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A REFLECTION ON H. J. MCCLOSKEY'S
"ON BEING AN ATHEIST"

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In February of 1968, H. J. McCloskey published an article in *Question One* entitled "On Being an Atheist." In his article, he gives various reasons for rejecting theism and adopting atheism. The purpose of this paper is to consider briefly the weight of McCloskey's arguments from the standpoint of a theist.

THE COSMOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

Early in the article, McCloskey identifies three arguments that seem to turn people to belief in theism, the first of which is the cosmological argument. McCloskey sets forth a basic version of the argument, relating that the world as we know it requires an all-powerful, all-perfect uncaused cause—a being who cannot *not* exist since the universe exists. He then trounces the argument, saying, "If we use the causal argument at all, all we are entitled to infer is the existence of a cause commensurate with the effect to be explained, the universe, and this does not entitle us to postulate an all-powerful, all-perfect uncaused cause. The most it would entitle one to conclude is that the cause is powerful enough and imperfect enough to have created the sort of world we know."¹ He then states that because the world is imperfect, and because we see a great deal of unnecessary evil, if we reason that there is a creator at all, he must be either "a malevolent powerful being or . . . a well-intentioned muddler."²

It would seem that Mr. McCloskey assumes that the universe as we know it (with its current defects) must be the world as it was created, without considering the theist's appeal to special revelation as to why this may be so. In short, if one accepts that the universe has need of

¹ H. J. McCloskey, "On Being an Atheist," *Question One*, February 1968, 63.

² *Ibid.*, 64

a first cause at all, McCloskey views the problem of evil as the definitive destruction of that first cause as an all-powerful, all-perfect being. Two questions arise, then: does the universe need a first cause? If so, does the problem of evil defeat the possibility of an all-powerful, all-perfect being as that first cause?

Since McCloskey does not address the first question, we will consider it only briefly here. In order to escape the need for a first cause, we can accept that the things in this universe, the contingent beings, just exist as “brute facts,” or we can rely upon an infinite regression of causes for these contingent beings. In either case, no explanation is offered as to why contingent beings exist at all, and the *principle of sufficient reason* is abandoned.³

We will return to McCloskey’s second objection to the cosmological argument—the existence of evil—shortly, since the existence of evil is the overall theme of his article.

Evans and Manis note that the cosmological argument itself provides a weak basis for theism, and in fact could be used to support many kinds of theistic belief systems. It is, at best, an “entering wedge into the knowledge of God.”⁴

THE TELEOLOGICAL ARGUMENT AND ARGUMENT FROM DESIGN

McCloskey moves into an attack on the teleological argument, the argument from the apparent design in the universe, by stating that he rejects the premise: he finds no evidence of design and purpose in the natural world. He says, “To get the proof going, genuine indisputable examples of design or purpose are needed. There are no such examples, so the proof does not get going at all”—which to him provides a “very conclusive objection.”⁵

³ C. Stephen Evans and R. Zachary Manis, *Philosophy of Religion: Thinking about Faith*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009) 74–75.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 77.

⁵ McCloskey, 64.

It is important to note that McCloskey was writing in an era in which the study of DNA was still relatively young (about fifteen years from the first accepted model of the double helix); yet even in our own day, atheists such as Richard Dawkins admire the immense complexity of DNA while refusing to acknowledge its design: “A DNA molecule is too small to be seen, but its exact shape has been ingeniously worked out *by indirect means*” (emphasis added).⁶ Keep in mind that Dawkins is fully aware of the incredible complexity of DNA, yet he ascribes its very existence to time and random chance, the product of countless ages of matter defying the laws of nature (abiogenesis and the Second Law of Thermodynamics) to become increasingly complex and diversified. If the “ingeniously worked out” design of DNA is not an indisputable example of design or purpose in the mind of an atheist, can any example ever suffice? It would seem that the refutation of design is a matter of prejudice rather than careful reflection of the evidence.

Even if we accept evolution as the factor which is responsible for the apparent design in nature, what evidence do we have that blind, unassisted chance could produce the natural order we see all around us? Two answers should be considered. First, it seems implausible that time and random chance *alone* are responsible for the order we find in the universe. The carefully ordered information latent in each existing being call for a guide to assemble that information and make it useable in ways that time and chance alone cannot. Second, even if the universe is simply a machine that functions in such a way as to make evolution possible, accounting for the extreme fine-tuning of natural laws that allow life to exist at all, must not such a machine *itself* have a designer? The machine—that is, the universe—will do what it was designed to do.⁷ In this respect, I find it interesting that just about any evolutionist will use the word “design” with

⁶ Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, Thirtieth Anniversary edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 22. See also his analogy of DNA to an enormous building in which an exact copy of “the architect’s plans” (DNA) is present in every room (cell) of an enormous building with a “trillion million million” rooms (a body): “There is, of course, no architect” (pp. 22–23).

⁷ Evans and Manis, 82–83.

abandon while maintaining that such design is only evidence of the work of an impersonal machine; yet they offer no explanation as to how the impersonal, unintelligent machine can design *with exact precision* every factor that makes life possible.

Evans and Mantis point out that the teleological proof cannot be convincing to every rational human being because the standards of “proof” are set incredibly high—so high, in fact, that perhaps no significant claim of philosophy, held to that same standard, could ever be proven. “[I]f this is so, the failure to prove God’s existence is surely no point in favor of atheism.”⁸

McCloskey again appeals to the problem of evil as a further refutation of the teleological argument: “Even if we uncritically accepted the examples of purpose and design pointed out by the exponents of this argument, all we should be entitled to conclude was that there was a powerful, malevolent, or imperfect planner or designer.”⁹ We turn now to address McCloskey’s appeal to the problem of evil.

THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

McCloskey uses the problem of evil to refute an all-powerful, all-perfect uncaused cause as the condition for the existence of contingent beings; he also relies on the problem of evil to refute the idea that we can find examples of design in the universe due to a Designer. If McCloskey is correct in his assessment of evil, then the arguments for theism fall flat.

However, the problem of evil proves to be a greater problem for atheism than it does for theism. In the first place, recognizing the existence of evil requires the existence of objective moral good. If there is no good in the universe, how can we recognize or classify anything as evil? Yet we do recognize evil, and the atheist cannot raise the problem of evil without also raising the recognition of the objective moral good which he is attempting to deny. As Ravi

⁸ Ibid., 87.

⁹ McCloskey, 64.

Zacharias notes, “Not one proponent of evolutionary ethics has explained how an impersonal, amoral first cause through nonmoral processes has produced a moral basis for life, while at the same time denying any objective moral basis for good and evil.”¹⁰ In appealing to the existence of evil as a denial of God, McCloskey inadvertently affirms the existence of objective moral good necessitated by a moral first cause. McCloskey can recognize the existence of evil *only because* he has an inherent understanding of objective moral good—and atheism cannot account for that.

Beyond the cold, logical answer lies the true emotional basis for McCloskey’s rejection of theism. He raises the example of one whose infant daughter is struck with meningitis and suffers permanent damage.¹¹ He believes that a perfect moral being cannot coexist with evil. If He were truly all-powerful and all-perfect, He would not allow evil at all; yet since evil exists, He is either too weak to prevent it (“a well-intentioned muddler”) or evil Himself (“a malevolent, powerful being”). Either way, in McCloskey’s mind, He is unworthy of worship.

I would agree with McCloskey that such a Being would be unworthy of worship; but is McCloskey right to hold to his dichotomy—that either God exists *or* evil exists? Against the emotional backdrop of the evil we actually see, philosophy alone cannot answer. Indeed, McCloskey briskly and briefly overturns the defenses that natural theology can raise. It is only in the context of special revelation that we can find the answers we need.

The Bible tells us that evil is a temporary condition. It has a beginning (Genesis 3) and it has an end (Revelation 21:1). It serves the purpose in the meanwhile of allowing us to make choices of our own free will. McCloskey asks, “[M]ight not God have very easily so arranged the world and biased man to virtue that men always freely chose what is right?” He then adds that

¹⁰ Ravi Zacharias, *Jesus among Other Gods* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 2000), 113.

¹¹ McCloskey, 67–68.

since theists present God as a moral free agent who can never do wrong, God should have been able to make men in the same fashion. While it is logically possible that God could have created such a world—a world in which free moral agents always choose to do what is right—Alvin Plantinga shows that “there are logically possible worlds which even an omnipotent being cannot bring into existence.”¹²

Again, we turn to special revelation for the answers we need. In his discussion of Genesis 3, Francis Schaeffer makes the case for the necessity of free will:

Today people constantly ask, “Does man have a purpose?” In some areas of the world man is told he has purpose only in reference to the state. In other places he is told that he only has meaning in his sexual life. Elsewhere he is told he has meaning only through affluence. But all of these turn to sawdust in his hands. The Bible gives us quite a different answer: The purpose of man—the meaning of man—is to stand in love as a creature before the Creator.

But the man who stands before God stands there in God’s image as a true personality, and the love which his is to give is not mechanical. The machine can only obey God mechanically; when it does, it is doing what God meant it to do. The far-flung system of the universe operates, much of it, as a great machine; and as such it fulfills its purpose. That is all it was meant to do. But man is a different being, made in a different circle of creation. He is to love God, not mechanically, but by the wonder of choice. Here stands an unprogrammed part of creation—unprogrammed chemically or psychologically—real man in a real history, a wonder in the midst of a world of uniformity of cause and effect. In the flow of history, man is brought face to face with that for which he has been made—face to face in a loving relationship to the God who is there.¹³

Man’s ability to freely choose between good and evil proves that man is a significant being. Schaeffer goes on to note that God did not make a good tree and an evil tree. The tree God made was just a tree. He then says, “It is perfectly true that in making man as he did God made the possibility of evil. But the bare possibility of evil is not the actualizing of it. And in making

¹² Evans and Manis, 165, summarizing Alvin Plantinga in *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), 173ff.

¹³ Francis Schaeffer, *Genesis in Time and Space* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1972), 70–71.

that possibility, God validated choice and validated man as man—a being significant in history.”¹⁴

In answering the question of man’s free will, Schaeffer also points to man’s purpose in life. It is to this final consideration that we now turn.

THE COMFORT OF ATHEISM

McCloskey argues that, far from being devoid of comfort as the theist would expect, he finds great comfort in atheism. Victims can find comfort in knowing that no god caused them to suffer, and seek and receive comfort and strength from their “friends and men of goodwill instead.”¹⁵ But is this alone sufficient reason to adopt atheism? Suppose my “friends and men of goodwill” appear to be comforting me in my time of need but are really in some way simply advancing their own personal agendas in ways that will exploit me? After all, who is to say that they would be wrong to do so? If there is no God, no objective standard of good, then how can we even sense that our friends or others have our best interests at heart? In a world without objective good, man’s highest duty is to himself and his own interests; the comfort we receive from others comes with a price determined by their self-advancement.

In addition, McCloskey proposes that atheists ought to “support the efforts of mankind to reduce the occasions on which such comfort is needed” (by means such as abortions of defective children and voluntary euthanasia and suicide, among other efforts).¹⁶ Here I find McCloskey’s reasoning to be disturbing. While his main argument against theism lies with the problem of evil, he establishes a standard which can easily be abused into great evil; for who is to determine the value of human life? Who will determine which children pass the test of physical and mental

¹⁴ Ibid., 72.

¹⁵ McCloskey, 68.

¹⁶ Ibid., 69.

adequacy and are worthy to be born? Who will determine what constitutes “voluntary euthanasia” for those who lack their own judgment?

McCloskey concludes by placing a moral obligation of his own upon his fellow atheists: “Atheism, adopted by a thoughtful and sensitive person, leads to a spirit of self-reliance, to a self-respect which *demand*s that we comfort and help those who need such support, and to a furthering and supporting of all measures which will reduce or moderate the blows of fate” (emphasis added).¹⁷ McCloskey’s vision of atheism finds comfort from fellow men who, like him, act altruistically rather than selfishly to meet the needs of others, and to find comfort from others when comfort is needed. Can McCloskey offer any undisputed examples of such behavior? Who is to tell the atheist how he ought and ought not to act? Why is the atheist obligated to act in the interests of anyone but himself? Who is to say he is right or wrong regarding his decision to comfort or not to comfort others? Does the adoption of atheism automatically confer upon a person the qualities of thoughtfulness and sensitivity? Who is to determine what measures will “reduce or moderate the blows of fate” if there is a difference of opinion regarding a proposed course of action? It is entirely conceivable (and historically verifiable) that thoughtful atheists can agree that *involuntary* euthanasia or eugenics can “reduce or moderate the blows of fate.”

In the final analysis, McCloskey seems to offer little in the way of validating atheism outside of the arguments against theism. He tells us why we ought not believe in theism, but leaves us unsatisfied as to why we ought to adopt atheism.

William Lane Craig cuts to the chase, showing that without God, man is doomed and life is absurd. The universe—and along with it the entire human race—is doomed to die; and when it

¹⁷ Ibid, 69.

dies, it will make no difference at all that man had ever existed.¹⁸ He says, “So if God does not exist, that means that man and the universe exist to no purpose—since the end of everything is death—and that they came to be for no purpose, since they are only the blind products of chance. In short, life is utterly without reason.”¹⁹ After Craig fleshes out his reasoning regarding atheism, he turns to evaluate theism, specifically Christianity:

But if atheism fails in this regard, what about biblical Christianity? According to the Christian worldview, God does exist, and man’s life does not end at the grave. In the resurrection body man may enjoy eternal life and fellowship with God. Biblical Christianity therefore provides the two conditions necessary for a meaningful, valuable, and purposeful life for man: God and immortality. Because of this, we can live consistently and happily. Thus, biblical Christianity succeeds precisely where atheism breaks down.²⁰

Craig fleshes out his arguments in ways that McCloskey does not. McCloskey attempts to undermine theism while offering little of substance in support of atheism, and he fails to carry his beliefs about atheism to their logical conclusions by adopting a standard of goodness for which he cannot account and obligating others to that standard without any moral authority to do so. On the other hand, Craig is able to make the appeal that while he has not proven Christianity to be true, he has shown the logical conclusions of the alternatives. He says, “If God does not exist, then life is futile. If the God of the Bible does exist, then life is meaningful....Therefore, it seems to me that even if the evidence for these two options were absolutely equal, a rational person ought to choose biblical Christianity.”²¹

¹⁸ William Lane Craig, “The Absurdity of Life without God,” *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, 3rd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2008), 71.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 77.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 86.

²¹ *Ibid.*

CONCLUSION

From the standpoint of a theist, I can see no viable reason to reject the arguments for God's existence discussed by McCloskey, to assume that the existence of evil precludes the existence of a holy God, or to limit my comfort in this life to that which my friends and men of goodwill can provide.

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