

Why I Do Not Take the “New Atheism” Seriously: “Flying Spaghetti Monsters,” Orbiting Tea Pots, and Invisible Pink Unicorns



One of the reasons that I do not take the “New Atheism” seriously is that they do not know what they are talking about when they say that they do not believe that there is such “a being” as God. In any intelligent disagreement it is important that both sides understand each other’s position well enough that they can at least agree on what the disagreement is about. Suppose that I were having a disagreement with a contemporary scientist in which I claimed that I did not believe in the scientific discipline of “Physics,” and that I defended my position by arguing that there is no good evidence for the existence of “phlogiston,” or that I found the ancient Greek philosopher Thales’ claim that all reality is composed of the substance of water to be empirically falsifiable, or that I disagreed with Aristotle in his book entitled *Physics* that everything in the sublunar sphere is composed of the four elements of earth, air, fire and water, and that everything in the heavens is made of a fifth element called “aether.” If the scientist were very patient, he might well explain that phlogiston is a long discredited scientific theory and that the modern scientific

discipline of physics is not at all the same thing as what ancient Greek philosophers meant by "physics." If, however, I continued to make objections against "phlogiston" or claims about physical reality being composed of the elements of "earth" "air," "fire," and "water," the scientist at some point would likely throw up his hands in exasperation because I clearly did not know what I was talking about when I used the word "Physics."

The New Atheists (and their followers) continue to use arguments that show that they simply do not know what they are talking about when they use the word "God." This can be shown by the repeated use of a number of tropes that compare belief in the existence of God to belief in things like "The Flying Spaghetti Monster," Bertrand Russell's "orbiting tea pot," "Invisible Pink Unicorns," or "imaginary friends." A variation on the same trope would be Richard Dawkins' argument in his book *The God Delusion* against the claim that the possibility of life coming into existence on earth would be equivalent to claiming that a hurricane sweeping through a scrap yard could assemble a Boeing 747 aircraft. Dawkins responded that any being that could create a 747 would have to be "more complicated" than a 747. So if an entity existed that could create the universe, this entity would have to be even more complicated than the universe, and so its existence would be even more statistically improbable than the existence of the universe itself.

There have been a number of responses to this frequently used New Atheist argument. It has been argued that the *real* question is whether the universe has an intelligent designer, and that this notion is not implausible in the same sense as an orbiting tea pot or a "Flying Spaghetti Monster."¹ It has been pointed out that the argument depends on comparing the existence of God to something inherently implausible. However, if Russell were to ask about the plausibility of an orbiting

asteroid with two craters rather than an orbiting teapot, or, if, rather than a “Flying Spaghetti Monster,” we compared the existence of God to the possibility of a rare but not yet discovered bird living in the Amazon, the argument loses its force. The strength of the argument lies in the claim that the existence of God is implausible in the same sense as the existence of “Flying Spaghetti Monsters” or orbiting tea pots is implausible. But if this is the case, the real argument against the existence of God lies on other grounds – its inherent implausibility – and that is an argument that needs to be made, not merely asserted.² Finally, William Lane Craig has made the argument that “one does not need an explanation for an explanation.” If one argues plausibly that the existence of the universe demands a cause, it does not follow that one necessarily has to provide an explanation for the explanation of the universe. Indeed, such a demand would necessarily lead to an infinite number of explanations for any plausible inference about any thing whatsoever.³

While the above responses do indeed point to weaknesses in arguments that compare the existence of God to “Flying Spaghetti Monsters” or orbiting tea pots, they do not specifically address what I think is the most important problem with the New Atheists, and that is that the very use of such arguments shows that the New Atheists do not know what they are talking about when they use the word “God.” What all of these New Atheist memes – invisible pink unicorns, “Flying Spaghetti Monsters,” orbiting tea pots – have in common is that they compare God to finite contingent physical objects existing within the known physical universe. God is understood to be one additional entity among others in the same way that an orbiting teapot would be one teapot among other non-orbiting teapots or a “Flying Spaghetti Monster” would be composed of “spaghetti,” a physical substance of which every grocery store has numerous items. (This is also evident in the New Atheist claim “I just believe in one less god than you

do,” or the claim, “I don’t believe in the Christian god, but I don’t believe in Zeus or Thor either.”)

In the same way that an argument about Physics as a scientific discipline would have to address accurate accounts of the scientific discipline and not beliefs in phlogiston or physical reality being made of earth, fire, air, and water, New Atheist rejections of the Christian God at least should clearly show an understanding of what it is that Christians mean when they affirm that God exists. And no competent Christian theologian or philosopher has ever claimed that God is one finite contingent entity among others – another item existing within the physical universe. When the New Atheists say that they do not believe in God, comparisons to “Flying Spaghetti Monsters” and “orbiting tea pots” make clear that they do not know what they are talking about.

If one is going to deny the existence of God, then what needs to be denied is the God of historical Christian faith, and the place to turn for an account of this Christian God would be classic Christian theologians such as Irenaeus, Athanasius, Augustine, John of Damascus or Thomas Aquinas, or even more contemporary theologians such as Karl Barth or Thomas F. Torrance (among Protestants), or (among Catholics) Hans Urs von Balthasar or Matthew Levering or numerous philosophical theologians such as David Burrell (my dissertation director) or Herbert McCabe, or Orthodox thinkers such as David Bentley Hart.

Among the most basic of Christian affirmations about God would be the following:⁴

(1) Since God is the Creator of everything else that exists, God cannot possibly be another “entity” within the universe. As Creator, God stands outside creation in a manner similar to the way in which an author stands outside a text. God cannot therefore be compared to any item existing *within* the universe, such as an orbiting tea pot.

(2) God and creatures exist in fundamentally different ways. God, by definition, is self-existent, and God's existence is both necessary and self-identical. God simply is, and he is identical with his own reality. In contrast, the existence of all creatures is radically contingent. Not only might they exist differently than the manner in which they do, but they might not exist at all. Their existence is radically dependent on the divine creative act in which God brings creatures into existence. (Aquinas's way of putting this is to say that, in God, essence [what God is] and existence [that God is] are identical, while in creatures they are distinct.) Because God exists necessarily, his existence cannot be compared to anything contingent by definition, such as an orbiting tea pot or a Flying Spaghetti Monster.

(3) Another way to make this point is to adopt the distinction made by some modern philosophers and theologians between "beings" and "Being." The 20th century German philosopher Martin Heidegger distinguished between *Seiende* (beings) and *Sein* (Being); in Latin, Aquinas tended to distinguish between *ens* (a "being") and the infinitive *esse* (to exist). God is not a "being" (*ens*), but *purus actus esse subsistens*, the "Pure Act of Self-Subsisting Existence ("To Be")." Unlike "Flying Spaghetti Monsters" or orbiting tea pots, God is not "a being" among others, but Necessary Self-Subsisting Existence.

(4) Any physical being must necessarily be contingent in its existence, since it depends on other entities to bring it into and maintain it in existence. An orbiting tea pot would have to be made by someone. A "Flying Spaghetti Monster" would be composed of of the parts of which it is made up (pasta and tomato sauce presumably), and so would not exist eternally or necessarily. Since God exists necessarily and eternally, God cannot be made up of physical parts, and so cannot be a body of any kind. Again, the analogy between God and *any physical entities* such as "Flying Spaghetti Monsters" or "orbiting tea pots" breaks down.

(5) All creatures (since they are created) are necessarily limited in some manner. They occupy a specific physical locality in space; they come to exist and cease to exist. To the contrary, God has no temporal beginning or end, and is not confined to any physical space, since space is the "place" in which created physical entities exist. (Traditional Christian theologians would go so far as to say that God is not temporal at all, but "eternal," since time comes into existence with created changing realities.) Another fundamental distinction between creatures and their Creator is, then, that between the "Infinite" and the "finite." Since God exists wherever anything he creates exists, God is not "finite" as are creatures, but "infinite," without limits of any kind.

The distinction between divine infinity and created finitude has consequences for how we think of God and creatures. For example, the "Infinite" and "finite" do not add up. A "Flying Spaghetti Monster" plus an "orbiting tea pot" are two entities, and the two together are greater than either one of them alone. However, because God is infinite, the addition of a finite world does not increase the amount of existence in the universe. God plus the finite universe is not greater than the infinite God alone. God without the world would still be God; however, the world without God would simply not exist. Accordingly, the atheist jibe "I just believe in one less god than you do" makes no sense. If God is infinite self-identical necessary existence, there could be no more than One God; however, one less God does not mean one less entity of the kind called "god," but no reality whatsoever.

(6) If God is One in the sense in which Christians understand God to be One, then an inevitable corollary is that God is unique, but not unique in the sense of being "one of a kind." God is not One in the sense of being the only instantiated example of "first cause of the universe" or "only existing necessary being." "Cause of the universe" or "necessary being" are not instances of particular ways in which beings can

exist. Aquinas makes this point by claiming that God is “not in a genus,” not even the genus of “being.” Unlike orbiting tea pots or “Flying Spaghetti Monsters,” God is not a “kind” or “example” of anything.

(7) God is absolutely simple and without composition (or parts). The kinds of things (“beings”) we come across in everyday life are always composed of parts because they are physical objects. However, the Christian God is without a body, and therefore cannot be composed of physical parts. Moreover, anything composed of physical parts is subject to dissolution of those parts, and can both come into existence (by combination of parts) or cease to exist (by dissolution). It follows that, since God’s existence is necessary, God cannot be physical.

In addition, other ways in which we might talk about composition in relation to postulated *non-physical* beings would not apply to God either. As already stated, God is absolutely unique and does not belong in a genus (category). One could not distinguish in God’s case between genus (the broad overarching category in which God would belong) and difference (what distinguishes God from others in the same category). Even the most fundamental distinction involved in any finite object – the distinction between essence (what it is) and existence (whether it is) – would not apply to God, since God, existing necessarily, simply is. The historical Christian understanding is then that God is absolutely simple, without parts of any kind.

Contrast God’s simplicity with such imaginary entities as “Flying Spaghetti Monsters,” orbiting tea pots, or invisible pink unicorns, all of which would be physical beings and necessarily composed of parts. Even Dawkins’ claim that any entity that could create a Boeing 747 would have to be more complicated than a 747 shows a complete misunderstanding of the Christian position. The Christian doctrine is not that God is “more complicated” than a 747, but absolutely uncomplicated

(completely simple).

(8) God is not only good, but the “Chief Good” (*Summum Bonum*). One of the classic dilemmas in philosophy is Plato’s *Euthyphro* dilemma: Do the gods act rightly because it is inherently good to do so, or does something become good because the gods do it? In the language of monotheism, “Is something good because God commands it, or does God command something because it is good?” If one answers that God commands actions because they are inherently good, then there must be some source of goodness outside of God to which God conforms. On the other hand, if something is good because God commands it, then goodness is arbitrary, God could command something evil, and then evil would become good.

To state that God is the *Summum Bonum* cuts the gordian knot of the *Euthyphro* dilemma by making clear that God’s very nature is identical with Goodness. A fundamental assertion of traditional Christian theology (going back at least to Augustine) is that being and goodness are convertible. To the extent that something exists at all, insofar as it exists, it is good.

That being and goodness are convertible does not mean that evil does not exist, but that even those things or persons who are evil necessarily have some kind of essential goodness about them insofar as they exist at all. In order for Hitler to accomplish his massive evils, he needed to exist, to be human, to be rational and capable of planning, to be able to persuade others to cooperate with his plans, etc. All of these qualities, as qualities, are good. They are the very same qualities that are necessary to accomplish great good, and were possessed by people like Abraham Lincoln or Martin Luther King, Jr. Evil, then, as Augustine argued, has no existence of its own, but is parasitic; it depends on the prior existence of both being and goodness for its own existence.

Given then, that goodness and being are correlative, insofar

as God exists necessarily and is identical with his own existence, God must also be not only good, but the Highest Good (*Summum Bonum*), identical with his own Goodness as he is identical with his Existence, and, as the Creator who gives existence to all else that exists, the source of all goodness that exists in created things. Insofar as anything exists that we might call good, it is good because it has been created by the Good God. God's Goodness does not then conform to some source of goodness outside of God's own nature because God's nature is inherently good, self-identical with absolute Goodness, and the source of all goodness in creatures. To answer the *Euthryphro* dilemma: on the one hand, the goodness of God's actions do not depend on a goodness outside his own nature because God's nature is identical with and the foundation of all goodness. On the other, God's actions and commands do not make goodness arbitrary because they always conform to God's very nature as Good. To use an illustration: despite God's absolute freedom and omnipotence, there are some things that God cannot do because they would contradict his very nature as Goodness itself. God cannot, for example, tell a lie. God cannot be cruel.

Again we see the New Atheist tropes fall massively short of the Christian understanding of God. No orbiting tea pot, "Flying Spaghetti Monster," or "Invisible Pink Unicorn" could be self-identical with Goodness itself, nor be the source of all goodness in the created universe. To the contrary, insofar as such imaginary entities might exist at all, they would be simply one more example of an individually existing thing (*ens*), with the limited kind of goodness such a thing might have, but even then, a kind of trivial goodness. There would be no reason to believe that a "Flying Spaghetti Monster" or "Invisible Pink Unicorn" would be morally good, and it would be ludicrous to posit that either could be the source of all goodness in the universe.

At the beginning of this essay, I stated that in any

intelligent disagreement, it is important that both sides understand each other's position well enough that they can at least disagree on what the disagreement is about. My claim in this essay is that the New Atheists do not know what they are talking about when they use the word "God," and this is demonstrated by the kinds of arguments they use to refute the existence of God. In every case, believing in the existence of God is compared to believing in an additional imaginary being who would exist alongside other beings within the common universe, simply one more finite object among others – something like an orbiting tea pot, a "Flying Spaghetti Monster," or an invisible pink unicorn. If Christians understood God to be simply another entity existing alongside others within the universe, perhaps these objections might have some validity. Perhaps they would be valid objections against believing in deities like Thor or Zeus.

However, this is not what Christians mean by God. God is not an entity (*ens*), one being along side other beings (*seiende*) in the universe, but, in Aquinas's words, *ipsum esse subsistens* (Self-identical Self-subsisting Existence). That the New Atheists continue to use examples indicating that they think that the question of the existence of God has to do with the existence of such an entity makes clear that they do not know what they are talking about when they use the word "God."

1 Joe Carter, "Celestial Teapots, Flying Spaghetti Monsters, and Other Silly Atheist Arguments," *First Things* (MAY 15, 2010);

<https://www.firstthings.com/blogs/firstthoughts/2010/05/celestial-teapots-flying-spaghetti-monsters-and-other-silly-atheist-arguments>.

2 Mark F. Shallow, "The End of the Teapot Argument for Atheism (and All Its Tawdry Imitators)"; <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/554a/04dea71e0a0d13d8b7b7afa4cce886132f76.pdf>.

3 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w4AHFBft2L8>.

4 I am largely following Catholic theologian Thomas Aquinas here, but there would be general agreement among Protestant theologians such as Karl Barth.