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THE FOLLY OF ANSWERING DISTRACTING ATHEISTIC ARGUMENTS

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Christian apologists regularly face what we call the *distraction challenge*: the temptation to take seriously *insubstantial objections* against God's existence. An insubstantial objection involves reasoning that is beyond or in spite of intellectual reasons or evidences; it may include nonintellectual or even anti-intellectual factors. We're not saying that these insubstantial objections are unanswerable or that it is somehow wrong to answer them; we're just saying that it might be more wise and prudent if our arguments and replies are attentive to the "reasons of the heart" and not only to those of the head.

Although atheists employ other types of insubstantial arguments, for the purpose of this article we will just consider as insubstantial their arguments from "luck." Certainly not all atheists utilize insubstantial arguments of the kind that we describe. But our concern is this: by lending credence to insubstantial arguments, the Christian apologist risks dignifying folly, encouraging self-satisfying flattery, and ultimately diminishing the power of gospel proclamation.

DISTRACTING ATHEISTIC ATTITUDE

It is not uncommon for atheists to argue for the following claims:

The universe is all there is and it luckily popped into existence, out of nothing, uncaused. The universe's fine-tuning, or ability to support life, is the result of luck and luck explains the origin of first life. Lucky positive mutations worked on by natural selection explain the complexity of life forms. It is more believable that the universe came about by luck than for God to exist because evidence for His existence is less obvious and more inaccessible.

These claims, at the very least, reveal the atheist's overall *attitude* or an epistemic stance (i.e., how they approach what is knowable); not only about God's existence, but also about the role of evidence and wishful thinking in one's belief formation.

Consider Richard Dawkins's admission in *The Blind Watchmaker* that "we can accept a certain amount of luck in our explanations, but not too much....We can allow

ourselves the luxury of an extravagant theory [regarding the origin of life on our planet], provided that the odds of coincidence do not exceed 100 billion billion to one.”¹ Dawkins goes on to say that “gradual evolution by small steps, each step being lucky but not *too* lucky, is the solution to the riddle” of how first life arose.²

Dawkins is not alone in these pronouncements. Other scientists have asserted similar explanations. For example, Nobel Prize winner Jacques Monod wrote that “chance *alone* is at the source of every innovation, of all creation in the biosphere. Pure chance, absolutely free but blind, at the very root of the stupendous edifice of evolution.”³ Similarly, in an attempt to explain the origin of the universe itself, physics professor Edward P. Tyron considers that “in answer to the question of why it happened, I offer the modest proposal that our Universe is simply one of those things which happen from time to time.”⁴

Should we entertain these arguments with a straight face? Are such atheist supercalifragilisticexpialidocious explanatory appeals to luck a distraction from the real issues? Above we noted that Dawkins said that our explanations shouldn’t be luckier than “100 billion billion to one,” which is 10^{20} . But Fred Hoyle, who Dawkins himself called a “brilliant physicist and cosmologist,”⁵ likened the probability of life originating on Earth as “no greater than the chance that a hurricane, sweeping through a scrapyard, would have the luck to assemble a Boeing 747.”⁶ We can’t even imagine that happening, right? Similarly, Nobel Prize winner Francis Crick reported that the pure luck assembly of one polypeptide chain “of rather modest length” to be 10^{260} . To explain the immensity of this luck, Crick pointed out that all the atoms in the visible universe only come to 10^{80} .⁷ What does belief in this supercalifragilisticexpialidocious kind of luck tell us about those who argue for it? How *should* we respond to such claims?

SHOULD WE RESPOND TO A DISTRACTION?

There are two possible responses. We could take the above claims as intellectually *serious*. If so, this would involve an almost tit-for-tat, direct response to atheist claims by offering counter-reasons and evidences. But our experience is that this tit-for-tat can be literally endless because those who appeal to this kind of luck alone will likely never give up arguing for what they desperately want to be true. If there’s the slightest possibility that an explanation for the origin of the universe, the origin of first life, or the origin of complex life can arise by sheer, unadulterated luck, then that mathematically all but impossible (if not impossible) argument will be employed. But how can one succeed in reasoning with an atheist as long as they maintain such an argument from luck?

Another option, however, would involve taking these claims *soberly* but recognizing that these are insubstantial objections masking reasons of the heart. If so, we should approach this option with only a limited and prudential use of counterargument—perhaps to remove a major objection in order to gain a more attentive hearing. After all, if an atheist is unwilling to explore honestly the “beyond intellectual reasons” factor, maybe that is an occasion where Jesus would have us “shake the dust off” our feet (Mark 6:11).

Some atheists directly admit they don't *want* God. New York University's Thomas Nagel acknowledged, "I hope there is no God! I don't want there to be a God; I don't want the universe to be like that."⁸ Nagel says that he fears the very possibility of God's existence. He recognizes that his fear is due to what he calls a "cosmic authority" problem. One might also consider the frank admission by nihilist Aldous Huxley, when he wrote that he "had motives for not wanting the world to have a meaning; consequently assumed that it had none, and was able without any difficulty to find satisfying reasons for this assumption."⁹

ATHEISTIC DISTRACTIONS: A FRAMEWORK

So how should we respond to an atheist's claims, if they reveal rationalizations that mask the reasons of the heart? Part of the challenge here is that there is very little guidance in contemporary Christian apologetics literature that accounts for such "objections as distractions." We suggest five factors to keep in mind when addressing distracting atheistic arguments.

First, recognize how supposedly intellectual claims can be shaped by a "fool's" heart. Although we don't need to name-call atheists as "fools," neither should we be inattentive to Scripture's wise insights, when it testifies that "the fool says in His heart there is no God" (Ps. 14:1; 53:1). Consider that when Jesus was asked by the Pharisees to provide more evidence—which He easily could have done—He instead replied that those who "demand a sign" beyond those He provided are "wicked and adulterous" (Matt. 12:38–42; cf. 1 Cor. 1:22–25, Luke 16:27–31). In general, the wisdom to be gained in these situations is to recognize how the corrupted desires of the human heart shape the "seeking" and "demanding" (cf. Rom. 1:19–20), even of those who legitimately desire to discover answers and ponder evidence. In our view, a smart approach is both/and: provide inquirers with answers and also help them attend to the movements and life-shaping powers of their own hearts.

Second, our anthropology should shape our understanding of the task of apologetics and its limits. Too often, we observe, apologists seem content to view their work as the mere outputting of reasons and evidences in response to inputted answer or information requests. This view tends to expect the following: as long as apologists "function properly" as outputters, the task of apologetics is being fulfilled. But apologists are not slot machines to be "played." Or, to switch metaphors, the value we provide to inquirers is not merely functionalistic, like a computer or search engine. Jesus has not called us to give an account like Google answers a search query. The manner in which we answer, including both our tone, strategy, and prudential reply, is as important as the content of our answer.¹⁰ Again, we are not suggesting that we cease to utilize carefully crafted apologetic arguments (if we were, we'd both be out of a job!), but we are calling for apologists to discern the following: whether for some people, and in some forums and contexts, our proclamation must go beyond answering questions to gospel proclamation with its inherent warning.

Third, our goal isn't merely to win the argument and rebut the counterclaims, but to help atheists become God-worshippers. Thus, Christian apologists don't best

serve the atheist by taking their every niggles seriously and refuting them as if eternal life depended on it. For among other reasons, this might very well suffer from a kind of “bigotry of low expectations,” of thinking that God and His church would just be pleased with them knowing “intellectual” answers to their questions. But is this humane, let alone Christian? Shouldn’t the goal involve helping them move a little closer, by the grace and Spirit of God, to becoming whole-life worshippers of God? If so, then we must help them (*whoever is willing*) understand the orientation of their own hearts.

Fourth, we must discern whether the inquirer wants to know an answer or just wants to argue, even noncontentiously. Philosopher Paul Moser has drawn a helpful distinction between an “obedience” vs. “discussion” mode of being human. This distinction is relevant to the topic at hand. An *obedience* mode, Moser writes, “responds to an authority by *submission of the will* to the authority’s commands,” whereas a *discussion* mode “responds with *talk* about questions, options, claims and arguments.”¹¹

It is challenging for obedience to emerge on the discussion mode alone; for it is poised for always talking, never needing to submit one’s will to an Authority greater than one’s discussion. It behooves the Christian apologist to help a person understand how the reasons of the heart have formational power to shape what one *wants* to be the case. It means helping them move from merely a discussion mode to an openness to the obedience mode.

Fifth, as the Spirit directs we must help our listeners reckon with the authority of God. Our concern is that if the goal of apologetics is just to advance positive arguments and refute counterarguments, the task of apologetics will become codependent on a discussion mode. Curiously, on that mode, it is easy to split “rational demonstration” from “proclamation”; but the “obedience mode” does not suffer from such a false dichotomy: it insists that apologetics and evangelism are interdependent and mutually beneficial.

Moreover, in discussion mode, you can’t go for broke; it does not really demand or require anything of worthwhile cost. It can keep a conversation in a perpetual state of sparring, even in a self-satisfying way; never ultimately surrendering to the authority or power of God. One can even maintain openness to objections against one’s atheism, and be seriously moved by their force of logic or argumentation; yet under the spell of the discussion mode no one ever has to give up atheism and surrender to God. There is no moral-spiritual obligation to surrender to God.

DISCUSSION MODE IS COSTLY

Discussion mode is less threatening for apologists since it is less likely to anger their opponents. In discussion mode we can just carry on as if apologetic discussion is no more serious than chess tactics and the only thing really at stake is whether the apologist is able logically to checkmate the atheist. In discussion mode, even if either side considers that one of his arguments has been checkmated—that’s only one argument and the only things lost are pride and boasting rights.

Calling people away from endless discussion is exemplified in Acts 17 by Paul's preaching in Athens, the land of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. Although the "Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new" (v. 21), Paul was wise enough not to argue with them all day, every day, about this or that new idea. Instead, Paul raised it out of discussion mode and told them that God *demands* their obedience (vv. 30–31): "In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead."

Here Paul makes apologetic argument by calling Jesus' resurrection "proof" that Jesus Himself will return to *judge the world*. And then people had to decide: "When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, 'We want to hear you again on this subject.' At that, Paul left the Council. A few men became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others" (vv. 32–34).

This happens more readily under obedience mode: some sneer, some want more chatter, but some come to Jesus. What would happen if apologists today, like Paul did with the Athenians, rejected contrivances and distractions by calling for obedience to God in their debates? Once in a panel debate, the atheists complained about hell and I (Clay) used it as an opportunity to warn the primarily atheist audience that yes, hell is awful, but Jesus died on the cross for your sins so that you don't have to go there. The atheists *hated* this and later complained that it wasn't fair for me to use a debate as an opportunity to present the gospel, but that's what Paul did, right? William Lane Craig has made similar gospel-shaped proclamations at some of his debates. We are not saying that apologists should abuse the privilege of being a debate contributor; but we are saying that calling hearers to reckon with the authority of God is not inherently contradictory to the nature of debate form. Further, when the disciples confronted crowds, whether in Jerusalem or Athens, they called their hearers to repent (Acts 2:38, 3:19, 17:30). Why should Christian debaters believe that they shouldn't likewise call their hearers to repent?

Of course we must employ reasons and evidence to answer objections and advance explanations. But Paul's argumentation *served his intent to proclaim*. What did he preach? Essentially, he preached the authority of God in their midst by confronting his listeners with the crucified and risen Messiah Jesus, who will also come again in judgment. We should, too. In discussion mode alone, Christians do no more than verbally vie for position and rank with competing ideas, and thus will more likely lend credence to insubstantial arguments. The Christian apologist then risks dignifying folly, encouraging self-satisfying flattery, and ultimately diminishing the power of gospel proclamation, which is neither wise nor Christian.

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NOTES

- 1 Richard Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker: Why the Evidence of Evolution Reveals a Universe without Design* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996), 139, 145–46.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Jacques Monod, *Chance and Necessity: An Essay on the Natural Philosophy of Modern Biology*, trans. Austryn Wainhouse (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971), 112.
- 4 James Trefil, "The Accidental Universe" *Science Digest* 92 (June 1984): 54.
- 5 Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2008), 142.
- 6 Ibid., 138.
- 7 Francis Crick, *Life Itself: Its Origin and Nature* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1981), 51–52.
- 8 Thomas Nagel, *The Last Word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 130.
- 9 Aldous Huxley, *Ends and Means* (New York: Harper, 1937), 312.
- 10 On "strategy," consider the helpful article by Daniel M. Johnson and Adam Pelser, "Communicating Truth through Humor, Ridicule, and Emotions," *Christian Research Journal* 35, 6 (2012): 44–48.
- 11 Paul K. Moser, "Jesus and Philosophy: On the Questions We Ask," *Faith and Philosophy* 22, 3 (July 2005): 273. Emphasis in original.