

The New Atheism – A Bahá'í Perspective

Ian Kluge

iankluge@netbistro.com

See also

<http://www.bahaiphilosophystudies.com/index.php>

Introduction

Since the publication of Sam Harris' *The End of Faith* in 2004, a number of books extolling the virtues of atheism have gained prominence in North America, notably Christopher Hitchens' *god Is Not Great*, Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion*, and Daniel Dennett's *Breaking the Spell*. Other books have also appeared but none achieved the fame and/or notoriety of these four. These texts adopted a pugnacious and even contemptuous tone towards religion and theists of all kinds, even the mildest of them, Dennett's *Breaking the Spell*, suggesting that atheists ought to rename themselves "brights" – which suggests that theists are obviously less 'bright.' According to the 'new atheists' as they were called, the only truth-claims we can accept are those meeting the standards of modern science. They completely rejected the existence of the super-natural or super-sensible aspects of reality. In addition, they attempt to dismantle various philosophical proofs of God, develop theories about the pathological origin of religion, detail crimes committed by religion and challenge the link between religion and morality.

This paper is a response to the philosophical claims of the new atheists, i.e. an analysis of the philosophical foundations of their beliefs both from a logical point of view, and from the perspective of the Bahá'í Writings. Logically and philosophically speaking, their works are deeply flawed, and, as is to be expected, they are often in disagreement with the Bahá'í Writings – though on a number of issues they are in agreement with them. This paper shall focus only on the major issues and shall not point out every error of fact, every identifiable logical error (and there are plenty)¹ or the various polemical and rhetorical theatrics they perform to advance their case.

Not unexpectedly, the number of differences between the new atheists and the Bahá'í Writings far exceeds the number of agreements or convergences. Writers calling for the wholesale abolition of religion and all concepts of the super-natural or super-sensible, are not likely to have much in common with the scriptures of any religion, even one that accepts evolution, rationalism, the essential harmony of religion and science and believes in the independent investigation of truth. We must remember that the goal of the new atheists is to put as much distance as possible between their ideas and religion. They have a programmatic disinterest in common ground with religion.

Given the scope of disagreement with the new atheists, not to mention their generally pugnacious style of self-expression, is there room for debate with the new atheists? The answer is a qualified yes, certainly on the basis of a number of agreements. We can also agree to explore each other's viewpoints to improve mutual understanding, although, given the contempt they express for theologians and/or theistic philosophers, there is room for a guarded optimism at best. There is, of course, no reasonable hope for philosophical agreement since the absolute denial of super-sensible realities undermines any basis for agreement with religion. In other words, there can be no agreement on foundational essentials, although there may be coincidental agreement on other, non-essential issues.

PART I: SOME MAJOR PROBLEMS WITH THE NEW ATHEISM

#1: What is the New Atheism?

The 'new atheism' is the name given to contemporary atheism as spear-headed by the work of Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris and Daniel Dennett. It is a form of explicit atheism which requires a conscious and intentional rejection of belief in God, gods and the super-sensible or supernatural realities, as distinct from implicit atheism which is absence of belief in God, gods or the supernatural without any conscious, i.e. intentional rejection. Implicit atheism may be the result of ignorance or indifference. We must also distinguish between the explicit, strong, positive or dogmatic atheism which requires the conscious denial of any super-sensible realities, and a "negative

¹ A 42 page catalogue specifically detailing these errors in each text is available upon request from the author by emailing iankluge@netbistro.com

theoretic atheism”² which is based on the lack of sufficient data to assert the existence of super-sensible realities, and on the inherent limits of human intelligence in knowing the existence of such realities. This second type of atheism is close to agnosticism. Finally, we must distinguish between atheism which denies the existence of personal a God or gods but accepts the existence of a super-sensible ground-of-being and an atheism which rejects the existence of any and all super-sensible entities, personal or not. Theravada Buddhism is often cited as an example of the former, as is Jainism.

The new atheism has twelve characteristics that define its nature:

- (1) A commitment to explicit, strong or dogmatic atheism as the only rational choice for modern, independent, free-thinking individuals. The new atheists reject agnosticism as too weak a response to the dangers of religion.
- (2) A categorical rejection of any and all super-sensible beings and realities and a corresponding commitment to ontological (metaphysical) materialism in explaining all phenomena;
- (3) A militant agenda and tone which opposes not just of religion itself but even the tolerance of any religious beliefs in others; this agenda and tone is driven by the belief that religion per se is pathological in nature;
- (4) A strident, aggressive, provocative and insulting way of expressing themselves and indulgence in all kinds of polemical and rhetorical shenanigans;
- (5) Commitment to the ability of science to answer all human questions by means of the scientific method with its criteria of measurability, repeatability, predictability, falsifiability; quantifiability;
- (6) A belief that faith is inherently an enemy of reason and science and no reconciliation between them is possible. Religion is inherently irrational. They are naturally in a perpetual conflict that must end with the victory of one or the other. Faith is defined as “belief without evidence.”³ They adhere to the conflict model of the relationship between religion/faith and reason;
- (7) A belief that religion is part of our past but not of our future, i.e. part of our evolutionary heritage that we must learn to overcome;
- (8) An insistence of reading scriptures literally (in order to condemn religion) and a consistent rejection of centuries of non-literal theological interpretations of the relevant scriptures;
- (9) An insistence that humankind has an innate and reliable moral sense or intuition that does not require the guidance of religion; morality is not inherently connected to or based on religion and our morals have less to do with religion than we tend to think.
- (10) Presentism: judging pas ages by the standards of today, which is, in effect, a failure to recognise progressive revelation. (also the logical error of anachronism);
- (11) Their belief that religious faith is either a mental illness or a criminal offense comparable to child-molesting or an anti-social act that ‘dumbs down’ society as a whole;
- (12) Their rejection of the freedom to be religious; because religion is so damaging religion is not a legitimate choice in society.

2. Are the New Atheists Really New?

If Hitchens, Dawkins, Harris and Dennett are the dominant figures in the ‘new atheism,’ who are the representatives of the ‘old atheism’? Since 1800, five major figures stand out, Feuerbach, Marx, Nietzsche, Freud and Sartre. Feuerbach developed an anthropological view of God in which God is nothing more than the projection of human nature, i.e. of emotions, wishes, fears, dreams, hopes and ideals projected outward in a larger-than-human form. In other words, God is man writ large; God is made in man’s image. Ontologically, there is no such being as God. Feuerbach influenced Marx

² *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/02040a.htm>

³ Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 232.

according to whom God is an invention used by the ruling classes to control those beneath them. Marx's atheism is based on three principles: (a) dialectical materialism according to which only matter is real; (b) historical materialism according to which all historical and cultural developments are based on economic factors; (c) radical humanism in which man, not God, is the supreme being in the universe. Nietzsche's most famous contribution to the development of atheism is his statement that "God is dead"⁴ which may be interpreted as a claim that our current conception of God is dead, or that the idea of a metaphysical God is dead. He believes that we can live more authentically human lives without a God Who stands in our way and prevents us from choosing and asserting our own identity and values, and Who weakens our commitment to and appreciation of earthly existence in the name of an abstract spiritual heaven. Rather he proclaims "Dead are all the Gods"⁵ so that the way is cleared for the evolution of the Superman. Nietzsche rejected the concept of metaphysical aspects of existence. Freud asserted that God is an illusion surviving from humankind's childhood and that this illusion prevented us from attaining intellectual and moral maturity. God was a father figure to Whom we turned for protection instead of doing what was necessary for ourselves. Thus, belief in God infantilizes us. Sartre, the most influential post WW II atheist, rejects the existence of God because the existence of God limits human freedom by imposing a pre-determined essence on us and thereby preventing us from creating ourselves by our choices. He also argues that the idea of God is self-contradictory insofar as no being can be both "in-itself" like any object in the world and "for-itself" like all self-conscious beings since "for-itself" is a negation of "in-itself."

As a sidebar, we might also mention Anthony Flew, easily the best known atheist philosopher in the English speaking world for almost five decades. However, starting in 2003, Flew revised his position and in his latest book, *There Is a God* (2007) he frankly admits to being a theist. Almost as if he wished to scandalize his former atheist colleagues, Flew based his change of mind on a vigorous philosophical defence of a variation of intelligent design.

A survey of the "old atheists'" work shows that very little of what the new atheists say is substantially new. Almost all major themes – materialism, the adequacy of science to solve all problems, religion as part of our evolutionary past, the inherent conflict of reason and faith or religion, the rejection of super-sensible aspects of the universe and the militant denunciation of religion – have all been anticipated by the "old atheists." They also attempted to disprove the earlier philosophical arguments for the existence of God and to show the concept of God was a social control mechanism.

What is new in the new atheists is their denunciation of religious tolerance, which they see as pandering to dangerous religious superstition; their rejection of the freedom to be religious; their rejection of belief in belief which is viewed as adopting a second-hand faith instead of facing the truth of atheism; their attempts to link religion to our evolutionary genetic endowment as well as the assertion that religion is child abuse. Finally, when compared to the work of the "old atheists" their work shows a willingness to engage in polemics and rhetorical theatrics that is unprecedented in Feuerbach, Marx, Freud and Sartre, though it has some, though not nearly as extreme, roots in Nietzsche.

3. Ontological Materialism and Its Problems

From the point of view of the Bahá'í Writings, the first problem with the new atheists is their adherence to ontological and methodological materialism or physicalism. This philosophy is also referred to as naturalism, which asserts that "[a] everything is natural, i.e. that everything there is belongs to the world of nature and [b] so can be studied by the methods appropriate to studying that world . . ."⁶ Part [a] of this definition covers ontological naturalism or materialism which is the view that "the world is entirely composed of matter,"⁷ that reality is fundamentally physical (matter or energy) and that non-physical entities have no part in composing reality. Consequently, "the

⁴ Nietzsche, "The Madman" in *The Gay Science*; see also sections 108 and 343.

⁵ Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Pt.1, XXII, 3.

⁶ Ted Honderich, editor, *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, p. 604.

⁷ Simon Blackburn, *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, p. 233.

supernatural does not exist, i.e. only nature is real, therefore supernature is not real.”⁸ Part [b] of this definition refers to methodological materialism, viz. that the proper method of studying nature takes only natural, i.e. physical factors into account. Any appeal to non-natural or non-physical factors is rejected in our quest for understanding.

It is worth noting that adherence to methodological naturalism does not necessarily require adherence to ontological naturalism. We may accept methodological naturalism as the proper technique for the study of physical nature without dismissing the existence of non-physical or spiritual aspects of reality which have their own appropriate methods of study. In other words, science confines itself to statements about empirical studies and refrains from extrapolating beyond its specific findings to such ontological issues as the nature of reality as a whole. It limits itself to the study of phenomenal reality from a strictly physical/natural perspective. Of course, those who accept ontological naturalism are logically required to accept methodological naturalism as well.

However, the new atheists are strong advocates of naturalism both in its ontological and methodological forms. As Dawkins says, “I decry the supernaturalism in all its forms.”⁹ One reason for his stance is that ontological: supernaturalism simply does not accurately reflect reality and therefore, cannot be a proper object of scientific study because nothing exists to be studied. A second reason is methodological: in a purely physical universe, only purely physical studies are appropriate and attention to non-physical/spiritual entities will only distract our attention and distort our conclusions. In a word, supernatural considerations violate Occam’s Razor, a subject we shall discuss in more detail below.

From a Bahá’í perspective, the new atheist’s naturalistic/materialistic ontology is unacceptable. `Abdu’l-Bahá makes it clear that he categorically rejects the view that sensible material reality is all that exists. Somewhat mockingly he says,

if it be a perfection and virtue to be without knowledge of God and His Kingdom, the animals have attained the highest degree of excellence and proficiency. Then the donkey is the greatest scientist and the cow an accomplished naturalist, for they have obtained what they know without schooling and years of laborious study in colleges, trusting implicitly to the evidence of the senses and relying solely upon intuitive virtues.¹⁰

Later, he compares the mental conditions of the materialists to that of the cow which is a

captive of nature and knows nothing beyond the range of the senses. The philosophers, however, glory in this, saying, “We are not captives of superstitions; we have implicit faith in the impressions of the senses and *know nothing beyond the realm of nature which contains and covers everything.*”¹¹

In more technical language, the cow is a good positivist, holding the belief that all valid knowledge must come from and is limited to the senses. Positivists elaborate these requirements – knowledge must be physically measurable, quantifiable, objective and predictable/testable – but they maintain the fundamental position that there can be no knowledge “beyond the range of the senses” or “beyond the realm of nature.” Even a cursory reading of their books makes it clear that the new atheists are strong positivists.

⁸ Steven Schafersman, “*Naturalism is a Essential Part of Scientific and Critical Enquiry*” (Presented at the Conference on Naturalism, Theism and Scientific Enterprise, University of Texas, Austin, 1997) <http://www.freeinquiry.com/naturalism.html>

⁹ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p.57.

¹⁰ `Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 262.

¹¹ `Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 311–312; emphasis added. Note this reference to ontological materialism.

`Abdu'l-Bahá comments that if materialism/positivism is true, if it is the final result of our studies, "why should we go to the colleges? Let us go to the cow."¹² The implication of his remarks is clear: just as the animal's materialistic view of reality is inadequate to understand reality as a whole – obviously there are realities beyond the knowledge of the cow – materialism or positivism in philosophy and science are inadequate tools for understanding reality as a whole. Even in principle, physical nature does not explain itself, i.e. is not completely intelligible on its own terms. If we want to understand the existence of nature, then we will have to go beyond physical nature itself. That does not mean we necessarily have to invoke super-natural factors in explaining each chemical reactions or every application of the law of gravity but it does mean that super-natural factors must be included when we try to explain certain fundamental questions such as the origin of nature itself, of natural laws or of contingent beings. This, of course, is precisely what atheists – old or new – deny.

The Bahá'í Writings illustrate the unintelligible character of strictly materialist explanations of the existence of physical reality in numerous ways that we shall explore throughout this paper. For example, in *Some Answered Questions*, `Abdu'l-Bahá discusses the way things affect each other, stating,

The same can be said of other beings whether they affect other things or be affected. Such process of causation goes on, and *to maintain that this process goes on indefinitely is manifestly absurd*. Thus such a chain of causation must of necessity lead eventually to Him who is the Ever-Living, the All-Powerful, who is Self-Dependent and the Ultimate Cause. This Universal Reality cannot be sensed, it cannot be seen. It must be so of necessity,¹³

`Abdu'l-Bahá clearly endorses the argument of the Uncaused Cause. Denying the Uncaused Cause implies the existence of an infinite regress of causal acts since it means that a causal sequence has no beginning or end. According to `Abdu'l-Bahá the idea of an infinite regress of causal acts is "manifestly absurd."

In examining this argument, it is essential to clarify what is being rejected, viz., an infinite series of actual dependent causal acts or things, i.e. an 'infinite' series in which each depends on and is conditioned by its predecessor. In other words, no act is self-sufficient in its own being, but depends on something else for its coming into existence or for acting. If all the things or causal acts in the universe are not self-sufficient, but rather externally conditioned and thereby dependent on others, then how can their existence or action be intelligible on strictly material terms? As W. Norris Clarke, SJ, says,

Can there be an infinite regress in this chain of dependence, so that it could extend endlessly with all its members having the same existential status of [externally] conditioned existents, none of them self-sufficient for its own existence?¹⁴

The question, of course, is rhetorical because when all things or causes are dependent on and conditioned by something external to them, then there can be no point at which a specific thing or causal act meets the proper conditions for existence or action by itself – and, consequently, nothing can act or come into existence. This is not a problem that can be solved with better instrumentation or sharper calculation; rather, the problem exists *in principle*, i.e. is constitutive of the nature of an infinite series of causal acts or things. Furthermore, if such an infinite regress of causal acts existed, the universe would be in stasis since no causal act has the required conditions for activation. But the universe is obviously not in stasis and, therefore, any solely material explanation fails to explain causal action, i.e. leaves the dynamic universe as we know it unintelligible. We may have limited local explanations for local actions, e.g. the motion of a billiard ball, but the ultimate origin of motion *per se* remains unintelligible.

¹² `Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 361.

¹³ `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Tablet to Auguste Forel*, p. 18; emphasis added.

¹⁴ W. Norris Clarke, S.J., *The One and the Many*, p. 217.

It is virtually self-evident that whatever ultimately initiates the “chain of causation” cannot itself be dependent on, i.e. caused or conditioned by anything external to itself. It must be absolutely self-sufficient. In other words, the initiator, the first cause, the “Prime Mover”¹⁵ must itself be unconditioned and/or uncaused, and this logically requires that it be a completely different kind of entity than all other conditioned things and/or causes known to us in the phenomenal world. It must be transcendent to the material world not subject to causes and/or conditions. In short, it is what religions call God.

There are other examples which show why, in principle, the material universe cannot explain itself and why logically there must be a non-physical source or ground of being. How and why do fundamental particles get their specific natures? As previously shown, we cannot posit an infinite series of evolutionary causal acts by which fundamental particles got their attributes through evolving from other forms of matter. How did those other forms of matter get their natures including their ability to evolve into something else and their receptivity to influence? Once again, we either posit a source or we succumb to the problems of an actual infinite regress.

We may also ask about the origin of physical laws. Since the laws that regulate things cannot be the same as the things they regulate (otherwise they require regulation themselves), they must be different in kind from the things they apply to. Therefore, in principle, such laws cannot arise from matter itself – which in turn raises the question of their source. Yet again we see that the natural world cannot explain itself, i.e. cannot explain itself in exclusively material terms and that some concept of a ground of being or “Ultimate Cause” is necessary.

There is yet another way in which the Bahá’í Writings show the rationality of theism and the inadequacy of atheism’s purely naturalistic explanations of the existence of the universe. Nothing in the universe exists by necessity; everything we know comes into and passes out of existence. This is what `Abdu’l-Bahá refers to when he says, “the phenomenality of contingency is essential,”¹⁶ i.e. that being contingent and being a phenomenon like matter are inseparable. Contingent beings are dependent beings. This means they are not self-sufficient and depend on something else to explain their own existence or action; certain pre-conditions must be fulfilled before they can come into existence and that whatever fulfills these pre-conditions cannot itself be contingent. As `Abdu’l-Bahá says,

Because a characteristic of contingent beings is dependency, and this dependency is an essential necessity, therefore, there must be an independent being whose independence is essential.¹⁷

In other words, whatever fulfills the pre-conditions for the existence of contingent things or causal acts must itself be independent of all other pre-conditions. This is the case because it is clear that something comes to exist only by virtue of something else that already exists (something cannot come from absolute nothing¹⁸) and that if we follow this sequence we eventually arrive at something that exists by its own nature, i.e. does not depend on something else for its existence, and which, therefore, is not a natural object. Here again we encounter a non-physical “Ultimate Cause.”¹⁹ If we reject this “Ultimate Cause” we shall find ourselves trapped in an impossible infinite regress.

It is, of course, possible to ask if the phenomenal universe is contingent. There are two ways to answer this question. First, the Bahá’í Writings and empirical experience tell us that everything that exists is contingent, i.e. it is possible for them not to exist. It is possible for me or my house not to be.

¹⁵ Bahá’u’lláh, *Prayers and Meditations*, CLXIX, p. 261.

¹⁶ `Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 203.

¹⁷ `Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 6.

¹⁸ `Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 281. This ‘nothing’ should not be confused with the vacuum potential in nuclear physics which is not an absolute nothingness.

¹⁹ `Abdu’l-Bahá, *Tablet to Auguste Forel*, p. 18

Because the universe is existentially constituted entirely by contingent beings, it follows that the universe itself is contingent. If every part of a machine is destructible, the machine itself is destructible, i.e. it does not have to exist. If a machine is constituted by its parts, the machine does not exist until the parts are assembled correctly.²⁰ Denying this fact would lead atheists into the strange position of asserting the somehow non-physical existence of a house whose components have been hauled to the dump, and to the continued non-physical existence of a plant whose cells have been destroyed. This is not only illogical but also violates their own naturalistic principles of sticking to empirical observations.

Second, the phenomenal universe is contingent because it is just one of many possible universes that could have existed in the past or could exist in the future. After all, the universe could have been arranged differently, natural laws could have been different, as well as proton mass and the strength of the weak force. In other words, the universe as we know it does not exist necessarily, i.e. it is radically contingent, which is to say, its existence does not inevitably follow from what it is, i.e. from its own being. A different universe could have existed and ours not at all. However, such a radically contingent universe requires a cause, since it obviously cannot create itself, nor can it create itself from nothing. Furthermore, whatever brings the entire universe into existence must be a non-contingent or necessary being i.e. in theological language, God Who exists necessarily.²¹

The Bahá'í Writings make it clear that science by itself cannot answer certain fundamental questions about why phenomenal nature came into existence, how or why natural laws arose and how or why particles acquired their attributes. The first problem as we have seen is that of an actual infinite regress. Furthermore, answering these fundamental questions scientifically requires us to apply the scientific method, which is designed to study measurable, quantifiable, repeatable physical phenomena in time and space, whereas these questions refer to the conditions that make measurability, physicality, quantifiability, repeatability and time and space possible in the first place. These are the pre-conditions necessary for phenomenal existence. Consequently these questions lie beyond the scope of the scientific method which is limited to phenomenal reality once these conditions have been established. Science cannot answer them even in principle.

4. The Principle of Sufficient Reason

Another way in which the Bahá'í Writings deal with the new atheists' denial of God is to point out that strictly materialist explanations for the existence of the universe violate the principle of sufficient reason (PSR). The PSR states everything exists or happens for a reason that is necessary and sufficient to explain why it exists/happens and why it exists/happens in the particular way it does.²² Any scientific explanation seeks to provide a necessary and sufficient reason for whatever it studies, i.e. it seeks to fulfill the PSR. If a purportedly scientific explanation does not satisfy the PSR, it is wrong or incomplete. If an explanation can never – not even in principle – fulfill the PSR, then it is inadequate or deficient in some major way.

Like science, the Bahá'í Writings posit the principle of sufficient reason (PSR) in a variety of contexts. Bahá'u'lláh makes theological use of the PSR when He writes, God

through the direct operation of His unconstrained and sovereign Will, chose to confer upon man the unique distinction and capacity to know Him and to love Him – a capacity that must needs be regarded as the generating impulse and the primary purpose underlying the whole of creation²³

²⁰ This is not an example of the fallacy of composition which obviously does not apply to existentially constitutive parts. We cannot say that the whole plant continues to exist even though we have destroyed all of its cells and that my house continues to exist after the wreckers have hauled all its parts away

²¹ `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 203.

²² Leibniz, “Nothing can be true or real or existing unless there is a sufficient reason that makes it so and not otherwise.” *Monadology*, par. 32.

²³ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, XXVII, p. 64.

Elsewhere, this purpose is also described as God’s desire to reveal Himself which He does through humankind, the phenomenal embodiment of His purpose. Bahá’u’lláh’s reason for the existence of the phenomenal world is obviously not a scientific explanation in terms of material or efficient causality. This account is existential insofar as it explains existence in terms of human purpose, value and final causality but this does not prevent it from meeting the PSR in a theological context. (We shall have more to say about final causality below.)

‘Abdu’l-Bahá also affirms the PSR when he states, “everything which happens is due to some wisdom and [] nothing happens without a reason.”²⁴ In its context, this statement has an existential and theological application since it applies the PSR to events in the human world and implies that any purely physical explanation of the tragic event may be physically correct but is not complete. For a complete existential and/or theological understanding of earthly events we must look beyond the phenomenal world. However, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s statement is also applicable to existence in general since he believes that creation functions according to natural laws and is not “fortuitous.”²⁵

‘Abdu’l-Bahá invokes the PSR in a scientific sense when he states that “the existence of everything depends upon four causes,”²⁶ i.e. the material cause (wood), the efficient cause (the carpenter), the formal cause (the form of the chair) and the final cause (the purpose of the chair). Without all of these aspects, the explanation is incomplete. We may know everything about the material aspects of the chair, but if we do not know what it is for – its purpose or goal or *telos* – we do not truly understand what it is. Nor can we adequately explain its form, i.e. why it exists in the way it does. Therefore, any strictly material account of the chair (or anything else) that cannot account for the final cause does not satisfy the PSR.

4.1. An Important Digression: the PSR and Final Causes

At this point, a question important to atheism/religion debate arises: do we need to know the final cause in order to satisfy the PSR? The answer is affirmative. To see why this is the case requires a brief digression in order to rectify some common confusions about final causes. It is an oft-repeated truism that science rejects final causes and confines itself to material and efficient causes; belief in final causes is regarded as a remnant of pre-scientific thinking to which religion is susceptible.

However, this issue is not as clear as it seems. To see why, let us perform a thought experiment. Imagine a group of scientists finding a book in an alien language. They can physically analyse the book to the smallest detail of every material and efficient cause, and yet, unless they know what the book is for i.e. a science text, a novel, a news article, a philosophical text etc, they cannot claim to understand what they have found. They do not know what it means and what its purpose is. Their knowledge is correct but incomplete and, therefore, their explanation cannot completely satisfy the PSR.

The usual objection to final causes is that nature is not a man-made artefact like a chair or a book and, therefore, does not embody a goal or purpose. Hence, the appeal to final causality is unscientific and must be rejected. Scientific explanations have no room for teleology of any sort. The problems with this retort begin with the misunderstanding that the final cause is a conscious intention or a plan externally imposed on some object or process. Aristotle, whose work is the foundation of teleology, states, “It is absurd to suppose that purpose is not present because we do not observe the [conscious] agent deliberating.”²⁷ In other words, purpose or goal can be present without a conscious agent externally imposing his wishes on an object or process. Aristotle was clearly aware that in natural processes, we see no such extrinsic agent guiding the changes.

²⁴ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 46.

²⁵ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 181.

²⁶ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 280.

²⁷ Aristotle, *Physics*, II, 8.

According to Aristotle, in natural processes “the form [formal cause], the mover [the efficient cause], ‘that for the sake of which’ [the final cause] . . . often coincide,”²⁸ i.e. are aspects of a single causal act. The formal, final and efficient cause act together to produce certain effects on a regular basis. The final and formal causes are simply what determines the efficient cause to consistently achieve one particular effect rather than a different one. For example, we expect sunlight on a windowsill to produce a warm windowsill instead of rainbows or ice-cream. The sunlight acts one way and not another precisely because it is pre-determined to affect things in certain ways only; it is inwardly constrained, by its nature to do only certain kinds of things, which is to say, constrained to reach only a limited repertoire of goals. As W. Norris Clarke, S.J. says,

[i]f the efficient cause at the moment of its productive action is not interiorly determined or focussed towards procuring this effect rather than another, then there is no sufficient reason why it should produce this one[effect] rather than [another]. Hence it will produce nothing [no effect] at all: indeterminate action is no action at all . . . [This is] precisely what is meant by final causality or focussed efficient causality . . .²⁹

The effects of any process can only be of a certain kind, i.e. they operate to reach particular goals or purposes. Consequently, it becomes clear that the laws of nature also act as final causes because they guide processes to certain specific ends instead of others; sowing iron filings will not let us harvest sunflowers but will allow us to gather rust. Planets follow the laws of motion – and therefore circle the sun rather than inscribing figure-eights. The laws of chemistry require acetic acid and baking soda to react in a certain way. All these processes are constrained to act towards certain ends which are predictable.

According to Henry Veatch, final causality is a perfectly commonsensical notion, applicable to nature as well as to the work of conscious agents. Here is how Veatch explains final causes:

In other words, since natural agents and efficient causes as far as we understand them, are found to have quite determinate and more or less predictable results, to that same extent we can also say that such forces are therefore ordered to their own appropriate consequences or achievement: it is these they regularly tend to produce, and it is these that may thus be said to be their proper ends . . . Aristotelian final causes are no more than this: *the regular and characteristic consequences or results that are correlated with the characteristic actions of various agents and efficient causes that operate in the natural world.*³⁰

In other words, Aristotle’s concept of final causes is no less scientific than a chemical formula that successfully predicts the results of mixing acetic acid with baking soda or a satellite’s orbit. One might also express this by saying that final causes are the potentials that will actualize when certain preconditions are met either naturally or through conscious human manipulation. They are not, as has been so often claimed, mere anthropomorphisms and, if correctly understood, do not undermine the doctrine of the unity of science and religion.

Among the new atheists, only Dawkins seems even peripherally aware of the PSR, in his rejection of the view that “only theology is equipped to answer the why questions. What on Earth is a why question?”³¹ He tries to brush them aside *tout court*: “Some questions simply do not deserve an answer.”³² This, of course, is more an expression of attitude and prejudice rather than a rational reply. However, in taking this path, he goes too far i.e. he proves too much insofar as his retrogressive attitude could also have been used to dismiss some of the most important scientific questions of our

²⁸ Aristotle, *Physics*, II, 7, 198a.

²⁹ W. Norris Clarke, S.J., *The One and the Many*, p. 201.

³⁰ Aristotle: *A Modern Appreciation*, 48; italics added. See also R. J. Hankinson, “*Philosophy of Science*” in *The Cambridge Companion to Aristotle*, p. 128

³¹ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 80.

³² Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 80.

time, e.g. Einstein's question of whether time was constant for all observers and why it was not. Dawkins also fails to distinguish between questions that can be rationally justified and those that cannot, i.e. questions based on scientific data or logical reasoning and those that are baseless speculation. For example, it is not unscientific to ask how and why the initial cosmological singularity came into existence since there is general consensus that such a singularity must have existed but, until empirical and/or logical evidence arrives there is no point in wondering why fairies rode sea-horses in the prehistoric oceans.

Based on his previous statements, Dawkins must say that only questions that can be answered scientifically deserve to be answered but this reply, as we shall see in detail below, is highly problematical.

5: Methodological Naturalism

As we may recall, the second part of our previously given definition of naturalism refers to methodological materialism i.e. the view that "everything there is "can be studied by the methods appropriate to studying that world."³³ In other words, all phenomena must be studied and explained scientifically, i.e. in strictly material or physical terms; we cannot appeal to any non-physical causes in our explanations. All studies must adhere to the methods of natural science, i.e. be measurable, quantifiable, repeatable, objectively observable, and falsifiable. Ideally, we should be able to conduct or at least conceive of an actual experiment to help determine what is true, or minimally, what is false. Only that which can be scientifically established or at least is not forbidden by the scientific method can be called truth.

The adherence to methodological materialism creates serious problems for the new atheists. The first is the claim that only knowledge meeting the demands of the scientific method is genuine knowledge, i.e. is not faith or "belief without evidence." The problem is how to verify such a claim scientifically. What experiment could prove that only scientific knowledge claims are valid, or that all other knowledge claims are false? The impossibility of doing so is self-evident. Obviously, the new atheists' claim about genuine knowledge refutes itself because it cannot meet its own criteria for testing knowledge claims. Hence, their position is untenable.

A second problem follows. If only scientifically established facts are genuine knowledge, how can the new atheists assert ontological materialism, i.e. that there are no supernatural or super-sensible aspects to reality?³⁴ By its very nature a scientific experiment can only tell us about physical things and nothing at all about the existence or non-existence of super-physical entities. How then, could an experiment prove or disprove the existence of the supernatural or super-sensible? Again, the new atheism's basic ontological premise is undermined by its own insistence of excluding anything but scientific evidence. In effect, their categorical denial of super-sensible realities is left without a foundation even on their own terms.

If the new atheism's foundational claims are self-undermining and self-refuting, then the assertion of these claims as if they were genuine truth is no more than an act of faith, or as Dawkins puts it, "belief without evidence."³⁵ This leads the new atheists into a serious self-contradiction since they are opposed to believing anything on faith. Harris, whose book is called *The End of Faith*, says "faith is simply *unjustified* belief,"³⁶ i.e. belief "unjustified" by the scientific method, while Dennett approvingly quotes Mark Twain's jest, "Faith is believing what you know ain't so."³⁷ Hitchens, too, views faith as belief without evidence.³⁸ Consequently, the new atheists are in the same position

³³ Ted Honderich, editor, *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, p. 604.

³⁴ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 57.

³⁵ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 232.

³⁶ Sam Harris, *The End of Faith*, p.65; original emphasis.

³⁷ Mark Twain quoted in Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, 321.

³⁸ Christopher Hitchens, *god Is Not Great*, p.150.

religious faith, and, this ironically, makes the new atheists the inadvertent target of their own grand pronouncements about the untenability of faith: “Our enemy is nothing other than faith itself,”³⁹ “It is therefore the very nature of faith to serve as an impediment to further inquiry,”⁴⁰ “faith and superstition distort our whole picture of the world.”⁴¹

What all this demonstrates is that the philosophical foundations of the new atheism, specifically, the methodological and ontological root premises, are severely flawed inasmuch as they cannot meet the basic logical criterion of internal consistency or non-self-contradiction. Even on their own terms, they cannot prove that the physical world is the only real one, and, therefore, they cannot prove the foundation principle of atheism that God does not exist. This leaves belief in God available as a rational alternative.

6. Is God as a “Scientific Hypothesis”?

Another problem with ontological materialism is Dawkin’s view that “the God question is not in principle and forever outside the remit of science”⁴² and “the existence of God is a scientific hypothesis like any other.”⁴³ These statements entangle him in a flagrant self-contradiction. How could a natural, physical experiment prove or disprove the existence of a non-physical entity? How could God, Who is not a natural object, Who does not exist in the limitations of time and space be proven or disproven by an experiment precisely limiting itself to entities that exist in time and space? God would be subject to scientific study and experimentation only if He is a quantifiable, physical or material being, i.e. part of nature – but He is not. Thus, Dawkins sets-up a straw-man argument insofar as he tries to portray God as a mere ‘natural object’ – something to which no religion agrees. As `Abdu’l-Bahá says,

The Divine Reality is Unthinkable, Limitless, Eternal, Immortal and Invisible . . . It [the “Infinite Reality”] . . . cannot be described in terms which apply to the phenomenal sphere of the created world. ⁴⁴

He adds, “in the world of God there is no time. Time has sway over creatures but not over God.”⁴⁵ Moreover, God is not limited by place.⁴⁶ In short, the God posited by all religions has none of the characteristics of the phenomenal reality which science is designed to study. Therefore, Dawkins’ argument does not refute the existence of God as accepted by religions but only refutes a ‘straw-man,’ a naturalistic ‘god’ as Dawkins has contrived him for polemical purposes. Like all straw-man arguments, Dawkins’ contention simply misses the point. The existence or non-existence of God is beyond the reach of scientific study, though, as we have already seen, it is not necessarily beyond the man’s reasoning capacity.

This problem also dogs Dennett’s work, though from a different perspective. He proposes to study religion scientifically – a project not in itself incompatible with the Bahá’í Writings – but then he forgets that scientifically studying the human phenomenon of religion in evolutionary terms is not the same thing as establishing atheism on a scientific basis. The latter requires evidence that God does not exist, whereas the former merely studies how the religious impulse manifests itself in various cultural forms – which does not say anything at all about God’s existence or non-existence. His attempt to argue from the historical manifestations of religion to God’s non-existence is a patent *non*

³⁹ Sam Harris, *The End of Faith*, p. 131.

⁴⁰ Sam Harris, *The End of Faith*, p. 45 – 46.

⁴¹ Christopher Hitchens, *god Is Not Great*, p. 41.

⁴² Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 96.

⁴³ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 72.

⁴⁴ `Abdu’l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 50.

⁴⁵ `Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 156.

⁴⁶ `Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 203.

sequitur. Finally, Dennett reduces God to the kind of phenomenon science can study and seems oblivious to the fact that he has substituted his own naturalistic ‘god’ for a supernatural God and, therefore, has set up a straw-man argument.

7. Self-Contradictions: Meme Theory and HADDs

The demand that all genuine knowledge must be scientific also causes trouble for the new atheists insofar as it leads them into blatant self-contradictions. In order to explain the spread and powerful hold of religion, Dawkins and Dennett assert that religion is a meme, i.e. a “unit[] of cultural imitation”⁴⁷ which functions like a gene for ideas, beliefs, customs, feelings, skills and so on. These are transferred through teaching, imitation and law. As Dennett points out, these memes operate for their own benefit, and must be studied in light of the question “*cui bono?*”⁴⁸ i.e. who gains?

The most obvious problem with meme theory is that it is beside the point to the issue of God’s existence or non-existence because it is a theory about the transmission of ideas and images, and, as such, says nothing about the truth of these ideas and/or images. Nothing in meme theory can be used to tell us whether or not the ‘God-meme’ refers to an existing reality. Any conclusions one way or another are simply a *non sequitur* fallacy. The method of transmission of an idea does not allow us to assess if the idea is true.

But there are deeper difficulties, viz. that meme theory itself does not meet the demands of the scientific method. Here are ten reasons why memes are no more than metaphors and not products of reasoning guided by the scientific method: memes (1) do not exist in space, (2) are not physical, (3) have no internal structure i.e. no physically separate or component parts or clear boundaries, (4) are not involved in any measurable energetic processes within themselves, amongst themselves or with other beings, (5) do not show, action, agency, e.g. competition, accommodation, (6) have no inherent interests or even self-interests (all their interests are attributed to them externally), (7) have no intention and cannot act intentionally, (8) have no inherent reproductive capacity, (9) cannot be quantified, (10) “have no chromosomes or loci or alleles or sexual recombination.”⁴⁹ Given these characteristics, memes are not objects amenable to scientific study, i.e. they are not measurable, quantifiable, physical, predictable nor any of the other attributes of genuine scientific objects. Furthermore, they cannot be subject to evolution in any but a metaphoric sense.

Consequently, Dawkins’ and Dennett’s meme theory is based on a fallacy, i.e. a false analogy, not only because memes are essentially different from genes but also because unlike genes, memes are not scientifically testable objects. Furthermore, treating memes as if they had inherent interests is an example of a logical mistake known as the pathetic fallacy, which treats inanimate things as if they were alive. Since a non-living thing has no intentions or goals, it cannot have any inherent interests to achieve or lose. Any ‘interests’ it has must be imposed from the outside and Dennett’s “*Cui bono?*” question is irrelevant to them.

Dennett attempts to prove that memes exist “because words exist”⁵⁰ but this is untenable. In the first place, identifying words with memes does not escape the problems noted above. Furthermore, a word may exist physically as sound or as physical marks on paper or a screen, but the meaning of the word is not inherent in these marks or sounds – and it is precisely the meaning which is the basis for their significance as memes. Therefore, if Dennett is referring to the physical word form, his argument to show memes exist is beside the point since it says nothing about the meaning of the word/meme. If the meme is the meaning, then how is meaning measurable, quantifiable, energetic, or, how is it in time and space? How does it have interests? In short, it is a non-scientific object and for atheists to build a theory on them is self-contradictory. Indeed, the meaning of a word is a perfect example of a non-material or non-physical – dare I say non-positivist? – reality the existence of

⁴⁷ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 223; also Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, p. 78.

⁴⁸ Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, p. 84.

⁴⁹ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p.223.

⁵⁰ Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, p. 80.

which atheists are eager to deny in any form. The new atheists cannot demand scientific rigour from religions on one hand and then appeal to meme (or HADD) theory on the other.

Like Dawkins' meme theory, Dennett's HADD theory is also beside the point of God's existence or non-existence. In "investigating the biological basis of religion,"⁵¹ Dennett posits the existence of the HADD, the brain's supposed 'hyper-action agent detection device' which attributes agency or intention to events and entities around us.⁵² This HADD is the alleged origin of our belief in supernatural phenomenon including God or gods.⁵³ Even if his hypothesis is true (though Dennett admits it is no more than a convenient supposition or untested theory⁵⁴), a theory to explain the *origin* or *prevalence* of an idea can tell us nothing about the *truth* of an idea. The prevalence of an idea and the truth of an idea are two different things and we cannot prove anything about one from the other. Nor can the historical origin of belief in God or gods be counted as evidence against them without committing the genetic fallacy. The origins of an idea can never prove or disprove the truth of an idea. An idea is true or untrue strictly on its own merits or lack of them.

Furthermore, HADD's, like memes, are no more than reified assumptions and cannot meet the most elementary tests of scientific validity. Yet Dennett, who admits they are no more than suppositions, and Dawkins treat them as established fact. This reveals an enormous self-contradiction in their work: on one hand, they critique religion for its speculations and lack of scientific explicability while at the same time indulging in such speculations in their own theories. We shall have more to say about fallacies involving HADD's later.

8. Self-Contradiction: Adopting Eastern Mysticism

Harris falls into a similar self-contradiction regarding his demand for scientific rigour for all religious claims on one hand and his reliance on non-scientific claims on the other. He asserts that eastern mysticism offers a rationally valid alternative to religion. In defence of mysticism he writes,

Mysticism is a rational enterprise. Religion is not. The mystic has recognised something about the nature of consciousness prior to thought, and this recognition is susceptible to rational discussion. The mystic has reasons for what he believes and these reasons are empirical. The roiling mystery of the world can be analyzed with concepts (this is science) or it can be experienced free of concepts (this is mysticism).⁵⁵

Harris' initial claim that mysticism is rational is a much debated subject and cannot simply be taken at face value especially in light of his self-contradictory statements about it. First, if mysticism is "consciousness prior to thought," then it cannot be "susceptible to rational discussion" which is entirely dependent on conceptual and rational thought to work. This problem is one of the reasons many mystics resort to metaphor, poetry, story, myth – the content of many religious texts – in an effort to convey in words that which is beyond conceptual thinking. We simply cannot discuss anything that is "prior to thought." Second, how could a mystic justify, i.e. provide "reasons for what he believes" if what he has experienced is "prior to thought"? What reasons could adequately justify that which is beyond all thought? Only the purely subjective experience itself can provide adequate justification. Our third problem is that this necessary subjectivity conflicts with Harris' adherence to the scientific method and its rejection of subjective experience as a valid source of knowledge. Fourth, Harris' phrase "the roiling mystery of the world" is, in light of Harris's advocacy of empirical, scientific knowledge, a prize piece of non-sense. What could this phrase even mean? How could one devise an experiment to determine how mysterious or "roiling" the world is? Obviously Harris, in his

⁵¹ Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, p. 71 – 72.

⁵² Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, p. 109 – 115.

⁵³ Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, p. 123.

⁵⁴ Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, p. 310.

⁵⁵ Sam Harris, *The End of Faith*, p. 221.

advocacy of eastern mysticism as a supposed anti-dote to religion is, like Dawkins and Dennett, in serious contradiction to the scientific premises he supposedly adopts as the basis of his thinking.

9. Disproving God's Existence

Because the new atheists realise that atheism requires denial of God's existence, they attempt to refute or dismiss various traditional arguments for God's existence. We shall review and critique a number of them as well as contrast them to the Bahá'í Writings.

Hitchens, for example, tries to disprove the First Mover argument by pointing out that the alleged First Mover or First Cause of all beings, God, must himself have a designer.⁵⁶ He asks, 'Who made God?' or as Dennett puts it in launching a similar argument, "What caused God?"⁵⁷

There are at least three logical flaws in this line of reasoning. First, it commits a category mistake, i.e. confuses one kind of object with another. God, as portrayed by religions, is not a natural object subject to physical laws and the conditions of existence such as time,⁵⁸ place,⁵⁹ contingency or dependence.⁶⁰ `Abdu'l-Bahá points out that God "cannot be described in terms which apply to the phenomenal sphere of the created world,"⁶¹ precisely because God is not a natural object. Dawkins disagrees, holding that God is well within the scope of scientific study.⁶² However, to treat Him as if He were necessarily fails to refute the concept of God that is at the center of the debate. In short, it misses the point completely.

Second, this category mistake leads to a straw-man argument which does not disprove God as understood by religion but only 'God' as described by the new atheists. This substitution makes their conclusion inapplicable to God as conceived by virtually all religions. The new atheists have, in effect, simply set up a straw man and, thereby, changed the subject. Indeed, if God were a natural object amenable to scientific study, there is no question that the new atheists would be right in denying His existence but in the debate with religion they often merely tilt at windmills of their own making.

Third, by asking "What caused God?" Dennett not only makes a category mistake but also initiates an actual infinite regress, which, as already shown, is logically absurd and rejected by `Abdu'l-Bahá. The question assumes that God, like all other natural objects, requires a cause and this in turn leads to an infinite regress of actual causal acts. We have already shown why such an actual infinite regress is impossible in an earlier section of this paper.

Dawkins' makes the same category mistake although he approaches the problem from a slightly different angle. He specifically rejects the "Unmoved Mover" argument, the "Uncaused Cause" argument and the "cosmological argument"⁶³ by arguing against the assumption that God is exempt from infinite regress. This assumption, he suggests, is unfounded. If God were a natural object like all others, Dawkins is undoubtedly correct, but no religion proposes such a God, as we have already seen in the Writings. Therefore, unless Dawkins wishes to pursue his straw man argument that God is a natural being, he must show why a God Who is not a natural entity should be subject to infinite regress like all other natural objects. Merely asserting that God is not exempt fails to satisfy when simple logic tells us that God as described by religion as an absolutely independent being is necessarily exempt from infinite regress.

⁵⁶ Christopher Hitchens, *god Is Not Great*, p. 71.

⁵⁷ Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, p. 242.

⁵⁸ `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 116.

⁵⁹ `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 148.

⁶⁰ `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 231.

⁶¹ `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 50.

⁶² Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 96.

⁶³ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p.100 – 102.

`Abdu'l-Bahá, of course, accepts the argument of the Uncaused Cause, which implicitly accepts God as exempt from infinite regress: “there must be an independent being whose independence is essential.”⁶⁴ The same conclusion follows from the radical contingency of all things. “Nothing is caused by itself.”⁶⁵ In fact, the idea is self-contradictory, i.e. literally nonsensical. For a thing to cause itself, it would have to exist before it exists – and this is impossible. Therefore, all phenomenal things are dependent on an external cause i.e. are contingent and this line of dependence ends with God. We can only avoid this conclusion by positing the existence of an actual infinite sequence and all the associated difficulties to which we have referred.

Dawkins compounds his category mistake of naturalizing God by stating that the universe, or a Dutchman’s Pipe plant, is too complex to have been created by a simple being. Thus, God would have to be at least as complex as His creation – and the existence of such a super-complex being is even more “improbable”⁶⁶ than the chance developments of evolution. Later he elaborates the idea that God must necessarily be super-complex: “A God capable of continuously monitoring and controlling the individual status of every particle in the universe cannot be simple.”⁶⁷ He also describes God as a “calculating agent”⁶⁸ of improbable complexity. Underlying Dawkins’ assertions is the assumption that God is a natural object, composed of matter subject to time, space and causality, and Who reasons discursively in linear logical sequence. But that is precisely what religion says God is not. Once again, Dawkins sets up a straw man – his naturalistic definition of God – and then tries to disprove it. He does not really deal with God as presented by religion.

In contradiction to the new atheists’ acceptance of cosmic evolution as a matter of pure chance, `Abdu'l-Bahá accepts the idea of design.

This composition and arrangement [of the cosmos], through the wisdom of God and His preexistent might, were produced from one natural organization, which was composed and combined with the greatest strength, conformable to wisdom, and according to a universal law. From this it is evident that it is the creation of God, and *is not a fortuitous composition and arrangement.*⁶⁹

We need not look far for the reason. The universe evolved in accordance with natural laws. However, as we have already seen, the existence of natural laws requires a creator, a transcendent entity not itself subject to natural law but which establishes natural laws with all their inherent potentials. When these laws affect matter, they create the order of which we are aware today. (The same has been noted about the attributes and potentials of matter.) Even moments of extreme disorder – supernovae, volcanic eruptions – happen according to physical laws. Moreover, as the laws of probability tell us, ‘chance’ functions according to rules which impose a degree of order on seemingly unordered processes. The large scale design we see on earth or in the universe around us is the product of these laws (and their action on matter) over time. There is no rational argument to insist that cosmic design must occur by direct intervention at the macroscopic level when an explanation based on the laws of nature and the attributes of matter provides equally tenable explanations of the order we observe.

Thus, in the Bahá’í Writings, there need be no inherent conflict between the concept of design – in the nature and potentials of laws and matter – and evolution vis-à-vis the actualization of these potentials in different forms over time. This weakens the new atheist argument that religion and science are necessarily antagonistic.

Dawkins tries to defuse the traditional argument from degree according to which the degrees of certain qualities such as goodness, perfection or truth require that there be a highest degree as a reference point for the lesser degrees. He replies that there must also be degrees of smelliness and

⁶⁴ `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 6.

⁶⁵ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 100.

⁶⁶ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 146; see also 176.

⁶⁷ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 178.

⁶⁸ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 176.

⁶⁹ `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 181; emphasis added.

therefore, a final “peerless stinker”⁷⁰ must exist. Obviously he does not understand the argument which requires us to distinguish between concrete descriptors (smelliness, redness) and “transcendentals”, i.e. attributes of being itself such as unity, (one-ness), goodness (in itself), truth and perfection. These can be applied to all beings – while smelliness or redness cannot. Once again, we observe how Dawkins sets up a straw man argument and thinks he has demolished the traditional argument when he has not even addressed it in the first place.

In *SAQ*, `Abdu'l-Bahá advances the argument from perfection as a proof for the existence of God.⁷¹ He says, “The imperfections of the contingent world are in themselves a proof of the perfections of God.”⁷² To say that something is imperfect or approaches perfection more than something else implies the existence of a perfect standard by which to measure imperfection. Such a perfect standard ultimately can only refer to God Who possess all perfections to a supreme degree, including the perfection of existence. God’s existence is perfect because it is necessary – there simply can be no greater degree of existence than God’s; furthermore, God’s existence is fully actual, i.e. God has no potentials left to actualize (otherwise He would be subject to change). He is complete and absolutely independent. On the other hand, the existence of creation is less than God’s because it is contingent, dependent and to some degree, potential.

Dawkins tries to undermine the ontological argument for God’s existence by referring to Kant who identified the “slippery assumption that “ ‘existence’ is more perfect than ‘non-existence.’ ”⁷³ The obvious problem is that it makes no sense to say that ‘non-existence’ is as perfect or as imperfect as ‘existence’ since we cannot ascribe any attributes whatever to ‘non-existence.’ Lacking all qualities and even the potential for acquiring qualities, non-existence is inherently less than existence; it is not even more imperfect – it just ‘is not.’ This understanding of the value of existence over non-existence is the ontological basis for gratitude to God for creation in general:

All praise to the unity of God, and all honor to Him . . . Who, out of utter nothingness, hath created the reality of all things, Who, from naught, hath brought into being the most refined and subtle elements of His creation, and Who, *rescuing His creatures from the abasement of remoteness and the perils of ultimate extinction* . . . How could it, otherwise, have been possible for sheer nothingness to have acquired by itself the worthiness and capacity to emerge from its state of non-existence into the realm of being?⁷⁴

An existential retort to Dawkins’ position would be to challenge him to choose non-existence for himself or someone he loves. It is a certainty that he will immediately and most personally discover the perfections of existence.

A survey of the new atheist’s work shows their handling of the issue of philosophical proofs for God’s existence is very weak, and shows little understanding of the subject. Aside from the problems noted above it should be noted that no major philosophers, even those with religious commitments, have ever seriously considered the “argument from scripture,” the “argument from admired religious scientists,” the argument from personal experience,” or the “argument from beauty”⁷⁵ as proofs for God’s existence. Pascal’s Wager is, of course, not an argument about God’s existence as Dawkins seems to think, but is an argument about belief.

⁷⁰ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 102.

⁷¹ `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p.5. The chapter is entitled “Proofs and Evidences of the Existence of God.”

⁷² `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 5.

⁷³ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 107.

⁷⁴ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, XXVII, p. 64 – 65. The statements about “nothingness” must be understood in light of `Abdu'l-Bahá’s clarification in *SAQ* p. 180.

⁷⁵ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 110 – 132.

9. Morality Versus Religion

One of the major goals of the new atheists is to separate morality from religion in order to undermine the argument that we need religion to be moral. They argue that enormous harm has been done in the name of religion and do not hesitate to provide exhaustive lists of horrors perpetrated in the name of faith. However, problems arise with their belief that such crimes are less likely to be committed in the name of atheism and that atheism has a more humane record.

In fact, the record of Marxist-Leninism, Communism, in which atheism is a foundational and integral part, shows that such is not the case. In the single century of Communist rule, approximately 100 million people have been programmatically killed in purges, vast slave labour camp systems, and man-made famines not to mention the brutalities of the secret police.⁷⁶ Even a cursory examination of the history of Communist countries makes it clear that atheism (which was often taught as a school subject) and atheists have no edge on moral behavior. The notion that the abolition of religion and its replacement by programmatic atheism would bring the end of murderous fanaticism is not borne out by history. Only Harris seems fully aware of this problem – and his response is to say that “communism was little more than a political religion.”⁷⁷ In other words, he tries to re-define communism as a religion – despite the fact that atheism is integral to the ontology, epistemology, ethics, philosophy of man, and social and political philosophy of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Mao. For obvious reasons Harris’ response is not credible. Hitchens admits that “emancipation from religion does not always produce the best mammal either”⁷⁸ but this is a statement made in passing and is not explored as to its implications for his indictment of religion.

The new atheists believe that we do need not religion as a basis for our values. The two must be separated because in their view we can rely on reason as the basis of our morals because we want to “commit ourselves to finding a rational foundation for our ethics.”⁷⁹ Says Hitchens: “We believe with certainty that an ethical life can be lived without religion.”⁸⁰ For support, he turns to Kant’s categorical imperative (CI) which states “I am never to act otherwise than so that I could also will that my maxim should become a universal law.”⁸¹ The chief problem with the CI is that it is an empty claim: it gives no specific guidance: a psychopath might very well agree that all people act as he does; Hitler, Stalin, Mao etc. expected them to – and struck first. In fact, the CI ultimately prohibits nothing and leaves our own subjective tastes as a standard for morals. This is obviously unsatisfactory as a basis for social order which requires unified moral standards. In a similar vein, Dennett writes, “Maybe people everywhere can be trusted and hence allowed to make their own informed choices. Informed choice! What an amazing and revolutionary idea!”⁸² Superficially this sounds good and reasonable, but if we ask ‘What principles shall guide these informed choices?’ difficulties multiply. Whose principles? What shall ground them? Why should I accept them? What happens if I disagree with them? Moreover, an even deeper question arises for all ethical systems grounded only on reason: ‘Why should I be reasonable? What if it’s to my advantage to act unreasonably? What if I don’t feel like being reasonable to others?’

As `Abdu’l-Bahá points out, ethical systems based purely on human reason can lead us to different, conflicting and even self-contradictory answers.⁸³ Indeed, ethical viewpoints may be little more than rationalized personal preferences. Obviously, such a plethora of competing viewpoints makes society unworkable since the existence of society depends on an objective standard applicable

⁷⁶ *The Black Book of Communism*, London: Harvard University Press, 1999.

⁷⁷ Sam Harris, *The End of Faith*, p. 79.

⁷⁸ Christopher Hitchens, *god Is Not Great*, p. 250.

⁷⁹ Sam Harris, *The End of Faith*, p. 177.

⁸⁰ Christopher Hitchens, *god Is Not Great*, p. 6.

⁸¹ Immanuel Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, <http://philosophy.eserver.org/kant/metaphysics-of-morals.txt>

⁸² Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, p. 327.

⁸³ `Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 297.

to all. In other words, ethical systems based only on reason lack authority and they lack an objective foundation applicable to all.

10. The Need for Absolute Ground in Ethics

The new atheists reject the necessity of an enforcing authority for morals. Dennett, as we have seen, thinks we can rely on individuals making their own choices,⁸⁴ and Harris thinks we can rely on our moral intuitions (more below) as well as Kant's other formulation of the categorical imperative i.e. that we must treat others as ends-in-themselves and never as merely a means to another end.⁸⁵ Hitchens, it is fair to say, speaks for these authors when he writes, "there is no requirement for any enforcing or supernatural authority."⁸⁶

There are two problems with this position. First, while it may (or may not) be an ideal to strive for, the practical problem remains that without consequences, without reward and punishment any ethical system becomes a dead letter, a mere set of suggestions that some will follow and others will not. That is why the Bahá'í Writings state "That which traineth the world is Justice, for it is upheld by two pillars, reward and punishment. These two pillars are the sources of life to the world."⁸⁷ Bahá'u'lláh also says, "the canopy of world order is upraised upon the two pillars of reward and punishment."⁸⁸ There must be consequences to action in order to encourage and reward obedience.

The second problem is that mere human authority, be it of reason or government lacks the authority to make people accept moral precepts; they lack the intrinsic authority of God Who is the author of all that exists. They lack the guarantee of correctness, the certainty, the objective viewpoint and foundation that only God can provide in guiding our actions. Yet this is exactly what people need as the new atheists themselves admit. This is precisely why Kant thought God was necessary as a regulative idea or principle in morals.

As an objective ground for ethics, the new atheists propose either an innate moral sense in all human beings, or in the case of Dawkins and Harris, in biology, i.e. genetics. These provide an absolute ground or absolute reference point needed to make moral choices more than the mere expression of personal preferences. Hitchens tells us that "conscience is innate"⁸⁹ and that "Human decency is not derived from religion. It precedes it."⁹⁰ Harris also asserts the existence of an innate moral sense:

Any one who does not harbour some rudimentary sense that cruelty is wrong is unlikely to learn that it is by reading . . . The fact that our ethical intuitions have their roots in biology reveals that our efforts to ground ethics in religious conceptions of "moral duty" are misguided. . . . We simply do not need religious ideas to motivate us to live ethical lives."⁹¹

Dennett's willingness to trust everyone's informed choices also implies that we all possess an inner moral standard of reasonableness to which we will adhere. Dawkins tries to ground the innate moral sense in our genetic make-up.⁹²

From the view-point of the Bahá'í Writings, this position is not so much incorrect as incomplete, and, therefore, leads to an untenable conclusion. In the first place, the Writings tell us that humans have the capacity to be moral i.e. learn moral behaviors but that this capacity must be

⁸⁴ Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, p. 327.

⁸⁵ Sam Harris, *The End of Faith*, p. 186; this is another formulation of the categorical imperative in Kant's *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*. , <http://philosophy.eserver.org/kant/metaphys-of-morals.txt>

⁸⁶ Christopher Hitchens, *god Is Not Great*, p. 266.

⁸⁷ *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p.27.

⁸⁸ *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 126.

⁸⁹ Christopher Hitchens, *god is not Great*, p. 256.

⁹⁰ Christopher Hitchens, *god is not Great*, p. 266.

⁹¹ Sam Harris, *The End of Faith*, p. 172.

⁹² Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, Chapter Six.

actualized by the teachings of a Manifestation acting through parental and social education.⁹³ `Abdu'l-Bahá tells us that “man, *if he is left without education*, becomes bestial, and, moreover, if left under the rule of nature, becomes lower than an animal, whereas if he is educated he becomes an angel.”⁹⁴

If our good or bad character is actualized by education, we immediately face questions the particular principles and teachings we shall inculcate – and here again, without divinely grounded guidance, we shall be subject to conflict opinions and programs. In short, we cannot rely only on the capacity to be moral for morality in practice.

This difficulty is exacerbated by the fact that humankind has a divine or spiritual aspect,⁹⁵ that might be compared to the innate moral sense posited by the new atheists. However, the Writings also note that humankind has an animal nature in conflict with our spiritual nature, and may overcome it by force or deception. The new atheists have not taken this animal nature into account in the unfolding of our moral lives and, therefore, have over-simplified the issue of innate moral intuitions. As `Abdu'l-Bahá says,

The promptings of the heart are sometimes satanic. How are we to differentiate them? How are we to tell whether a given statement is an inspiration and prompting of the heart through the merciful assistance or through the satanic agency?⁹⁶

Because this question cannot be answered immanently, i.e. from the standpoint of reason or intuition alone, we require an external guide or objective standpoint by which to evaluate our ethical promptings and decisions. This is precisely the role filled by God and the Manifestation. “He [man] has the animal side as well as the angelic side, and the aim of an educator is to so train human souls that their angelic aspect may overcome their animal side.”⁹⁷ However, if we reject God as the ground of our morality, then all moral systems inevitably fall into relativism and conflict as various moral conceptions compete. This is not conducive to the peaceful world both the new atheists and Bahá'ís want to establish.

In other words, the Bahá'í Writings lead us to believe that there is an innate moral capacity if man but that this moral sense is only potential until it is activated by education from parents, teachers but above all, by the Manifestations of God. The view that this innate moral capacity may have biological roots is not a problem from a Bahá'í perspective, indeed, is to be expected given that man is an embodied creature. Thus, Bahá'ís may agree that science can study the biological *basis* of ethics, without at the same time succumbing to the reductionist view that all ethics can be reduced to biology.

12. Faith Versus Reason

The new atheists also posit an inherent conflict between faith and reason. Hitchens sums up their views when he writes, “All attempts to reconcile faith with science and reason are consigned to failure and ridicule.”⁹⁸ Harris claims,

Religious faith represents so uncompromising a misuse of the power of our minds that it forms a kind of perverse, cultural singularity – a vanishing point beyond which rational discourse proves impossible.⁹⁹

⁹³ `Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 400 – 4001.

⁹⁴ `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 7; emphasis added.

⁹⁵ `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 118.

⁹⁶ `Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 254.

⁹⁷ `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 235.

⁹⁸ Christopher Hitchens, *god is not Great*, p. 64.

⁹⁹ Sam Harris, *The End of Faith*, p. 25.

For his part, Dawkins says, “religious faith is an especially potent silencer of rational calculation, which usually seems to trump all others.”¹⁰⁰ Such sentiments inevitably lead us to questions about the nature and scope of reason.

The new atheists’ work makes it clear that in their model of reasoning, they identify reason with science and the scientific method, i.e. with a naturalist view of reason in which reason must function within the limits of nature as understood by science. Any knowledge-claims that claim to transcend the natural realm and therefore cannot meet the scientific standard of knowledge are not genuine knowledge. Consequently, reason is fundamentally incompatible with belief in super-natural or super-sensible beings or realities and is also incompatible with faith which is “simply unjustified belief.”¹⁰¹ Indeed, faith simply shows an unwillingness “to stoop to reason when it [faith] has no good reason to believe.”¹⁰² In effect faith is inherently irrational, and, therefore, inherently incompatible with reason. Whatever we designate as knowledge must be rational, i.e. explicable in rational terms, and must fall within the limits of nature as established by science. There is no such thing as knowledge that transcends our natural limits; reason only functions correctly when it limits itself to the natural world. Any attempt to reason beyond physical nature opens the way to theological superstition.

We have already discussed the logical short-comings of this viewpoint, i.e. its inability to meet its own standards for genuine knowledge. Since experiments are limited to the natural realm, no experiment can tell us anything one way or another about the existence or non-existence about super-natural or super-sensible aspects of reality. Consequently, the naturalist viewpoint is itself a form of faith as the new atheists define it, i.e. “belief without evidence.”¹⁰³

In contrast to the new atheists who embrace an extreme rationalism which asserts that only positivist or scientifically rational knowledge is true knowledge, `Abdu’l-Bahá maintains a moderate rationalism. According to moderate rationalism, reason can tell us some things but not everything; it is necessary for the acquisition of knowledge but it is not always sufficient. While reason may prepare the way or lay the foundations for certain kinds of knowledge, there comes a point in the quest for knowledge, when we must rely on other ways of knowing. That is why `Abdu’l-Bahá points out that the mind which is “a power of the human spirit”¹⁰⁴ must be augmented by a super-natural power if it is to acquire knowledge of super-sensible realities: “the human spirit, unless assisted by the spirit of faith, does not become acquainted with the divine secrets and the heavenly realities.”¹⁰⁵ Reason alone cannot supply us with certain spiritual truths the knowledge of which requires super-natural guidance or inspiration. Nor can it provide complete certainty which is why other ways of knowing are necessary. `Abdu’l-Bahá points out that

the bounty of the Holy Spirit gives the true method of comprehension which is infallible and indubitable. This is through the help of the Holy Spirit which comes to man, and this is the condition in which certainty can alone be attained.¹⁰⁶

Similarly, in discussing various proofs of God, `Abdu’l-Bahá states,

if the *inner perception* be open, a hundred thousand clear proofs become visible. Thus, when man feels the indwelling spirit, he is in *no need of arguments* for its existence; but for those who are deprived of the bounty of the spirit, it is necessary to establish external arguments.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁰ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 346.

¹⁰¹ Sam Harris, *The End of Faith*, p. 65.

¹⁰² Sam Harris, *The End of Faith*, p. 66.

¹⁰³ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 232.

¹⁰⁴ `Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 208

¹⁰⁵ `Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 208.

¹⁰⁶ `Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 299.

¹⁰⁷ `Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 6; emphasis added.

In other words, when the mind is clear and open, we can perceive directly truths which we otherwise must laboriously prove by discursive reasoning. We acquire knowledge by immediate insight because we are enlightened by the “the luminous rays which emanate from the Manifestations.”¹⁰⁸

It is clear that one of the functions of reason is to remove the intellectual, attitudinal and emotional impediments that block our direct vision of the truth. Reason, so to speak, clears the path for faith because faith, too, is another way of knowing certain kinds of truth. As `Abdu'l-Bahá says, “But the discerning faith that consists of true knowledge of God and the comprehension of divine words.”¹⁰⁹ In other words, faith need not be ‘blind’ or ‘ignorant’ faith but can be “discerning faith” which provides genuine knowledge of super-sensible truths. Elsewhere he speaks of the kind of faith “which comes from Knowledge, and is the faith of understanding”¹¹⁰ This latter kind of faith culminates in “the faith of practice,”¹¹¹ a statement which calls to mind his pronouncement that “By faith is meant, first, conscious knowledge, and second, the practice of good deeds.”¹¹² He also points out that faith gives us “the capacity to partake of the lights of knowledge and wisdom.”¹¹³ Furthermore, `Abdu'l-Bahá says, “If a question be found contrary to reason, faith and belief in it are impossible and there is no outcome but wavering and vacillation.”¹¹⁴

Very obviously, the Bahá'í Writings do not view faith as ‘ignorant faith’ but see reason and faith working together, two wings of a bird,¹¹⁵ to provide knowledge both the sensible/physical and super-sensible aspects of reality. Consequently, the clash between faith and reason is not inherent or necessary as the new atheists claim but is a product of unclear thinking.

13. Intolerance Against Religion

One of the areas of major disagreement between the Bahá'í Writings and the new atheism is the latter's emphatic rejection not just of the intolerance shown by religions but also for inter-religious tolerance itself. Sam Harris writes,

religious moderates are themselves the bearers of a terrible dogma: they imagine that the path to peace will be paved once each of us has learned to respect the unjustified beliefs of others. I hope to show that the very ideal of religious tolerance – born of the notion that every person can believe whatever he wants about God – is one of the principle forces driving us toward the abyss.¹¹⁶

It is worth pointing out that religious intolerance is demonized – in favour of atheist intolerance, a self-contradiction given the new atheism's attack on intolerance by religion. It is also a case of special pleading insofar as they apparently believe that atheist intolerance is somehow salutary.

However, the new atheists go farther. Harris writes, “It is time we recognized that belief is not a private matter . . . beliefs are scarcely more private than actions are.”¹¹⁷ If beliefs are as public as actions, then they are subject to law and punishment like actions. Here we observe a more repressive side of the new atheism, which also becomes apparent when Dawkins writes

children have a right not to have their minds addled by nonsense, and we as a society have a duty to protect them from it. So we should not allow more parents to teach their children to

¹⁰⁸ `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 108.

¹⁰⁹ `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Bahá'í World Faith*, p. 364.

¹¹⁰ `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Abdu'l-Baha in London*, p. 64.

¹¹¹ `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Abdu'l-Baha in London*, p. 64.

¹¹² `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Bahá'í World Faith*, p. 382.

¹¹³ *Tablets of Abdu'l-Baha*, V. 1, p. 166.

¹¹⁴ *Bahá'í World Faith*, p. 240.

¹¹⁵ `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Bahá'í World Faith*, p. 382.

¹¹⁶ Sam Harris, *The End of Faith*, p. 15.

¹¹⁷ Sam Harris, *The End of Faith*, p. 44.

believe . . . than we should allow parents to knock their children's teeth out or lock them in a dungeon.¹¹⁸

As with Harris's challenge to the concept of religion as a private personal matter, Dawkins' claim suggests the instrument of law may have to be used to "protect them [children] from it [religion]." Hitchens' suggestion that teaching religion is "child-abuse"¹¹⁹ implies a similar line of action since child-abuse is not something any society should tolerate. He would at the very least forbid religious instruction until a child has attained "the age of reason."¹²⁰ Admittedly, Hitchens says he would not ban religion even if he could, but in light of his extreme rhetoric throughout his book, and especially in light of his claim that religious instruction is child abuse, this statement rings hollow. The intolerance of the new atheists – though it must be noted Dennett is largely free of this – also manifests itself in their expressions of contempt, gratuitous insults and other rhetorical theatrics during their discussions. These might make their works more entertaining but they do nothing to strengthen their arguments.

14. Belief in Belief

Perhaps the best portion of *Breaking the Spell* deals with Dennett's concept of "belief in belief,"¹²¹ which he describes not as belief in God but belief that belief in God is a good thing, "something to be encouraged and fostered wherever possible."¹²² He points out that "It is entirely possible to be an atheist and believe in belief in God."¹²³ He also suggests that some individuals who find their faith in God waning, try to restore their faith by enlisting others to believe in God. According to Dennett, while many believe in God, "Many more people believe in belief in God"¹²⁴ which he regards as a kind of unconscious or unadmitted atheism. People no longer believe in God but in a concept.

This raises an interesting question: 'Is belief in the belief in God a kind of belief or unbelief?' Can a person who believes that belief in God is a good really be considered an atheist, or is belief in the goodness of the concept of God itself a kind of faith in God? Has such an individual not taken the first intellectual step towards belief in God, i.e. is such a person not already on the road to faith insofar as s/he recognises a unique goodness lies in a certain kind of belief? If, moreover, we combine this belief or faith with action, as required by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, then belief in belief may, indeed, be a kind of faith.

The *Bible* also contains a relevant passage on this issue. The father of a child whom Christ was asked to heal said, "Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief."¹²⁵ Like Dennett's believer in belief, he, too, suffered from unbelief – yet because he recognised the goodness of belief, Christ accepted his statement as a statement of belief and healed the child. Unlike Dennett, therefore, we may interpret belief in belief as a species of belief in God, at least in principle. Dennett's understanding of belief in belief as a form of atheism does not necessarily follow from such belief itself.

15: Literalism

One of the new atheists' major problems from a Bahá'í perspective is their consistent literalism in reading Jewish, Christian and Muslim scripture. They read scripture in its explicit and most obvious sense and reject non-literal understandings. Dawkins rails against theologians who

¹¹⁸ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 367.

¹¹⁹ Christopher Hitchens, *god Is Not Great*, p. 217.

¹²⁰ Christopher Hitchens, *god Is Not Great*, p. 220.

¹²¹ Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, p. 200.

¹²² Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, p. 221.

¹²³ Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, p. 221.

¹²⁴ Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, p. 222.

¹²⁵ *Mark*, 9: 24

“employ their favourite trick of interpreting selected scriptures as ‘symbolic’ rather than literal. By what criteria do you decide which passages are symbolic, which literal?”¹²⁶ Assuming there is no rational answer, he simply continues his literalism, a practice supported by Sam Harris and Christopher Hitchens. In this sense, the new atheists resemble their fundamentalist opponents who also have a strong tendency to literalist readings of scripture.

There are two kinds of problems with new atheist literalism. The first concerns their neglect of centuries, indeed, millennia of non-literalist interpretation of scripture. This is not the appropriate place for a survey of scriptural interpretation, so we shall be content with two examples from Christianity. Already as early as the 5th C A.D., Augustine in his “*The Literal Interpretation of Genesis*” states that the creation story does not refer to seven actual days and that the time framework is not to be taken literally. The story conveys a spiritual meaning not a scientific account that can be expected to replicate modern cosmological findings. In more recent times, we have developed existential ways¹²⁷ of reading scripture as well as Bultmann’s de-mythologizing which understand scripture as dealing with the possibilities and conditions of human existence and decision-making.¹²⁸ In addition, we might consider the point that the spiritual teachings are communicated through “symbolic forms . . . which are designed to reach the more hidden levels in us of instinct, feeling, and intuition.”¹²⁹ Dawkins seems unaware of these possibilities and gives no reasons why this history should be ignored, i.e. why we should simply accept his unsupported assertion that symbolic readings are all a “trick.”

Whether we read symbolically or literally depends entirely on how we understand the intention or main idea of scriptural passage or story. It need not always be to convey actual historical events. It may, for example, function as a ‘myth,’ i.e. as an account in external worldly terms of inner psychological and spiritual processes. William Blake, for example, thought of the Exodus story as a journey from enslavement to a false notion of self and a struggle to attain a true one. It may be to convey the nature of (an) existential choice, such as Abraham’s or to draw attention to our need to recognise overwhelming and mysterious powers in our existence as in Job. In light of the history of scriptural interpretation, we can only conclude that the new atheists adopt literalism because it suits their polemical purpose of presenting religion in its most negative light.

From the viewpoint of the Bahá’í Writings, the second problem with literalism is that emphasise non-literal or symbolic readings of scripture. Perhaps `Abdu’l-Bahá sums up the Bahá’í position most succinctly when he states “The texts of the Holy Books are all symbolical.”¹³⁰ For example, in *Some Answered Questions*, `Abdu’l-Bahá provides extensive symbolic interpretations of Biblical books and stories; indeed, of the story of Adam and Eve, he says “if the literal meaning of this story were attributed to a wise man, certainly all would logically deny that this arrangement, this invention, could have emanated from an intelligent being.”¹³¹ Clearly he recognizes its irrationality at the literal level. Similarly, Bahá’u’lláh’s *Kitáb-i-Íqán (The Book of Certitude)* is a non-literal, symbolic reading of portions of the Qur’án and other Muslim theological statements. Bahá’u’lláh makes it clear that those who do not apprehend the inner, symbolic meaning of these terms, will inevitably suffer:

Yea, inasmuch as the peoples of the world have failed to seek from the luminous and crystal Springs of divine knowledge the inner meaning of God’s holy words, they therefore have languished, stricken and sore athirst, in the vale of idle fancy and waywardness.¹³²

¹²⁶ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 280.

¹²⁷ For example, *An Existential Theology* by John Macquarrie.

¹²⁸ *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Vol. 1, “Rudolf Bultmann,” p. 424.

¹²⁹ Jacob Needleman, *Why Can’t We Be Good?*, p. 10.

¹³⁰ `Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 220.

¹³¹ `Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 123.

¹³² Bahá’u’lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Íqán*, p. 105.

Insofar as the new atheism has confined itself to the outward, explicit meaning of scriptures, it is, like fundamentalism, lost “in the vale of idle fancy and waywardness.” He adds, that “the commentators of the Qur’án and they that follow the letter thereof misapprehended the inner meaning of the words of God and failed to grasp their essential purpose.”¹³³ This would certainly include the new atheists.

The new atheists cling to literal readings of scripture for the obvious reason that many of their complaints about religion would evaporate if scripture were understood symbolically. For example, problems with the Biblical creation account or with the story of Adam and Eve would be resolved in symbolic understandings. This weakens their case against religion.

16. Presentism

The final problem with the new atheism to be discussed is presentism, i.e. the logical fallacy of evaluating past societies which existed in completely different physical, cultural, economic, social and psychological circumstances by the standards of 21st century ideals as developed in advanced, post-industrial nations. Presentism is a particular form of the logical flaw known as *anachronism* which distorts our understanding of past societies and actions by introducing incongruous standards into our study of past societies. It is rooted in overlooking, ignoring or misunderstanding the fact that earlier historical circumstances may have required responses that would strike us as immoral.

Hitchens’ discussion of the Old and New Testaments represents the presentism found throughout the work of the new atheists. His discussion of the “pitiless teachings of the god of Moses”¹³⁴ shows no awareness of the time-frame he is considering, nor of the cultural conditions and political circumstances with other tribes. The laws may, indeed, strike us as harsh or odd – but to expect the ancient Jews living in a ‘tough neighbourhood’ to have been governed by laws suitable for 21st century post-industrial democracies shows enormous historical insensitivity. Speaking of Christ’s beatitudes, Hitchens writes, “several are absurd and show a primitive attitude to agriculture (this extends to all mentions of plowing and sowing, and all allusions to mustard and fig trees).”¹³⁵ Why would he object to the agricultural references in parables delivered in a time when the vast majority of humans were involved in agriculture?

Ironically, the new atheists’ presentism is a failure to adopt an evolutionary viewpoint on human development, a failure to recognise that just as humankind’s body has evolved, so has its capacity to understand moral and religious concepts. For that reason, expecting the same level of moral and religious understanding from ancient peoples living in wholly different circumstances is not a rational response. Furthermore, presentism involves the new atheists in a self-contradiction with their declared evolutionary principles. Consequently, this self-contradiction undermines their claim to base their arguments in strictly rational and scientific principles.

PART II: AREAS OF CONVERGENCE OR AGREEMENT

Despite the significant differences between the Bahá’í Writings and the new atheism, there are at least seven points on which they agree or at least converge.

17. The Evolution of Religion

Because of their advocacy of the scientific method, the new atheists agree that religion should be explored and discussed in evolutionary terms. Dennett, for example, says that the supernatural creatures “that crowd the mythologies of every people are the imaginative offspring of a hyperactive habit of finding agency wherever anything puzzles or frightens us.”¹³⁶ The HADD, which started out as a coping mechanism, a “Good Trick, rapidly became a practical necessity of human

¹³³ Bahá’u’lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Íqán*, p. 115.

¹³⁴ Christopher Hitchens, *god Is Not Great*, p. 100.

¹³⁵ Christopher Hitchens, *god Is Not Great*, p. 118.

¹³⁶ Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, p. 123.

life”¹³⁷ and thereby came to control and blind us. Hitchens traces the origins of religion to earliest man’s “babyish attempts to meet our inescapable demand for knowledge.”¹³⁸ Now that we have science, we have outgrown it. Dawkins presents two theories about the evolutionary origin of religion. In one, religion’s roots are the evolution-based tendency for children to “believe without question whatever your grown-ups tell you.”¹³⁹ The other is that religion “is a by-product of the misfiring of several of these modules”¹⁴⁰, i.e. data processing units in the brain as it evolved. Thus religion is essentially pathological, “an accidental by-product – a misfiring of something useful.”¹⁴¹ The time has come to correct this mistake.

From a Bahá’í perspective, there is no inherent difficulty with an evolutionary approach to understanding religion. Indeed, it is amazingly close to the teaching of progressive revelation according to which “the exoteric forms of the divine teachings”¹⁴² which are adapted to physical, historical and cultural conditions evolve over time, and the inner or “esoteric meaning”¹⁴³ or “eternal verities”¹⁴⁴ which remain constant to meet the universal needs of our human nature. Each Manifestation

restates the eternal verities they [previous religions] enshrine, coordinates their functions, distinguishes the essential and the authentic from the nonessential and spurious in their teachings, separates the God-given truths from the priest-prompted superstitions.¹⁴⁵

By distinguishing the essential from the non-essential and the man-made from the God-given, the Manifestation renews religion, providing it with a new outward form appropriate to new circumstances and new teachings or restatements¹⁴⁶ of universal truths suited to a new era. He cleanses religion of that which is “man-made,”¹⁴⁷ since the Bahá’í Writings agree with Hitchens that much of what passes for religion is man-made. Through this process of cleansing reform and augmentation religion evolves and continues to evolve without any foreseeable end.

Consequently, Bahá’ís are not surprised to find that different – perhaps to us shocking – laws were proclaimed in earlier times, that different practices held sway along with substantially different beliefs. Rather than condemn them from our current viewpoint we should try to understand these laws, practices and beliefs as agents in creating a unified society, often struggling for survival against implacable enemies. What progressive evolution shows is that God, works through history within the limitations of human beings endowed with free will, who often find themselves caught in very difficult circumstances. In these circumstances, it may have been necessary to punish adultery or theft very harshly for the cohesion and well-being of the group. We should also remember that perhaps one people was more receptive to God’s message than others and, thereby, became a special vehicle for human religious evolution. Surrounded by mortal enemies, these more receptive peoples may have been forced to take what strikes us now as gratuitously harsh action.

From a Bahá’í perspective, there is no difficulty in saying that religion started with a HADD for example or has roots in a child’s trust in its parents. Hitchens informs us there would be no churches “if humanity had not been afraid of the weather, the dark, the plague, the eclipse and all manner of other things now easily explicable.”¹⁴⁸ This may be true, but anyone who thinks this disproves the truth of religion is simply committing the genetic fallacy, a logical error according to

¹³⁷ Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, p. 116.

¹³⁸ Christopher Hitchens, *god Is Not Great*, p. 64.

¹³⁹ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 203.

¹⁴⁰ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 209.

¹⁴¹ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 218.

¹⁴² Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 75.

¹⁴³ Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 120.

¹⁴⁴ Shoghi Effendi, *The Promised Day is Come*, p. 108.

¹⁴⁵ Shoghi Effendi, *The Promised Day is Come*, p. 108.

¹⁴⁶ Shoghi Effendi, *The Promised Day is Come*, p. 108.

¹⁴⁷ Christopher Hitchens, *god Is Not Great*, p. 99.

¹⁴⁸ Christopher Hitchens, *god Is Not Great*, p. 65.

which we de-value something on the basis of its origin instead of its present state.¹⁴⁹ HADD, childish trust or childish fear are only the avenues by which religious phenomena first appeared in the world – and these avenues of emergence, determined as they are by their cultural circumstances, do not necessarily negate the truth value inherent in the beliefs that appear. Given the vulnerability of their rather short lives, it makes no sense to expect that our ancestors would have the same sophisticated religious understanding that is available in our day. However, their lack of sophistication does not prove they were not ‘onto something’ in their intuitions about super-sensible realities. If we demythologize these beliefs, we may indeed find valuable insights.¹⁵⁰

18. Crimes on God’s Name

Another area of significant agreement between the Bahá’í Writings and the new atheists concerns the crimes that have often been committed in the name of religion, not to mention injustice and corruption. The Writings make no effort to conceal or sweeten the misdeeds that have been perpetrated under the guise of religious teachings. Frank recognition of these sad developments is integral to the doctrine of progressive revelation since all religions and civilizations follow the seasonal cycle which begins with a pure spring inspired by revelation but ends with a winter in which

only the name of the Religion of God remains, and the exoteric forms of the divine teachings. The foundations of the Religion of God are destroyed and annihilated, and nothing but forms and customs exist. Divisions appear . . .¹⁵¹

‘Abdu’l-Bahá also says,

The beginnings of all great religions were pure; but priests, taking possession of the minds of the people, filled them with dogmas and superstitions, so that religion became gradually corrupt.¹⁵²

These corruptions led to false doctrines that encouraged war and destruction:

I wish to explain to you the principal reason of the unrest among nations. The chief cause is the misrepresentation of religion by the religious leaders and teachers. They teach their followers to believe that their own form of religion is the only one pleasing to God . . . Hence arise among the peoples, disapproval, contempt, disputes and hatred. If these religious prejudices could be swept away, the nations would soon enjoy peace and concord.¹⁵³

In the words of Christopher Hitchens, “religion has been an enormous multiplier of tribal suspicion and hatred, with members of each group talking of the other in precisely the tones of the bigot.”¹⁵⁴ Overcoming these prejudices and divisions is the purpose of Bahá’u’lláh’s mission:

The utterance of God is a lamp, whose light is these words: Ye are the fruits of one tree, and the leaves of one branch. Deal ye one with another with the utmost love and harmony,

¹⁴⁹ For example, Hitchens commits this fallacy in the chapter entitled “The Lowly Stamp of Their Origin”: Religion’s Corrupt Beginnings.” p. 155.

¹⁵⁰ Paul Radin, *Primitive Man as Philosopher*.

¹⁵¹ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 74.

¹⁵² ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *‘Abdu’l-Bahá in London*, p. 125; see also *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 406.

¹⁵³ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 45 – 46; see also *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 265.

¹⁵⁴ Christopher Hitchens, *god Is Not Great*, p. 36.

with friendliness and fellowship . . . So powerful is the light of unity that it can illuminate the whole earth.¹⁵⁵

The Writings also denounce religion's attempts to suppress the development of science,¹⁵⁶ the ignorance of the clergy,¹⁵⁷ the undue wealth of the churches compared to the poverty of Christ and the masses¹⁵⁸, and its interference in politics among other things.¹⁵⁹ Although the Bahá'í Writings do not express themselves as flamboyantly as the new atheists, they are equally clear in condemning the abuses perpetrated by religion and are equally determined to eliminate such practices. Moreover, like the new atheists, the Writings view the elimination of religion as a better alternative to continued division and conflict: "If religion becomes the source of antagonism and strife, the absence of religion is to be preferred."¹⁶⁰

The Bahá'í Faith and the new atheists differ on this issue only insofar as the new atheists want to remedy this problem by abolishing religion altogether as an irremediable destructive force, while the Bahá'í Faith sees the solution in progressive revelation and above all, in the revelation of Bahá'u'lláh. In the Bahá'í view, atheism and strictly man-made moral systems will not achieve the desired goal of a world that is at peace with itself and its environment.

However, we must not forget that the new atheists and the Bahá'í Revelation are responses to the same problem, i.e. global disunity, ignorance and the depredations of corrupt religion. This fact forms a basis for positive dialogue with the new atheists despite the difference in solutions. Unfortunately, the dogmatic denial that religion has anything worthwhile to contribute to such a debate makes such a dialogue unlikely.

19. Respecting Science and Reason

Another significant area of agreement between the Bahá'í Writings and the new atheists is importance of reason and science in human existence. Since we have already explored the new atheism's commitments to reason and rationality in the previous section, we shall point out a few Bahá'í statements on this subject to show that a basis for dialogue exists. For example, 'Abdu'l-Bahá says that "in this age the peoples of the world need the arguments of reason."¹⁶¹ Elsewhere he proclaims, "Science is an effulgence of the Sun of Reality, the power of investigating and discovering the verities of the universe, the means by which man finds a pathway to God."¹⁶² He sees no inherent and necessary conflict between reason, science and religion, a concept emphasised in the following:

The third principle or teaching of Bahá'u'lláh is the oneness of religion and science. Any religious belief which is not conformable with scientific proof and investigation is superstition, for true science is reason and reality, and religion is essentially reality and pure reason; therefore, the two must correspond.¹⁶³

Also:

Material science is the investigation of natural phenomena; divine science is the discovery and realization of spiritual verities. The world of humanity must acquire both . . . Both are necessary – one the natural, the other supernatural; one material, the other divine.¹⁶⁴

¹⁵⁵ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 288

¹⁵⁶ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 137.

¹⁵⁷ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 104.

¹⁵⁸ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 135.

¹⁵⁹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 136.

¹⁶⁰ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 117.

¹⁶¹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 7.

¹⁶² 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 49.

¹⁶³ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 107.

¹⁶⁴ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 138.

Finally, he points out the intimate connection between faith and belief and rationality, making clear that irrational faith is not just undesirable but essentially impossible:

Unquestionably there must be agreement between true religion and science. If a question be found contrary to reason, faith and belief in it are impossible, and there is no outcome but wavering and vacillation.¹⁶⁵

These statements demonstrate that according to the Bahá'í Writings, faith is not just “belief without evidence”¹⁶⁶ or ‘blind faith.’ Indeed, in the foregoing quotation, `Abdu'l-Bahá makes it clear that genuine faith in opposition to reason cannot exist since it leads to “wavering and vacillation.” Faith must include knowledge and understanding, because without them, even the strongest commitment is bound to weaken.

`Abdu'l-Bahá's pronouncements potentially form the basis for a far-reaching dialogue about the nature, strengths and limitations of reason, as well as the relationship between reason, science and religious faith. However, it must be admitted that such a dialogue will be fraught with challenges given the new atheist's insistence on a positivist and materialist view of science and reason and the Bahá'í Writings' allegiance to moderate rationalism and to belief in the super-sensible.

20. The Independent Investigation of Truth

The new atheists certainly agree that the quest for truth should be independent, i.e. unhindered by religious institutions such as the Inquisition or by religious beliefs. Otherwise, how can we know what the truth is on any subject? As `Abdu'l-Bahá says,

The first is the independent investigation of truth; for blind imitation of the past will stunt the mind. But once every soul inquires into truth, society will be freed from the darkness of continually repeating the past.¹⁶⁷

Elsewhere he says,

God has conferred upon and added to man a distinctive power, the faculty of intellectual investigation into the secrets of creation, the acquisition of higher knowledge, the greatest virtue of which is scientific enlightenment.¹⁶⁸

Bearing in mind that ‘science’ here does not refer to naturalistic or material scientism that `Abdu'l-Bahá rejects elsewhere¹⁶⁹, we see that the quest for knowledge is one of humankind's distinguishing features. This independent investigation is necessary not just for a few but for “every soul” so that all human beings can take responsibility for what they believe. Consequently, there can be no inherent objection to a Bahá'í investigating the new atheism and testing its arguments by the standards of logic, philosophy, science, history and theology. Nor is there any objection to Dennett's suggestion that we teach children “about all the world's religions, in a matter of fact, historically and biologically informed way.”¹⁷⁰ The only stipulation would be that such teaching must be complete, i.e. students must also be equipped with understanding of the inherent limitations of naturalistic science, so that their understanding may be conscious and critical and so that one faith-based preference is not simply replaced by another. In that way, each individual will be able to be able to give informed consent to whatever ideas s/he adopts.

¹⁶⁵ `Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 181.

¹⁶⁶ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 232;

¹⁶⁷ `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of `Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 248

¹⁶⁸ `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Bahá'í World Faith*, p. 244

¹⁶⁹ `Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 262, 311.

¹⁷⁰ Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, 327.

21. Ethical Realism

Although the new atheists and the Bahá'í Writings disagree about the role of religion in ethics, they do agree on ethical realism, i.e. the view that moral beliefs are not simply a matter of individual preference but rather that “in ethics, as in physics, there are truths waiting to be *discovered* – and thus we can be right or wrong in our beliefs about them.”¹⁷¹ This view is already implicit in their belief in some kind of universal ethical intuition which can be applied to all peoples at all times. Leaving aside the issue of how this universal ethical intuition might be manifested in different evolutionary circumstances, the new atheists and the Bahá'í Writings can agree that certain ethical virtues are objectively valid, among them compassion and goodwill,¹⁷² justice and fairness, tolerance, generosity and a dedication to truth.

An ethical realist position also means that the new atheists and the Bahá'í Writings agree on the rejection of relativism in ethics, i.e. they agree that ethical viewpoints are more than reflections of person preferences. They reject the view that we cannot judge ethical viewpoints because we lack an objective, Archimedean standpoint from which to make judgements. For the new atheists, this standard consists in our innate moral intuitions, and for Bahá'ís, this standard is established by God and is sometimes available through the moral intuitions of our spiritual nature.

The issue of ethical realism gives the new atheists and the Bahá'í Writings common ground in their opposition to ethical relativism as exemplified in postmodern philosophy.¹⁷³ It also provides common ground in regards to the essential unity of human nature, in regards to ethical intuitions and their possible genetic basis, i.e. a universal human nature which provides an objective basis for unity.

22. Objective Correspondence Epistemology

The agreement between the new atheists and the Bahá'í Writings on ethical realism has far-reaching implications, into epistemology for example. If there are universal, objectively knowable (and innate) ethical standards, then it follows that at least some knowledge is objective, that it is possible to evaluate at least some knowledge vis-à-vis truth and falseness. This lays the basis for an objective epistemology, i.e. the claim that all truth-claims are not necessarily mere individual or cultural constructions without correspondence to reality.

The new atheists' adherence to an objective epistemology is self-evident from even the most cursory survey of their books; after all, the whole enterprise of science is predicated on the principle that our discoveries correspond to or tell us something about reality. There may be interpretational differences whether this knowledge is about reality in itself or to reality in inter-action with us, but in the final analysis we gain some testable and objective knowledge about reality itself. This agrees with `Abdu'l-Bahá's statement that “the rational soul gradually *discover[s]* ... [and] *comprehends the realities, the properties and the effects of contingent beings.*”¹⁷⁴ In other words, the rational soul does not construct these realities, which is to say that these “realities” exist independently of the human perceiver. Elsewhere `Abdu'l-Bahá states,

the rational soul as far as human ability permits *discovers* the realities of things and *becomes cognizant* of their peculiarities and effects, and of the qualities and properties of beings.”¹⁷⁵

¹⁷¹ Sam Harris, *The End of Faith*, p. 181.

¹⁷² `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, 301.

¹⁷³ See Ian Kluge, “*Postmodernism and the Bahá'í Writings*,” and “*Relativism and the Bahá'í Writings*,” in *Lights of Irfan*, Volume 9, 2008.

¹⁷⁴ `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 217 – 218; emphasis added.

¹⁷⁵ `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 208.

Again, the emphasis is on discovery and on acquiring knowledge, becoming “cognizant” of the attributes of things. These properties are not ‘subjective,’ i.e. ascribed to things by humankind either as individuals or as cultures. Here is another statement from `Abdu'l-Bahá:

The mind and the thought of man sometimes discover truths, and from this thought and discovery signs and results are produced. *This thought has a foundation.* But many things come to the mind of man which are like the waves of the sea of imaginations; they have no fruit, and no result comes from them.¹⁷⁶

Here `Abdu'l-Bahá goes into more detail. Discoveries lead to “thought [that] has a foundation,” i.e. a foundation in reality, i.e. corresponds to reality. This, in effect, asserts an objective, correspondence theory of truth in which correct thought has a “foundation” or basis in reality, which is to say, corresponds to reality. `Abdu'l-Bahá also differentiates such thought from imaginations which he says lead to no real results. He also states,

Reflect that man’s power of thought consists of two kinds. One kind is *true, when it agrees with a determined truth. Such conceptions find realization in the exterior world; such are accurate opinions, correct theories, scientific discoveries and inventions.*¹⁷⁷

Here he speaks specifically of a knowledge that “agrees with a determined truth,” i.e. knowledge that *corresponds* to reality. He also provides a test for this knowledge: it leads to “accurate opinions” and “correct theories” which conform to reality as well as to discoveries and inventions. In other words, such knowledge has real results testable with the reality in question.

`Abdu'l-Bahá reinforces the correspondence theory of knowledge in a variety of statements. As already noted, `Abdu'l-Bahá states that “Philosophy consists in comprehending the reality of things *as they exist*, according to the capacity and the power of man.”¹⁷⁸ To comprehend “the reality of things *as they exist*” is nothing other than to have one’s knowledge correspond to reality. Naturally, this comprehension is limited by our station and capacities but this does not mean that what we do in fact comprehend does not correspond to reality. For example, the statement that the interior angles of a triangle add up to 180 degrees is true – but only in plane geometry. This statement is true but limited. The same holds for our true but limited knowledge of reality.

23. Realist Ontology

Along with a realist ethics and a realist epistemology, the new atheists and the Bahá’í Writings share a realist ontology. In its simplest terms, ontology is one’s theory of reality, its nature and modes of being. Although ontology seems far removed from ordinary human concerns, all human beings and cultures possess an ontology, although it is usually unconscious. For example, the simple statement, ‘I shall walk the dog’ assumes (a) that ‘I’ exists in some way, (b) that ‘I’ have could make such a decision, (c) the dog exists in some way, (d) that ‘I’ and the dog are distinct and separate entities, exterior to each other, (e) that motion is possible and real and that (f) the city street outside also exists. While this may seem self-evident to some, to others, such as those who believe the world is an illusion or *maya*, or who believe that the self is an illusion, none of these points are necessarily obvious.

It is undeniable that the new atheists and the Bahá’í Writings disagree about the ontology in regards to the existence or non-existence of any super-sensible reality. Naturally, the new atheists reject the super-natural. However, they do agree with the Writings that the world is real in its own right i.e. exists independently of human perception and possess some “principle, foundation, or

¹⁷⁶ Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 253; emphasis added.

¹⁷⁷ Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 251; see also 3, 9; emphasis added.

¹⁷⁸ Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 221; emphasis added.

reality”¹⁷⁹ which gives it existence in itself. In *SAQ*, `Abdu'l-Bahá flatly rejects the view that reality is a phantasm created by humankind:

Certain sophists think that existence is an illusion, that each being is an absolute illusion which has no existence – in other words, that the existence of beings is like a mirage, or like the reflection of an image in water or in a mirror, which is only an appearance having in itself no principle, foundation or reality. This theory is erroneous.¹⁸⁰

It is noteworthy that `Abdu'l-Bahá refers to those who maintain that the world is an “absolute illusion” as “sophists,” a term traditionally associated with flawed and deceptive reasoning. Use of this term signals his rejection of ‘illusionism’ or ‘phenomenalism’ which is confirmed by his statement that “[t]his theory is erroneous.”

Further support for ontological realism is found in `Abdu'l-Bahá’s statement that “each being”¹⁸¹ in the exterior world is real, i.e. possesses some “principle, foundation, or reality”¹⁸² which give it some degree of existence “in itself.” In other words, “each being” has at least some degree of innate existence, is individual, is distinct and possesses some detachment or independence from other beings and is, in that sense, unique. As `Abdu'l-Bahá’ says in a later section of this passage, “in their own degree they [things in the exterior world] exist.”¹⁸³ Each thing “in the condition of being [] has a real and certain existence.”¹⁸⁴ They are not mere “appearances” of something else, i.e. epiphenomena, passive side-effects or by-products that possesses no “principle, foundation or reality” of their own. This idea is re-enforced by the following statement:

for though the existence of beings in relation to the existence of God is an illusion, nevertheless, in the condition of being it has a real and certain existence. *It is futile to deny this.* For example, the existence of the mineral in comparison with that of man is nonexistence . . . ; but the mineral has existence in the mineral world . . . Then it is evident that although beings in relation to the existence of God have no existence, but are like the mirage or the reflections in the mirror, yet in their own degree they exist.¹⁸⁵

This statement makes it unequivocally clear that according to `Abdu'l-Bahá while degrees of reality differ, every being is, in its own degree, undeniably real. It is worth noting that he flatly rejects any contradictory viewpoint: “It is futile to deny this,” he says, thereby foreclosing any argument to the contrary. He emphasises the reality of creation elsewhere by stating “Now this world of existence in relation to its maker is a *real* phenomenon.”¹⁸⁶ In other words, it has its own, undeniable degree of reality.

The new atheists also accept the objective reality of the exterior world, which they understand as being purely material or physical and amenable to adequate study by the scientific method. Of course, where the new atheists and the Bahá’í Writings differ is whether the objectively known reality which exists independently of human perception and possess its own degree of reality, is limited to the physical or includes the super-sensible. This is a serious difference but it should not blind us to the fundamental agreement about ontological realism. Ironically on this, and the previously noted fundamental philosophical issues, the new atheists and the Bahá’í Writings share more common ground with each other than they do with postmodernist philosophy.

¹⁷⁹ `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 278.

¹⁸⁰ `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 278.

¹⁸¹ `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 278.

¹⁸² `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 278.

¹⁸³ `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 278.

¹⁸⁴ `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 278.

¹⁸⁵ `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 278; emphasis added.

¹⁸⁶ `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 280; emphasis added.

Conclusion

As is to be expected, there are far more differences than similarities between the new atheists and the Bahá'í Writings – though the extent of the similarities and their foundational nature is surprising. The question remains, however, ‘Are these similarities enough to allow a meaningful dialogue between the two?’ Can the differences between the new atheists and the Bahá'í Writings be bridged? In other words, is there anything the two can build on together?

On the foundational issues there is no common ground: they cannot agree on

- (1) the existence or non-existence of super-natural or super-sensible beings (God) or realities (Abhá Kingdom, Holy Spirit). [ontology]
- (1) the adequacy or inadequacy of the scientific method and reason as the sole determinants of what constitutes genuine knowledge. [epistemology]
- (2) the new atheist belief that religion is inherently pathological and no longer as a part in humankind's future evolution.

Change on any of these issues would undermine their core identities.

On the accidental or non-foundational level, there are several bases for dialogue and building together.

- (1) the evolutionary outlook on religion: the Bahá'í doctrine of progressive revelation can help the new atheists sharpen their analysis to avoid the problem of presentism.
- (2) the need to eliminate religious prejudice and a frank recognition of the crimes committed in the name of religion.
- (3) respect for science and reason and a continued dialogue about their nature.
- (4) the independent investigation of truth.
- (5) ethical realism, ontological realism and correspondence epistemology. This the new atheism and the Bahá'í Writings in opposition to various forms of contemporary philosophy which reject realism in these areas.

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