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***Preface by Christopher Aquette, December 2009:** This essay does not express my personal views on theism. It was written a year ago as an assignment for an English course at Malmö University. The task was to write a short argumentative essay, and I decided it would be fun to argue against theism as I had just finished reading Christopher Hitchens's atheist manifesto *God Is Not Great*, which was high on the bestseller lists at the time.*

### The Beginning and End of Theism

Theism is a seemingly harmless idea with deathly implication. I think it is a fair assumption that no few ideas have caused humankind more harm and humiliation than the one about an omniscient, omnipotent, and anthropomorphic god mastering our world. However, theistic ideas should be rejected not only because they are so easily abused by people who wish to legitimize war, genocide, and prejudgment; they should be rejected because theism in itself is unsound, unethical, and an insult to humankind. In this essay, I will argue that there are no rational reasons for believing in God, and that theism thus should be refuted. The thought that a god rules our world opposes humanism, which holds that people alone have made us what we are today. We made this world what it is with our bare hands, learning pertinaciously from past mistakes over many generations.

What is the origin of theism? There are a few possible answers to that question, and it depends largely on whom you ask. Interestingly, most Western sceptics and theists would agree on the development from polytheism to monotheism, although they may have different ideas to why people believe in gods to begin with. The most established of secular explanations to human religiosity is ascribed to the Scottish philosopher David Hume. In his book *The Natural History of Religion* (Wollheim 31-98), first published in 1761, Hume explains how the belief in specialized gods made perfect sense to primitive people vulnerable to natural disasters, onslaughts, epidemics, floods, failed harvests, and so forth. The search for reason to seemingly inexplicable things gave rise to idolatry, and a god was invented to go with every course of event. Historic documents confirm the many specialized gods worshipped in pagan times. At one point in ancient Greece, even an everyday occurrence as

trivial as sneezing had its link to deity (Aristotle 1516, *Problems* 33:7). Polytheism offered a practical belief system: when a particular misfortune hit the village, the villagers know what god to propitiate. In some cases, a natural disaster could spark the most inhumane rituals. An example is the Aztec god Huitzilopochtli, who demanded thousands of litres of human blood after an earthquake (Hitchens 143).

No one worships Huitzilopochtli any longer. He and thousands of other pagan gods have vanished from our culture as more and more people move on to monotheism. Hume sees this as a natural development of religious ideas: an ever more complex hierarchy among specialized gods leads to one supreme being, a god among gods that will eventually become the sole deity.

The American philosopher Daniel Dennett advocates a Darwinian explanation to religious development. He suggests that women through the ages have “preferred males who demonstrated a sensitivity to music and ceremony, which could then have snowballed into a proclivity for elaborate rapture” (87-89). In other words, sexual selection caused the jump from polytheism to monotheism as human females had developed a preference for men with certain qualities.

A Darwinian take on religious evolution may become less speculative in time, but for now, Hume’s theory seems easier to comprehend, not least because monotheistic mythology confirms it to some extent. The religious scriptures of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all say that monotheism began with Abraham. In the Koran, we learn that he denounced his father after a disagreement about polytheism and the worship of idols (The Qur’an 6: 74-79, 21: 51-75, 26: 69-89). This story fits well with Hume’s *Natural History*: the many gods of early theism is at some point replaced by the sole god of a more developed theism.

Abraham’s monotheism has its scriptural origin in the Torah, which, according to Jewish tradition, God—now capitalized because it is a named entity—dictated to Moses at Mount Sinai (Robinson 306). To Christians, the Torah is better known as the Books of Moses, which make up the first five books of the Old Testament. The Koran not only confirms that Moses took dictation from God (21: 48), it says the Prophet Muhammad did the same (26: 192-195). Moses is the first to write down God’s demand for exclusivity. The first of the Ten Commandments reads, “Thou shalt have no other gods before me” (The Bible, Exodus 20: 3), which suggests there are other gods, a fact later theism will deny. This, in my opinion, gives strength to Hume’s argument that an ever more complex hierarchy among competing gods eventually brings about a monotheistic belief system.

Before I continue, it might be important to stress that I consider religion a mere product

of human culture and vivid imagination. I do not suggest that a struggle for power among supernatural beings actually has ever occurred outside the religious narration itself, but to understand the scientific and philosophical claims made by theism, I think it is important to know the mythological background. After all, religious fiction is taken literally by many people, with dire consequences not only for the believers, but also for humanity at large. It is because of these myths that naïve teenage boys in Gaza wrap their genitals in toilet paper and blow themselves up in crowded Israeli shopping centres—they want to be intact when they enter Paradise and meet the virgins God has promised martyrs who kill infidels (Stern 55). Had it not been for theism, these boys would not have sacrificed their lives for fictional promises.

For many centuries, philosophers of religion have sought to prove God's existence. None of them has succeeded, but their arguments are still discussed and scrutinized at seminars at every university with a philosophy department. I consider this the next step in the evolution of religious beliefs. If the jump from polytheism to monotheism was the first, the jump to atheism will be the final one.

The limited length of this essay does not allow me to discuss all known arguments in detail, so I will only comment on three of the most common ones.

The ontological argument for the existence of God proceeds entirely from theoretical deduction. It was first formulated by Anselm of Canterbury in the eleventh century. In his *Proslogion*, he states that God must be thought to exist merely because our mind tells us that there must be something that is the greatest (87-88). The reasoning in Anselm's own words is rather confusing, but Beverly and Brian Clack offers a simplified table version in their book *The Philosophy of Religion* (15):

1. God is that than which nothing greater can be thought.
2. God exists, at least in the understanding, or in the mind.
3. But what exists in the mind is not as great as that which exists both in mind and in reality.
4. So, if God exists only in the mind, he is *not* that than which nothing greater can be thought.
5. Thus, *as* that than which nothing greater can be thought, God must exist in reality as well as in the mind.
6. Therefore, God exists.

Anselm's argument was rightfully rejected by most theologians and philosophers until René Descartes revisited the ontological argument in six centuries later. In his *Principles of Philosophy*, Descartes writes, "The existence of God is implied by the fact that necessary existence is included in our concept of God" (116).

The German philosopher Immanuel Kant criticized the ontological argument by suggesting that although "God is non-existing" might be self-contradictory, "There is no God" is not (Mackie 44; Clack 16).

I would go further still and suggest that not only is it silly to assume a particular thing exist merely because it is thought to exist, it is absurd to prove the existence of something unknown by adding qualities to it. Instead of greatness, Anselm and Descartes could have picked a less flattering and godlike quality as proof. Who would have bought that idea that God must exist in the world solely because the concept of an extraordinarily obnoxious being is plausible?

What is even more interesting is that the God of the ontological argument resembles the gods of early polytheism. They, too, had qualities that seemed self-evident; the idea of a divine power specialized in sneezing would have seemed axiomatic to a person suffering from allergy.

The other two arguments I wish to discuss both claims that natural laws cannot explain the world by themselves. Only by adding a supernatural force does our world make sense. Both arguments appear in Thomas Aquinas's list of "five ways of proving there is a God" (100-102).

Firstly, we have the cosmological argument, which holds that every motion must have a cause and that nothing creates itself. Secondly, we have the teleological argument, which says the order of nature requires an intelligent designer. In my opinion, the two lines of arguing bears many similarities and I will therefore discuss them simultaneously.

The fundamental premise is that nature cannot organize itself, that the creation of the universe cannot be coincidental and that the biological world must follow a plan. I understand why Aquinas thoughts went along these lines, but in a post-Darwin era, it seems strange that theists cling to this idea. We now know that species evolve not by divine plan, but through sexual selection and adaptation to new environments.

British evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkin gives an example of foreseeable coincidence in his book *The Selfish Gene*, "If you filled in pools coupons every week for a hundred million years you would very likely win several jackpots" (15). In other words, repetition over a very long time would occasionally give in the most unlikely outcome.

Thinking about it a bit harder, and I think we find that it is quite difficult to imagine any scenario where even the oddest projects would not eventually succeed by apparent chance or luck. And given that the unknown universe has an eternity of time to play trial and error, the coincidental big bang seems determined.

Adding to the devastating criticism is American physicist Victor J. Stenger, who not only explain the origin of the universe by lucky, yet foreseeable coincident, but show us that nothingness is unstable and thus creates matter by itself following Einstein's special theory of relativity (116, 133). In other words, "The transition of nothing-to-something is a natural one, not requiring any agent" (133)—God is obsolete. Even if such a supreme being existed, the universe, life on Earth, and humankind can do without it.

I began this essay by stating that theism has caused humankind much harm and humiliation, and that the theory about a God governing our world is both unsound and unethical. Although there are many arguments for and against the existence of God not mentioned in this short essay, I hope I have been able to show that some of the most common arguments have severe flaws. A reader might wonder why I consider theism unethical. The simple answer is that worshipping gods and speculating about the nature of supernatural beings take time and resources that could be used to improve human conditions. Instead of pleasing a non-existing God, we could better the real world and ourselves. This is what humanism is about, and that is why humanism is the opposite of theism. That is why I look forward to the completion of the next step in religious evolution.

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