinion, theism is not in fact capable of grounding the ethical values that make life worthwhile. Second, to show that secularism is capable of grounding these values, he offers a sophisticated account of how ethics could have evolved as a “social technology” — a set of optimally designed practices and norms — to satisfy basic human desires.*

*Kitcher’s case is open to serious objections, but it has the conceptual and logical weight that is lacking in the polemics of the scientific atheists.*

Gary, there is no such thing as a "scientific Atheist." Atheism has nothing to do with science. Atheism is nothing more than a rejection of God ... for *any* reason.

*It also lets Kitcher enter into genuine dialogue with believers like the philosopher Charles Taylor, whose defense of religion in “A Secular Age” offers an essential counterpoint to almost everything Kitcher says.*

Gary, counterpoints offered by Ghost Worshippers are never based on anything other than fantasy. So they are worthless.

*For a long time, meaningful engagement between believers and nonbelievers was, especially in the United States, blocked by an implicit mutual agreement: religious belief was exempted from challenge, provided it remained within a private sphere of religious life, and was not asserted as relevant to any issues of public concern.*

Gary, that was in the days when there was an effort to live by the Constitution which requires a separation of church and state. Now that Christians are involved in an active campaign to replace our government with a "Christian nation" founded upon the Bible, that separation is being attacked constantly.

*Over the last few decades, however, conservative Christians have rejected this agreement, particularly over issues like abortion and evolution.*

Gary, our courts have ruled that abortion is legal and teaching creationism in science class is illegal. Conservative Christians refuse to abide by our laws because they answer to a higher authority. Unfortunately, like most religions, they want to impose that higher authority upon everyone else. This is the essence of the current culture war in America.

*The scientific atheists, led by Dawkins, rightly responded with their aggressive insistence that militant believers justify the claims they wanted taken seriously in the public sphere.*

Gary, that is one thing believers have never been able to do; and no matter how many times they rewrite their divinely inspired holy books, they never get any closer to reflecting reality.

*The resulting polemics cleared some murky air but now have little use except to keep assuring each side of the other’s perversity. Kitcher’s secular humanism reanimates the debate, promising much needed serious reflection on whether the divine can or should be eliminated from our moral lives.*

Gary, the divine doesn't have to be eliminated because it has never been proven to exist in the first place. What needs to be eliminated is the belief in the divine which is what is causing much of the grief on our planet.

*Such a debate may not result in a victory for secular humanism. But even if it does, secular humanists would still face the much greater practical task of embedding their convictions in secular versions of the religious institutions, rituals and customs that even today remain vital fixtures in our social world.*

Gary, like what? What is religion doing that couldn't be done by rational institutions?

*But Kitcher’s challenge, unlike Dawkins’s, is one that reflective believers have no easy way of evading, and meeting it may well seriously revise their understanding of their faith.*

Gary, reflective believers? Reflective believers don't exist because once they honestly reflect on their beliefs their only option is Atheism. Believers refuse to reflect because they believe there is an invisible monster standing right beside them at all times who can hear every thought they think; and they believe that this monster has the power to send them to eternal torture. They believe that because they have been indoctrinated with this threat since early childhood. It is in their Bibles and Korans and they believe it. As long as they fear that the threat might be true, there is no power on Earth, no argument so persuasive, that they will risk eternal torture by reflecting and allowing doubt to enter their minds.

Gary, this is the salvation that Christianity and Islam are offering you.

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THE SCIENCE SEGMENT

Nobel Prize in Physics 2012: Particle Control in a Quantum World

The Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences has awarded the Nobel Prize in Physics for 2012 to two researchers for ground-breaking experimental methods that enable measuring and manipulation of individual quantum systems. The researchers independently invented and developed methods for measuring and manipulating individual particles while preserving their quantum-mechanical nature, in ways that were previously thought unattainable.

The Nobel Laureates have opened the door to a new era of experimentation with quantum physics by demonstrating the direct observation of individual quantum particles without destroying them. For single particles of light or matter the laws of classical physics cease to apply and quantum physics takes over. But single particles are not easily isolated from their surrounding environment and they lose their mysterious quantum properties as soon as they interact with the outside world. Thus many seemingly bizarre phenomena predicted by quantum physics could not be directly observed, and researchers could only carry out thought experiments that might in principle manifest these bizarre phenomena.

Through their ingenious laboratory methods the Laureates, together with their research groups, have managed to measure and control very fragile quantum states, which were previously thought inaccessible for direct observation. The new methods allow them to examine, control and count the particles.

Their methods have many things in common. One traps electrically charged atoms, or ions, controlling and measuring them with light, or photons. The other takes the opposite approach: he controls and measures trapped photons, or particles of light, by sending atoms through a trap.

Both Laureates work in the field of quantum optics studying the fundamental interaction between light and matter, a field which has seen considerable progress since the mid-1980's. Their ground-breaking methods have enabled this field of research to take the very first steps towards building a new type of super fast computer based on quantum physics. Perhaps the quantum computer will change our everyday lives in this century in the same radical way as the classical computer did in the last century.

The research has also led to the construction of extremely precise clocks that could become the future basis for a new standard of time, with more than a hundred-fold greater precision than present-day caesium clocks.

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FAMOUS QUOTES

Ludwig Andreas von Feuerbach (1804–1872) 68 years.

He was a German philosopher and anthropologist. Feuerbach was politically liberal, an Atheist and a materialist. Many of his philosophical writings offered a critical analysis of Christianity. His thought was influential in the development of dialectical materialism, where he is often recognized as a bridge between Hegel and Marx.

"It is not, as in the Bible, that God created man in His own image

but on the contrary, that man created God in his own image."