

THE DEFENSE OF ATHEISM

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Reginald Williams in 'The Case Against Theism' (Think Autumn 2011) argued that the 'empirically verifiable' psychological need 'to believe that good things exist when in fact they don't' offers 'the best reason anyone should expect' for endorsing atheism over theism. My article outlines six objections to his thesis, questioning how empirically verifiable the evidence he adduces is, and pointing out various logical fallacies such as illicit use of generalizations and begging the question. It concludes that atheism needs defending on stronger grounds.

If nails are to be hammered into the coffin of God, it is as well to be sure that God is inside the coffin. The arguments presented by Reginald Williams in his short piece 'The Case Against Theism' (*Think Autumn 2011*: 49f) are hardly persuasive in this respect.

He makes an important point at the beginning. Yes, 'the whole enterprise of proving and disproving God's existence' is a red herring because God, if God exists, is not the conclusion of a 'valid deductive argument', nor part of the empirical world such that 'direct physical evidence' can justify belief in God. In this respect theists have been as guilty as atheists of directing attention inappropriately and therefore hopelessly.

But Williams' assertion that people imagine a non-existent God because of a deep-seated need to believe that good things exist is no argument against the existence of God for several reasons:

- (i) He admits that this is a generalization concerning what 'most people are likely to believe', but some

people could believe in God who are free of this tendency. It does not therefore dispose of God's existence just like that – there could be, and are, many other reasons for belief in God. Regarding matters of truth, a minority view can be correct whilst a majority view utilizing a herd-instinct can be mistaken.

Stephen Law (*Think* Autumn 2011: 5–7) makes a similar point regarding another psycho-social factor which he suspects may have some truth in it, that of hyper-active agency detectors (H.A.A.D.). According to this, evolution has equipped us with faculties that tend to over-detect agency, seeing agency when in truth there is none. The presumption of agency is in order to protect the vulnerable from potential danger; it is a survival tactic. He notes that 'the fact that large numbers hold such beliefs can no longer be considered good evidence that any such agents exist'. Yet this does nothing to dis-establish the correctness of H.A.A.D. belief, for sometimes an agent really does exist. It is possible to believe in H.A.A.D. and in God at the same time.

- (ii) The 'empirically verifiable' evidence which he gives is itself suspect. It assumes what may not be true. Some children indeed may invent a friend to compensate for loneliness, but they are not necessarily taken in by this. I speak, it so happens, from experience because, as an only child, I did invent a sister, but even at the time I knew this was make-belief. This was play-acting at which children are remarkably good and which adults, looking on from the outside, tend easily to assume that the child takes literally. In fact children can be very sophisticated in their understanding of reality. Such evidence is not therefore 'a fact of human nature'.
- (iii) The authority that Williams gives Nietzsche's 'analysis of the historical and psycho-social roots of religion' is problematic. There is good reason to doubt his judgement because of his seriously prejudiced

view of Christianity as it had developed in historical times. He equated, for example, the Christian virtue of meekness with weakness which in many instances is almost its opposite. The meek person, like Jesus himself, can be an immensely strong character, showing remarkable independence of thought and exercise of autonomy. Such misunderstanding of Christianity suggests that his excursions into the origins of religion may have been driven by his hatred of it in rebellion against the stifling upbringing he received from elderly religious women. The latter is a historically well-attested factor which any fair-minded person may be able to acknowledge, but surmises on how ancestors thousands of years ago happened to come across the idea of God does not rest upon objective empirical verification such that everyone must accept. How did Nietzsche know that 'early theists were destitute, were enslaved, and had generally horrible lives'. Where is the evidence for these claims?

The problem with all the applied sciences such as anthropology and archeology is that they do not provide incontrovertible scientific evidence. The hard facts with which they deal have to be interpreted and given meaning, and such meanings cannot themselves be objectively verifiable beyond intelligent challenge-ability.

- (iv) Surmises accounting for the origins of religion do not eliminate the possibility of the existence of God because, if God exists, that is and remains an alternative explanation. Moreover it is an explanation which can co-here with the empirical facts adduced. The involvement of physical, psycho-social factors is essential in appreciating anything, but this does not mean that nothing exists. We experience the need for food because food exists and is necessary for us. The need itself is, therefore, no evidence for the object being a mirage. Non-existence must be shown on other grounds.

- (v) It is only because the possibility of the existence of God has already been ruled out of consideration that the psychological argument persuades anyone, but this comes close to begging the question. If we start off assuming that there is no God, what we are actually doing is trying hard to find an alternative explanation for the undoubted fact of religion. What then comes up bears no necessary relationship at all to the question of the truth of religion, which the premises of the argument have already discounted in only counting as evidence what is empirical.
- (vi) Williams argues that atheism cannot be debunked whereas religion can be. This is capable, however, of an unfortunate twist. What is to prevent people from debunking religion because of something good they want and which they think, rightly or wrongly, that religion would deny them? An example might be the revolution in sexual mores which has liberated and delighted millions and which a return to religion might be thought to jeopardize. Here a psycho-social reason for debunking religion casts doubt on the validity of the atheist claim rather than the religious claim.

Fundamentally what is the matter is reliance on psycho-social evidence to decide the question of God's existence or non-existence. If God exists 'He' (a metaphor not to be taken literally!) does so whether or not any humans believe in 'Him' or not. Atheism needs defending on stronger grounds.

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