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anyone losing faith"*

EMERGING
FROM
DISBELIEF

THE GOD CONCLUSION

WHY SMART PEOPLE STILL BELIEVE

I W B R O W N

THE
GOD
CONCLUSION

WHY SMART PEOPLE STILL BELIEVE

IW Brown

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CA

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THE GOD CONCLUSIO

For my parents

Carleton Wade & Marian F. Brown

“A little philosophy inclineth a man’s mind to atheism; but depth in philosophy bringeth men’s minds about to religion.”

—Sir Francis Bacon

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PROLOGUE

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WHILE I CONTEMPLATED WRITING THIS book I began to pose serious questions to my family and friends. My questions centered on their belief or disbelief in God. I wanted to know what they believed and in some cases, why not. I was eager to learn how they handled the primary arguments of modern atheism. Frankly some of them were a bit puzzled by my interest in such personal details.

Through my years of agnosticism and atheism I embraced some of these atheist arguments like hell, well, gospel truth. They directly shaped how I interpreted the God question. Only through coming to believe in God did I begin to see them in a more critical light. It turns out that they were not advertised. Despite repeated claims to the contrary made in bestselling books and by zealous atheist foot soldiers online, no argument for atheism is what philosophers call a “knock-down argument,” an argument with a conclusion which clearly follows from sound and sufficient premises. None is even close. Upon careful and prolonged reconsideration, I found that many atheist arguments are less about truth and logic, and are more a reflection of the lens through which their proponents choose to see the world. More often than not, that lens is shaped and colored by profound emotions which typically go unrecognized. In time I realized that the only way for me to make sense of the arguments for and against God, was to first better understand my own lens—including the emotional baggage I never before thought I carried.

Here I intend to present reasonable and rational ways to reconcile competing claims of truth. In fact, I explain how theism is a sound inference to be drawn from what we know today. I look at the best and most common arguments for atheism and explain how, with a better understanding of one's own lens of interpretation, they dissolve under scrutiny. In fact, some atheist arguments not only lose their force, but even transform into reasons to believe in God.

Many of the most common atheist claims simply do not withstand the scrutiny which these same cynics apply to faith and belief in the God of the Bible. Some of their claims can be technically accurate, but wildly misleading. For example, is it true that the most intelligent people in the world are atheists? After all, leading atheists never seem to miss an opportunity to say so. If this is true, why? What does that mean? Ultimately shouldn't we just defer to the smartest and wisest among us? These are just a few of the claims and questions which have a substantial influence on those who think about the God question. They demand our attention. I intend to carefully examine each.

My intended reader is someone who cares or who wonders about the God question. I write to those who struggle to express the reasoning for their belief. What's more I write to those in transition. Some once believed but, due in part to atheist arguments they find compelling, are gradually letting go of their faith. Conversely others may be gently nudged toward belief through life experience but are troubled by those very arguments. These people would believe were it not for this or that philosophical or scientific objection. I am convinced that all of them genuinely want to know the

truth. There is just so much conflicting information to overwhelm and derail even the most sincere efforts.

If I am successful the readers I have described will have navigated through many of the arguments pro and con and will have discarded those without merit. They will be left with more sound reasoning. Naturally, the analysis and opinions are mine. But of course if they are sound, they will stand on their own.

In the chapters to come I explore what I believe are compelling answers to atheist challenges—answers and explanations I wish I had understood years ago. In short, I want to correct some of the false advertising that so confounded me. There are enough profound realities to consider that we have no need for the irrelevant and the misleading. With these things clarified, it is my hope that the genuine seeker of truth will be better equipped to find his way.

INTRODUCTION

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SOME QUESTIONS REFUSE TO GO AWAY. Chief among the most stubborn is the question of whether God exists. Certainly the urge to know is nothing new. It has been the focus of human contemplation for as long as there has been a mind capable of inquiry. Philosopher David Bentley Hart waxes poetic when describing this constant human compulsion in his latest book *The Experience of God*:

“The question of God never ceases to pose itself anew. And the longing to know about God, never wholly abates” (1)

Those of us who truly want to know, and it seems we are no small number, have been treated to passionate arguments from both sides. But far too often these seem more designed to score debating points rather than to provide the seeker of truth with genuinely helpful insights into the question. We find ourselves no closer to clarity, let alone certainty. We have listened as a friend or a family member has regurgitated the latest and greatest atheistic arguments available online and made clear how foolish it is to believe in God today in the age of science. Yet despite his or her protests and those of the most vocal atheists, polls continue to show that most of the country still believes in a high power—and mostly the theist God. Even so, it seems many of the arguments pro and con are more technical and calculating than authentic attempts to find truth.

My personal library, digital and paper copy, overflows with titles from celebrity atheists like Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Michael Shermer, Jerry Coyne, and the late Christopher Hitchens as well as much less notorious but no less strident advocates of atheism. Conversely, I also have the works of professional theist writers like William Lane Craig, David Bentley Hart, JP Moreland, and their like-minded thinkers like Alvin Plantinga, Alan Sandage, and NT Wright. Delving deeper I read books by passionate theists from various traditions of monotheism, including Catholics, Episcopalian, Orthodox Jews, Mormons, Baptists and other Protestants.

No doubt the authors listed above on both sides of the debate are highly intelligent and well informed. They are really smart people! But that is not to say that all have a firm grip on the breadth of possible considerations. And yes, I have learned a great deal from them about the latest and greatest arguments for and against God. But painfully few of the volumes in print seem aimed at helping the reader better understand how to navigate the best atheist arguments and how to interpret those with merit. Again, much of their commentary seems more about winning an argument than elucidating truth. Put another way, at times we see a degree of gamesmanship in these bestsellers and only secondary attention to aiding those who sincerely seek the truth. This is troubling because there is indeed real truth to be found and worth finding. The means by which we work to find it are of utmost importance. It has been said that we can be continually learning but never manage to draw closer to the truth. Of course, I am paraphrasing Paul in the New Testament. He was right. In other words, the

are bad ways to go about finding truth. Sifting through the evidence and arguments as if to prepare for a debate ourselves is one of those bad ways.

Like many who read books of this genre, I consider myself educated and reasonably well-read but I am not a trained logician, philosopher or a scientist like many of the authors above. But the stark disagreement among these intelligent people with those very impressive Ph.Ds. is evidence that our pursuit of truth requires something more. It appears that advanced degrees alone do not lead to any greater clarity or certainty on the God question. In truth, some of the most sound and compelling reasons to believe or disbelieve are articulated by amateurs, arm-chair philosophers. For this reason I have gathered my thoughts and observations into book form. My hope is to provide the reader with new ways to think about atheist challenges to belief in God. My purpose is not to help the reader take himself into belief or to justify flawed conclusions as some critics might presume. Instead, I present analyses to help us make better sense of the arguments. Be advised that I will argue that with the improved understanding of competing claims we are more likely to conclude that God exists.

With this disclosure of purpose and conclusions (as if the book title alone wasn't enough), still I encourage the reader to consider the analysis which follows with an open mind—admittedly a posture far easier claimed than actually maintained. Naturally some points and arguments may be eye-opening, helpful, even compelling—others, not so much. One important question I do examine is why the majority of those who make a living studying and writing about the material world, scientists, do not believe in God. As we will see, we tend to misinterpret the ostensible linkage between intelligence and belief in God. My broader purpose is to encourage sincere reflection, even upon points one's thought settled.

A Note on Terminology: This is not a technical volume. I do my best to use terms with which most of us are familiar. Of course, my primary goal is to be understood. So I have no interest in splitting hairs or belaboring the subtle nuance of words. For example, I speak of materialism and naturalism along with atheism. At times I may use one term as a proxy for the others. I do not devote much space to defining or attempting to exploit technical nuances to make my points. Instead I use all three terms to refer to the philosophy and the belief that there is no god, no guiding creative intelligence, no life after death, no soul independent of body, no mind independent of brain, and so on—that the only reality is the physical or material. Similarly, I sometimes use the words theist and believer interchangeably; by which I mean those who believe in a monotheistic, personal, creator God who is ultimately in control.

CHAPTER 1 - THE NATURAL PATH TO ATHEISM

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“The unexamined life is not worth living.”

“All men by nature desire to know.”

—Socrates

MY URGE TO FIND AND UNDERSTAND GOD, particularly over the last ten years, has compelled me to read thousands of pages arguing for God's existence. Genuinely wanting to understand both sides of the argument, I also read many thousands of pages arguing for atheism. Based upon the success of books on the subject, I can safely assume that I am not alone in my interest. A simple review of the New York Times Bestseller List indicates that a considerable number of high volume titles are related to the God Question.

Many of the most recent books arguing against God's existence have taken up the cause of what has been called the “New Atheism.” We shouldn't be fooled by the “New” in the moniker. These atheists are not new in the sense that they have arrived on the scene with new arguments, previously unavailable or unknown, in support of atheism. Rather they are new in the simple sense of having come after those who preceded them. They are the latest to come around. Perhaps a more apt label would be the “Late Atheism.” Often calling something “new” has more to do with the person presenting it than it has to do with the thing itself. So when I write “New Atheism” I am referring to content and philosophy that has actually been around a long time but which is being advocated and encountered today by new populations. However, what is new about this iteration of atheism, meaning unlike that which preceded it, are its tone and objectives. The New Atheism is more militant and energetically determined to fundamentally reshape society.

Similarly many theist arguments have been around a very long time. Of course to say that an argument has been around a long time is not to say that it isn't valid or compelling. Obviously there is no fixed shelf-life. This is true of persistent arguments both pro and con God. Yet at times the first rebuttal made to a particular theistic argument is that it is nothing new; but so what? The first mistake we can make is to accept this criticism as a legitimate argument, as though it demonstrates something

My intent here is simply to warn the reader not to infer from the label “New Atheism” that ground-breaking discoveries have been made to advance the atheistic world view. Conversely, to say that a theist argument is nothing new is not to say that it is invalid. There have been no dispositive findings in the laboratories of science which disprove theism, despite the often explicit and high public claims to the contrary. This hasn't happened. There most certainly has been a wave of energetic and vocal atheism in recent years. As we would expect, this wave has met fierce opposition from believers. Unfortunately the result has been a lot of friction and heat, and much less of the light

needed for understanding.

Who am I to be writing a volume on something as weighty as God's existence? It's a good question and often my first when I encounter a new book on this subject. First, I do not claim to bring any new data or facts to the debate. As stated in the Introduction, I do believe that my journey from belief to agnosticism to atheism to belief has provided me some useful and helpful insights. I do believe that those who have transitioned from one side of the divide to the other may have some unique perspectives which can be instructive to others. Moreover, as stated above, I have discovered some of the most insightful questions and commentary, not from well-known authorities, but from unheralded and often anonymous internet message board amateurs. We should not expect to find comprehensive or sufficient arguments either way in cyberspace. But we can most certainly discover remarkably astute points not found in the popular books. In summary, I have come to see that useful arguments can come from nearly any source. I venture into the God question hoping to be one of those sources for my reader.

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A brief explanation of the type of atheism addressed in this book will be helpful. As a disclaimer I must acknowledge that there are countless methods of classification in circulation today. Multiple dimensional approaches to classification use terms like weak and strong, positive and negative, implicit and explicit, intellectual and practical, and more. When I use the terms atheist and atheism on these pages I have in mind a particular kind of non-believer which I believe encompasses the majority of self-described atheists. In general, the atheist to whom I refer here is well-informed and has concluded that the god of the Bible does not and/or cannot exist. Many may have come from homes rooted in belief. I am less concerned with degrees of activism than with the reasons for the atheist worldview.

My purpose here is not merely to attempt to present evidence of God's existence. Instead I intend to argue that a rational, science-believing person should have no trouble believing in God. In fact, rational thinking can lead one to believe in God. But many of the books on offer today from the advocates of this New Atheism would have us believe that we must choose one or the other—either rationality or belief. Put another way, atheists routinely argue that reason and rationality can lead one to the rejection of the concept of god. This notion is a fundamental element of their philosophy. But it is demonstrably untrue.

This question of God's existence is the most important question we face. Those who have long ago dismissed it may tend to disagree. But honest contemplation of what is at stake leads us to accept the primacy of the God question. With that in mind I feel obligated to avoid some natural tendencies. I will not attempt to win debate points by clever maneuvering or appeals to technicalities. One practical reason for this is that I am not equipped to do so. I am not a debater. Like many readers, I have observed talented debaters on both sides. They may be effective at winning a debate, but I don't believe the methods they have mastered truly advance genuine contemplation of the real question. The God Question deserves better. The God Question is far too important. It shapes the way we see the world, the way we see ourselves, and the way we choose to live.

As mentioned above, the wave of books in recent years on this very topic have served to popularize the most common arguments on both sides. I write these pages assuming that my reader has been exposed to some of the current arguments and rebuttals. So rather than regurgitate content,

will instead focus on what strikes me as less explored ground. Of course, I will need to summarize essential themes to frame what I have to say as I go. These summaries will be as concise as I am capable of making them. In other words, I attempt here to share new thoughts, at least thoughts that are for the most part new to me. I will not be entirely successful simply because I haven't read everything written on the subject. Nor can I claim to clearly remember everything I have read. With this warning I will do my best to present what I believe are useful thoughts on the question of God.



Atheists aim some of the sharpest points of their arguments against believers themselves. In that they are characteristically unapologetic and often heavy-handed. So believers are confronted by a two-pronged attack: 1. Critiques of the argument for God, and 2. Attacks on the rationality of their own thought process.

Before we consider some of the most common claims made in criticism of believers, I want to first confront perhaps the most common and persistent myth with which atheists like to frame the argument itself. There are of course many. I will address just the most prevalent here. We are told that believers are driven by emotion and wishful thinking. Belief in a higher power is conjured up only in the mind tortured by wishful thinking and childish imaginations—and it is only within this strained atmosphere that belief can be maintained over time. A related claim is that religious experiences are really only emotional or psychological “episodes.” As such a religious or spiritual experience is really just a cognitive breakdown. As such it is certainly not a source of reliable information; far from it. Conversely, we are told that in stark contrast to the believers, atheists are objective and even rational slaves to fact and the scientific method. Emmett F. Fields expressed this notion writing:

“Atheism is more than just the knowledge that gods do not exist, and that religion is either a mistake or a fraud. Atheism is an attitude, a frame of mind that looks at the world objectively, fearlessly, always trying to understand all things as a part of nature” (2).

For one thing, Fields flatly acknowledges that atheism strives to see the world exclusively through a naturalistic framework, something we examine throughout this book. Fields’ is but one of many voices assuring us that atheists are free from the emotional attachments and baggage which are so obvious in believers. In self-congratulatory terms they argue that a cold and brutal universe without a god is not a conclusion to which emotions or wishful thinking lead a person. In other words, the atheist conclusion is not one reached through emotionalism—how could such an unpleasant reality be something for which a person would wish? Thus we are told that those who conclude that there is no god are not confused or misled by emotion. In fact, that they conclude there is no god while emotion would compel them to desire the opposite is in itself evidence that atheists have overcome emotion and wishful thinking. Put another way, atheists are more objective and clear-headed than are theists.

The notion that religion serves as an opiate to the masses continues to hold sway. In a cold harsh world, people need something to cling to, something to distract them from the drudgery and hopelessness of life. Serving that purpose, faith and religion are also said to be a crutch for the weak. The point of this imagery is that human beings, particularly the dull and feeble, are drawn to the promise of imaginary friends and a better world to come. They need to believe that their lot will improve and that justice will be served. Clearly this is not the case in the material world so many people need to believe that somehow life continues after death. Thus critics argue that religious conviction is largely an emotional contrivance. Or as former governor Jesse Ventura put it

“Organized religion is a sham and a crutch for weak-minded people who need strength in numbers.” quote Ventura only because I think he is willing to express this sentiment more clearly and honestly than most.

What nearly all the critics of the alleged emotion of religious belief fail to acknowledge are the emotions and the attraction of the alternative philosophy, atheism. We need only turn our attention to the commentary of some outspoken atheists to better understand the emotional draw of atheism. The precise nature of that draw may be different, yet every bit as emotional as that manifested in believers. In fact many atheists are on record with confessions of ulterior and plainly non-intellectual motivations to believe that there is no god. For example, atheist philosopher Thomas Nagel confessed

“I want atheism to be true and am made uneasy by the fact that some of the most intelligent and well-informed people I know are religious believers. It isn’t just that I don’t believe in God and, naturally, hope that I’m right in my belief. It’s that I hope there is no God! I don’t want there to be a God; I don’t want the universe to be like that” (3).

Nagel is not the only atheist to expressly hope there is no god. A recent advertising campaign in Great Britain reflected similar desires. An atheist organization promoted their cause with billboard and bus signs which read, *“There Probably is no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life.”* Independent of the case for or against God, this appeal reflects the very human desire to avoid worry and accountability when possible. Many who profess disbelief do not want there to be a god. For one thing there seems to be far too much downside to the proposition. This leads to what is called motivated reasoning which cognitive scientists describe as emotion-based decision-making. Motivated reasoning causes us to dismiss or underestimate things we do not like.

In summary, as with any debate with much at stake, both sides are equally prone to losing objectivity and to drawing conclusions based upon more than just reason alone. There are powerful motivations to be found both to believe and to disbelieve. Desire and reason, heart and mind, often overlap and are confused in both camps. So I suggest that to argue about failed objectivity on either side simply does not help anyone. Moreover, at base even a perfect understanding of the role of emotions in belief still tells us nothing of God’s existence. This is yet another distraction from the core question. Consequently, I lay aside claims and counter-claims of emotional bias as a net neutral. It does not confer advantage to either proposition. I make a more detailed case for this conclusion later in the book.

Finally, I want to write a few words on epistemology, or how we get and hold knowledge. I do not believe in an exclusive or singular method of gaining knowledge. Instead I believe that the scientific method, for example, is but one of a number of legitimate means by which we acquire knowledge. That said, an essential theme of this and other theistic books is that a rational individual can reason his way to a belief in God. Based upon my personal experience I have concluded the same.

As we would expect the claim above stands in stark contrast to the fundamental theme of New Atheism. This is a key point of disagreement between the two sides—the reasonability and rationality of belief in God. One version of the materialist atheist view was best articulated by one of atheism’s most venerated spokesmen, the late philosopher Bertrand Russell. In 1961 Russell wrote:

“Whatever knowledge is attainable, must be attained by scientific methods; and what science cannot discover, mankind cannot know” (4).

One cannot be more materialist than that—at least on the surface. To begin with, it is striking that

Russell unequivocally grants exclusive authority to scientists. On his theory scientists are the gatekeepers of the flow of knowledge, the definitive arbiters of truth. By definition, nothing can count as knowledge unless it passes through their hands. This philosophy is often called scientism, placing inordinate faith in science. Not only is the material world all that exists, there is but one means by which we are able to make sense of it. This is a startling claim which, as we will see, is simply untenable. Moreover, it is a declaration which fails to meet the very standard it pronounces. Put simply, Russell's is unequivocally a knowledge claim—a claim of fact. Yet the claim itself obviously cannot be verified through science, the only possible source of truth, we are told. Thus to accept and employ Russell's standard compels us to reject it outright. We rightly wonder, did Russell run this knowledge claim by scientists? What tests did they conduct to verify the claim?

Paradoxically implicit in Russell's statement is the ultimate value of nonscientific means of inquiry. That is, he clearly drew conclusions from his observations outside of the laboratory—after all; Russell himself was not a scientist. Yet somehow, even without the benefit of the scientific method which he claims is universally authoritative, he found a way to conclude certain facts about the universe. Setting aside for a moment the content of his proclamation, we can consider his methodology. We can clearly see that Russell placed definitive value in his own powers of logic and reason. To pronounce a declaration as absolute as his, he must have been supremely confident in his own intellect. Thus his overriding message, even if inadvertent and fundamentally contradictory, is that philosophy must necessarily shape our decisions about which tools of inquiry to employ in which circumstances. The scientific method alone is utterly insufficient. Thus despite the glaring contradiction, we can say that we agree with the broader gist of Russell's message—we must draw conclusions using logic and reason. We will continue to see that there is often far more to be learned from the proclamations of noted atheists than is captured directly in their chosen expressions. We can learn a great deal from their methodologies and what goes unsaid.

CHAPTER SUMMARY – THINGS TO CONSIDER

Merely the passage of time does not invalidate an argument. Many arguments are old precisely because they are compelling. It is a mistake to assume that emotions and irrationality lead to belief in God. Lack of rationality can lead a person to disbelief just as readily as belief. Science is but one means of acquiring knowledge. To claim otherwise is fundamentally contradictory. Logic and philosophy are necessary to make sense of what the scientific method yields.

CHAPTER 2 - FRAMING THE ARGUMENT

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“Not everything that counts can be counted. Not everything that can be counted counts.”

—Albert Einstein

“All knowledge and understanding of the Universe was no more than playing with stones and shells on the seashore of the vast imponderable ocean of truth.”

—Isaac Newton

UNFORTUNATELY, THE MOST PROMINENT atheists have become professional debaters. Many are experts in the craft. In fact, debating God’s existence has become a sport—boasting which amounts to a roster of all-stars. So while their logic and analysis may have originated in all sincerity and through the greatest possible objectivity, they are now delivered with an eye toward winning an increasingly public debate. As a result, much of their content has been transformed and has lost the intellectual honesty which gave them voice. My purpose here is to briefly examine and correct some of the more confusing if not disingenuous formulations of atheist arguments with which most of us are familiar.

A regrettably effective approach for some atheists is to commandeer central theist themes and terms and to transform them with new, more helpful definitions—that is, more helpful to the atheist narrative. Perhaps the most vivid example is provided by atheist professor and author, Peter Boghossian, Ed.D. His signature work, *A Manual for Creating Atheists*, takes this tactic to a whole new level. Boghossian based his book, related lectures, and articles on his unapologetic redefinition of the paramount term to all believers; *faith*. He appears to have taken a cue from Mark Twain who famously quipped that, *“Faith is to believe what you know ain’t so.”*

We can give Mr. Twain a pass because with the same pen he described himself as a humorist and satirist. That is, he admitted to taking cheap shots and making simplistic assertions in humor—tactics far less helpful in serious discourse. Meanwhile, Boghossian is a professor of philosophy with a substantial following who takes him quite seriously. He presents himself as a serious scholar and ambassador of reason. But most important, Boghossian undertakes a solemn campaign to rid the world of all faith and religion. He unabashedly recruits foot soldiers, whom he calls “street epistemologists,” to achieve that objective. The gravity of Boghossian’s mission warrants careful scrutiny of his methods. From Chapter 1:

“The goal of this book is to create a generation of Street Epistemologists; people equipped with an array of dialectical and clinical tools who go into the streets, the prisons, the bars, the churches, the schools, and the community — into any and every place the faithful reside — and help them abandon their faith and embrace reason”

“To help people overcome their faith and to create a better world — a world that uses intelligence, reason,

rationality, thoughtfulness, ingenuity, sincerity, science, and kindness to build the future; not a world based on faith, delusion, pretending, religion, fear, pseudoscience, superstition or a certainty achieved by keeping people in a stupor that makes them pawns of unseen forces because they're terrified" (5).

According to Boghossian there is intelligence, rationality, sincerity, ingenuity, kindness, and science on the one hand; then on the other hand there is faith. This stark dichotomy will come as a surprise to those who profess faith and simultaneously strive for these other virtues. His mission is driven by a full-throated indictment of faith and religion and everything related to them. It is clear that the stakes could not be higher. He aims to transform society by first ridding it of faith in God. Thus the definition and real meaning of faith is paramount.

Summarily discarding the admittedly numerous and sometimes contradictory definitions used by believers, Boghossian transmutes the word faith into “*pretending to know something you really don't know*” (5). He unabashedly acknowledges that his is a redefinition of the term, one obviously not accepted by believers. The absence of nuance and flexibility in his custom formulation will come as a surprise to most believers, perhaps by design. More important, by fundamentally reframing the entire argument and hijacking the word faith, Boghossian has created for himself a no-lose debate. After all, if you are entitled to redefine your opponent and his primary argument to your advantage apparently in any way you choose, the debate is all but over. There is no need to venture beyond the very first salvo. Your opponents pretend to know something they really don't know. It follows then that they are flatly wrong so nothing more to come out of their mouths or from their pens is worth consideration. Case closed.

Not so fast. Just imagine something comparable from the theist side of the debate. For example, if we could get away with it we might redefine the word atheist to “one who refuses to consider evidence he doesn't like” or “one who, no matter the merits, refuses to consider arguments or evidence for the supernatural.” It would follow naturally that atheists were more than likely wrong because they willfully lack adequate information to form reasonable beliefs. With this new and more helpful definition of my opponent's position, we would have no need to venture any further into the debate. Again, there is no point to any further discussion. After all, the atheist position is based upon the rejection of relevant data. Case closed. This is precisely the reason Boghossian hijacks the meaning of faith. Unfortunately, it amounts to calling his opponent a fool. Consequently, there is no reason to continue the dialogue.

The sincere seeker needs to beware of the tactics employed in *A Guide to Creating Atheists*. This book is a destructive misfire in the dialogue among atheists, agnostics, and theists, serving none in any meaningful way. In fact, it only creates more distrust, confusion, and alienation. We could expect nothing less from a cause driven by an a priori indictment of believers, their soundness of mind, and their sanity. A better approach would be accepting the definition of a word from those who actually use it directly, those who define themselves with it. That is, if we want to know what believers mean by the word “faith,” we should inquire of believers. Conversely, atheists sometimes offer distinctions on a range of classes of atheism—weak, strong, and classes in between. There will be more on this in subsequent chapters. For now, I accept their definitions because they are intended to describe the way atheists think, not the way those who disagree with atheists think of them. In short, we should get the definition from the source. A dialogue in which each side presumes to force definitions upon the opposition is not a dialogue worth having. It's no different that presuming to read the opponent's mind. Boghossian's novel definition of faith is an entirely self-serving contrivance.

The next cynical but occasionally effective tactic is revealed with clarity in much of the methodology of anti-Christian crusader Richard Carrier, Ph.D. This devious tactic is nowhere captured more clearly than in the conclusion of his book, *Why I am Not a Christian*. This is just one of his series of books targeting belief in God. Carrier systematically uses gratuitously bold, conclusively language to dismiss arguments from the opposition:

“As I have clearly shown, Christianity entails that God, like any other person, would say and do at least some things we would all observe. And we’d all agree on what they were. Any Christian God would make sure of that. Since we haven’t seen such things, none at all, the Christian theory of the world is falsified by the evidence, conclusively. Christianity also entails that God would have made the universe very differently than we observe it to be. It’s instead exactly as we would expect it to appear if there is no god at all. So again Christianity is falsified by the evidence, conclusively. A failed prediction means a failed theory, especially when these failures apply to the very nature and design of the universe itself. There is also insufficient evidence for any of the essential propositions of Christianity. The evidence offered doesn’t even come remotely close to what common sense requires and certainly nowhere near what you would accept to convince you to adopt any other religion. So the Christian hypothesis flatly contradicts a ton of evidence, makes numerous failed predictions, is not the best explanation of the universe we find ourselves in, and fails to find anywhere near sufficient evidence in its own support. That’s more than enough reason to reach my conclusion – Christianity is simply false” (6).

Naturally, we can assume that his arguments and conclusions make perfect sense to him. So his uses of words like *clearly* and *conclusively* seem warranted to him. But here is another source of disconnect. We can often mistake the author’s emphatic proclamations, particularly when repeated for sound argumentation. In short, just because the critic of theism pounds the table with ultra-sharp conclusions does not mean that they are borne out by the evidence or arguments on display. In fact, experience teaches us that often the use of such absolute language actually betrays weaknesses in the claimant’s argument. In this way, Carrier’s work is similar to that of Boghossian described above—misuse of language.

Had we not read the pages which preceded this summation of his arguments, we would reasonably conclude that Carrier had set the final nails in the coffin of the God of Christianity. Once again, with all the pressing details so categorically decided we all might as well move on and find something else more interesting to debate. But fortunately, having considered the book in full, we still have a few things to say about his methodology and conclusions. I present most of my criticism in later chapters but for now the important point is that when Carrier cites the Christian theory or Christian theories he is actually talking about his own unique formulation of them. His Christian theory is his very own constituted in large part of the projection of his patently human inclinations, concerns, and constraints onto his straw-man god—his straw-god. For example, Carrier is quite naturally determined to accomplish all there is to accomplish in his anticipated 85 or so years of human existence. So naturally his god figure is likewise determined—he too is driven to accomplish his designs in a similarly short order. His god’s clock is ticking just as ominously as is his own. Moreover, given Carrier’s understanding of the fleeting nature of mortality, he cannot tolerate the least degree of inequity or pain by any one for any reason. So of course his god is similarly intolerant of the same temporal inequities.

The list of human objectives, concerns, and preferences to which Carrier appeals go on and on and all are presumed to be equally if not more binding upon or paramount to Carrier’s straw-god. F

seems painfully unaware of any risk of misattribution which could invalidate his arguments. So the end result is an unmistakably man-made god ready for public demolition.

With fatally flawed expectations of his straw-god in place, Carrier then devotes the bulk of his book to demonstrating how his straw-god fails to meet them. To establish the credibility of his ostensibly scientific approach to the question, Carrier carefully identifies particular predictions which a real god would fulfill. To no one's surprise the latter fails to fulfill them. In dramatic fashion Carrier concludes that his failed hypotheses demonstrate that the Christian god does not exist. But in reality all he has demonstrated, *conclusively*, is that the imaginary god who has the very same limits of understanding and perspective, and who has the same resulting priorities, does not and in fact cannot exist. Put another way, there is no god who thinks and feels about the world like Dr. Carrier. The logical construction of his argument is sound in a broad sense. But if he intends to rule out the Christian God, which he most certainly does intend to do, he omits an essential premise upon which his conclusion necessarily would rest.

With respect to this god created in Carrier's image, I cannot dispute his conclusions. In fact, I agree with him. I am equally certain that no god exists who shares my level of intellect, my perspective, and my limitations as well. All of this could have been stipulated by believers and non-believers from the get-go. If we want to continue to contemplate the theist God we can confidently dismiss all notions of gods who think and behave like Carrier or me, or any other human being. Thus we remain interested in the possibility of a real God, not those contrived in mankind's image. There is much more to consider.

Finally, when Carrier writes that he has "clearly shown" something, the reality is that he has merely stated that thing before. He repeats a number of assertions against the Christian God and later refers back to those assertions as "clear demonstrations." Moreover, when he writes that "The Christian Hypothesis" has made failed predictions, he would be more accurate to state that *his predictions of his Christian hypothesis and of a Carrier-like god fail*. These corrected statements would be true.

History is replete with war and violence, and much of what we call evil. Beyond the evil perpetrated by human beings is the pain and suffering caused by nature and natural forces. In chapter I examine the age-old Problem of Evil—that is, how can God exist when we see so much evil around us today and so much man-made evil throughout history? There are reasonable answers to the important questions which are worth understanding. But first and even more damning, many atheists attribute the vast bulk of man-made evil to the frenzy of religion. Admittedly they have a bounty of attractive targets, and not just the self-righteous believer who in secret cheats on his taxes—or on his wife. They cite the sweep of the Crusades, the Inquisition, the European Holy Wars, and most recently the Islamic Jihad as examples of the fruit, to borrow a concept from Christianity, of religion in practice. Unsurprisingly, many among the New Atheist ranks claim to have been energized and morally compelled into action by the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

The late Christopher Hitchens penned a blockbuster book; *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, which is an all-out assault on organized religion and an unapologetic call for its relegation to the fringes of enlightened life. Of course, there was no way such an assault would go unanswered by offended apologists and agnostic friends of Christianity alike. Hitchens' book

triggered a wave of books and articles published to rebut his indictment of religion and faith.

The truth is that religion along with every other human enterprise has militated adherents' unspeakable actions. There is no way around this fact. Then during the 20th century new ideologies displaced religious belief as the primary form of the call to organize and tragically the call to commit atrocities. Various forms of collectivism, fascism, and other isms took the reins and delivered the most devastating fruit to date. We see that religious belief is one of many human urges through which cynical and evil tyrants can marshal forces and motivate the individual to commit acts he would otherwise never contemplate. At a minimum the theist must acknowledge that religious devotion can be commandeered much like so many other commitments to achieve evil ends. Importantly, however, we must remain vigilant not to confuse religion's susceptibility to manipulation with indicators of its veracity. Still it does not follow that these means of manipulation should be altogether eliminated—an alert is warranted, certainly. Similarly, a car is an instrument which was designed to be used for good but which can easily be used for bad. We work to ensure the good, and to prevent and mitigate the bad by proscribing speed limits, seat belts, driver proficiency, and the like. In the end it all depends on the intentions of the one who makes use of it. A car can get you from one point to another or it can snuff out life. Similarly, religion can draw the heart closer to its Creator or it can blind its adherents and drive them to do evil.

In contrast to the reproach heaped upon it by the New Atheists and in response to it, author Dines D'Souza has much to say about the net effect of religion in general and Christianity in particular on society. He is but one of many authors so inclined. His book *What's so Great About Christianity* rebuts many of the most prevalent criticisms of religion and explores how Christianity as a movement and Christian tenets together have shaped nearly all aspects of modern life, from science, government, to philanthropy, and more (7). He makes a powerful case that, far from hampering progress as claimed by critics, Christianity actually has been the principal force behind many of the features of modern life we value the most. Admittedly D'Souza's book is not one of historic scholarship. As an author determined to defend institutions and religions from false claims, he is certainly not alone.

In *How the Catholic Church Built Western Civilization*, author Thomas E. Woods chronicles and documents the countless contributions the church and the broader faith have made over the years (8). Woods holds a Ph.D. from Columbia University and has produced a number of similar works written to defend the faith and its historical role in shaping the modern world. Unlike D'Souza, Woods is one of many credentialed historians motivated to set the record straight. There are of course many other scholars and authors who help provide more context and perhaps greater balance to an increasingly hostile debate about faith in history. In short, there is a great deal of scholarship which debunks atheistic allegations against organized religion and in fact recounts extensive benefits to society brought about by Christianity.

Theists correctly point out that the very notions of individual value and rights against which critics impugn Christianity in fact emerged as inviolable only within tenets of the faith itself. Put less charitably, the strident critics of Christianity would do well to first thank the institution for the basic concepts they hold dear—then feel free to indict adherents for their failures to abide by them.

Next let's consider the influence of belief on altruism. While not perfect indicators, perhaps the two most meaningful measures are time and money. That is, do believers devote more or less time and money to charitable causes? If as the critics insist, nothing truly good comes from faith and religious belief, we should not observe any meaningful differences between believers and non-believers in the key metrics of what society deems moral or simply desirable behavior.

Yet we see that the common assumption that believers give away more of their income than do non-believers is absolutely correct — in a very big way. The following is from Arthur C. Brooks' article in *Policy Review*:

“The differences in charity between secular and religious people are dramatic. Religious people are 25 percentage points more likely than secularists to donate money (91 percent to 66 percent) and 23 points more likely to volunteer time (67 percent to 44 percent). And, consistent with the findings of other writers, these data show that practicing a religion is more important than the actual religion itself in predicting charitable behavior. For example, among those who attend worship services regularly, 92 percent of Protestants give charitably, compared with 91 percent of Catholics, 91 percent of Jews, and 89 percent from other religions” (9).

Again, this is not particularly surprising. Yes, believers are more likely to give and to sacrifice for others. In fact, they give a lot more than non-believers:

“The typical no-faith American donated just \$200 in 2006, which is more than seven times less than the amount contributed by the prototypical active-faith adult (\$1500). Even when church-based giving is subtracted from the equation, active-faith adults donated twice as many dollars last year as did atheists and agnostics. In fact, while just 7% of active-faith adults failed to contribute any personal funds in 2006, that compares with 22% among the no-faith adults” (10).

These studies along with others find that the single most significant predictor of an individual's likelihood to give is religious belief. Even when donations to church groups and organizations are excluded from the calculations, believers give more than non-believers. The data make abundantly clear that belief in God and the extra-natural has a powerful effect on how one treats the rest of humanity. Put succinctly, belief in God promotes charitable giving more than any other factor. Nothing else comes even close.

□□□

Simplistic arguments circulate on both sides and not just among amateurs. Both sides have produced high-profile debaters who fail to resist the appeal of flat out vacuous and emotionally charged points. Sadly, in formal debates some are presented for the very purpose of invoking a knee-jerk reaction or to encourage applause. Of course, these are typically only a small part of the debate. But they tend to significantly shape the broader discourse. One purpose of this book is to separate emotional appeals from legitimate arguments.

It is striking to me that most atheists in debates are unable to acknowledge the merit of a single theist argument. My experience is that theists, for all their other faults, seem more willing to concede a point or two. Instead atheist debaters would have you believe that no point ever made by a theist has any validity whatsoever. To them, it is often “absolutely” clear or “obvious.” Their points are often “unassailable.” It is “an open and shut case.”

Atheist Peter Boghossian echoes a common assertion among militant atheists that every argument for God's existence has been soundly refuted. He states flatly in his atheist tome, *A Manual for Creating Atheists*, that all theistic arguments have “absolutely failed” (5):

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