

The Atheist Debater's Handbook

by B. C. Johnson

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Preface

Much has been written in an effort to resolve the debate over whether belief in God can be rationally defended. However, pointing to the volumes contributed by theologians, philosophers, and lay persons is no reason to conclude that nothing further can be said concerning this vital question. Scholarly journals continue to publish new arguments and discussions focusing on issues that surround God's existence. Indeed, there are three journals devoted exclusively to the treatment of questions and topics in the philosophy of religion. Because they are generally found in university libraries, publications of this type are, for the most part, inaccessible to the public. Even if these journals were readily available, the articles they contain are nonetheless quite long, complicated, and rough-going; few people have the time, persistence, or stamina to wade through them.

This handbook is, in part, an attempt to summarize the

best arguments from these journals, and to offer a concise set of rejoinders for use by atheists in their formal (and informal) debates with theists. Older, more traditional, arguments are included as well, but these are treated in greater detail than ever before. Here and there I have set forth original arguments which I hope will advance the debate if only slightly. Great care has been taken to insure that digressions and rhetoric are minimized. The result is a short book, yet one that contains an unrelenting presentation of argument and analysis.

For some time now atheists have been in need of firm grounds upon which to base their position. My handbook offers them this foundation. Some will look upon my efforts as a sinister attempt to further undermine social values. Actually, my purpose is to show that atheism is an intellectually respectable viewpoint despite recent efforts to prove otherwise.

One point should be made concerning the structure of this handbook. In scholarly works there are numerous quotations and references which serve as important study aides. This technique seems inappropriate for a layman's handbook. The value of this work is found in its simplicity. For this reason the text is not interrupted by quotes or references. Where necessary credit has been given in footnotes and in an extensive bibliography.

I. God and Atheism

Theists believe in God, while atheists do not have such a belief. Many theists insist that it is the responsibility of the atheist to offer evidence justifying his lack of belief in God. But is the theist's demand rational? Must the atheist justify his lack of belief in God? Or does the burden rest with the theist?

Both the theist and the atheist agree on many points. For example, they share a belief in the existence of a physical universe composed of orderly atomic structures, and they may even hold very similar moral beliefs. However, the theist asserts that a *further* belief is necessary in order to explain both the existence and the characteristics of those things about which he and the atheist have similar beliefs.

The first point to notice is that the theist has proposed to explain a set of facts. Now if one offers an explanation of something, one must be prepared to provide reasons for

accepting the explanation. Consider what would happen if justifications were not required for all proposed explanations. We could "explain" something in whatever manner suited our whim. We could assert, for instance, that the earth turns because muscular ghosts push it. It might be claimed that the wind blows because air spirits are fanning themselves. We could even offer incompatible explanations of the same facts and there would be no way to decide among them. The atheist is like a man who does not necessarily claim to know what makes the earth turn but who nevertheless does not believe that muscular ghosts push it. It is vital for the one who believes in such muscular ghosts to offer reasons for his belief. By the same token, it is incumbent upon the theist to provide reasons for his belief that God is the true explanation of the universe and morality. The atheist, for his part, does not necessarily offer an explanation; he simply does not accept the theist's explanation. Therefore, the atheist need only demonstrate that the theist has failed to justify *his* position.

Another point to note is that the atheist believes in the existence of the universe and does not believe in anything which is more fundamental. The theist believes in the existence of the universe and—in addition—he believes in the existence of God. The theist, therefore, believes in one more thing than the atheist. If all beliefs should be justified, then surely the more one believes, the more justification one must produce. Clearly, the theist must justify this extra belief to the atheist. If, on the other hand, beliefs need *not* be justified, then we might as well give in to pure anarchy and admit that rational discussion is impossible.

Consider the following example illustrating why a justification for such additional beliefs is required: Suppose

there is a lawsuit in which I claim that a written contract exists while the other party to the alleged contract denies it. When challenged to prove the existence of such a contract I claim that it is up to my opponent to prove that it does not exist. Obviously, no case is ever conducted in this way. The person who believes in the existence of the contract possesses at least one more belief than he who denies its existence. Courts demand some justification for such extra beliefs, otherwise no case could ever be resolved.

As a further illustration, suppose I accuse someone of breaking my car window. This person denies the charge and demands to know the nature of the evidence pointing to him as the culprit. I reply that it is his responsibility to produce evidence indicating that he did *not* break the window. I believe in one more thing than he does: that he broke the window. Plainly I must first justify this extra belief. Until I do so, the accused person need not support his denial. And when he finally does support it, he need only do so by finding flaws in the evidence I have advanced against him.

Imagine that I just claimed there to be a gigantic man-eating frog in the local lake, and a friend denies it. It would be incumbent upon me to prove that such a thing exists, and not my friend's responsibility to disprove it.

Suppose I am a physicist and I claim to have discovered a new form of matter. My colleagues deny the discovery. I must produce evidence to support the discovery. They need not produce evidence to suggest that I have discovered nothing.

In each of these examples I have claimed to possess a belief which someone else has denied. I have expressed my belief in one more thing than can be found in his list of beliefs. I must justify this additional belief. He need not

justify his denial. The reason for this procedure is fairly straightforward: requests for disproof lead to hopeless situations. If I claim that a contract exists and demand that the skeptic prove me wrong, he could claim that there is evidence to disprove my claim but that it is up to me to disprove the existence of *that* evidence. I in turn could claim that there is evidence discrediting his evidence but that it is now his job to disprove the existence of *my* evidence. And so it would go without end. Once the demand for disproof is permitted to go unchallenged, it becomes impossible to prove any claim. Much time would be wasted in futile attempts to undermine evidence only to find more of the same piled up in its place.

How does this reasoning work when applied to the controversy separating theists and atheists? The theist claims that the atheist must disprove God's existence. The atheist could reply that there is conclusive evidence to suggest that God does not exist and thus it is the theist who must disprove the existence of such evidence. The demand for disproof inevitably leads to an inconclusive farce. The demand for proof, on the other hand, can have conclusive results. Therefore, the only sensible procedure would be to demand proof, not disproof.

If additional beliefs are held, one must be prepared to justify them in light of statements to the contrary. If, on the other hand, a person does not possess additional beliefs, then his position must prevail provided that his opponent is unable to offer good reasons for him to abandon it. The atheistic position must prevail if the theist is unable to support his belief in the existence of God.

Atheism can be more positively defended in the following way.¹ We can properly claim to know that many things are not so if reasons have not been offered to support the

claim that they are so. For example, I am able to claim that I know my friend Frank is not at home precisely because there is no reason to believe that he is at home. There is no noise coming from his house, the lights are out at a time when he is usually awake, his bed is empty, and so forth. Everything seems to count for my belief and nothing against it. I could discover that I was mistaken, but the possibility of error exists for virtually any knowledge claim one might make.

The parallel between the belief that Frank is at home and the belief that God exists is an exact one. If Frank is at home, there will be evidence indicating this state of affairs. On the other hand, if there is no evidence that he is at home, one can claim to know he is not at home. Similarly, if God exists, there will be evidence of this; signs will emerge which point to such a conclusion. However, if there is no evidence that He exists, then one can claim to know that God does not exist. It could be claimed that God exists but has simply left no evidence upon which to base the claim. But such a statement would be much like saying that Frank is at home yet there is no evidence of his presence. Neither claim seems plausible. Frank is normally involved with his house in various ways and if there is no evidence of involvement, one can assume that he is not at home. Presumably, God is even more involved with the world than Frank is with his house—after all, God created and designed the world. Therefore, if the evidence of God's involvement with the world is no more compelling than that of Frank's present involvement with his house, then one is equally justified in claiming that God does not exist as one is in claiming that Frank is not at home.

If I am correct, then the claim that there is no God can be justified on the grounds that there is no reason to

believe that he exists. What has just been said is no more surprising than if I were to claim to know that there is no Santa Claus because there is no reason to believe in him.

Are there reasons to believe in God's existence? This question will occupy us during much of the remainder of this book.

II. God and Science

There is a tendency among theists to offer, as evidence for the existence of God, phenomena which “science cannot explain.” For example, neo-Darwinism has thus far been unsuccessful in explaining the development of the turtle’s shell. All conclusions have been based upon the gradual modification of the rib-cage of its ancestors. Intermediate structures between rib-cage and shell would have had no use and therefore would not have been favored by natural selection. God, the theist claims, must therefore be the explanation of the turtle’s shell.

God certainly could be used to explain puzzling phenomena. However, the issue is not whether a particular explanation can be provided but, instead, whether the explanation presented is in fact correct.

To illustrate this point, let us consider the tendency of water to form into drops. One could explain this phenomenon by conjuring up invisible fairies who deliberately