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In recent years, there has been a swell in atheist popular literature. The likes of Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Christopher Hitchens, and Sam Harris have emerged as voices of a “new atheist” humanist movement. Bent on calling attention to the dangers and irrationality of theistic belief, they largely champion science as an antidote to religion. In keeping with this, professor of Philosophy at the University of Toronto, and Emeritus Professor at the London School of Economics and Political Science, Colin Howson tackles religion from the perspective of a logician and philosopher of science in *Objecting to God*.

In his first chapter “Of human bondage,” Howson’s tone is remarkably similar to the so-called new atheists. In subsections such as “The Perils of Prophecy,” “Clear and Present Danger,” “Your Life Isn’t Your Own,” and “Assisting a Crime,” Howson laments religion’s powerful “grip on the human psyche” (7) and emphasizes the profound moral issues that he perceives to result from the elevation of faith over evidence. Calling the Abrahamic religions “fear-inspiring totalitarian” belief systems (7), Howson offers examples, both scriptural and experiential, supporting his perception of these religions’ predisposition to violence and intolerance, rooted largely in their “absolutist morality based on the command of an all-powerful [God]” (6). A highlight is his interpretation of the Biblical story of God’s command to Abraham to sacrifice Isaac; Howson argues that it leads to “the reasonable conclusion that the God of Abraham is a psychopath” (29). While he anticipates that many will question the virtue of attempting to destroy the faith of billions (9), Howson posits that religion is an obstacle to free and rational thought and the best way to remove the obstacle is to prove that God is “in all probability nothing but a figment of [human] imagination” (33). The refutation of the existence of God is the book’s essential task.

Howson begins by arguing against the view of science and religion as “incommensurable domains of belief,” asserting that since religions purport to make factual claims, they are subject to scientific investigation (37). He then critiques the logic of the concept of God through an examination of God’s omniproperties (omniscience, omnipotence, and omnibenevolence). Focusing primarily on the latter two properties, Howson asserts that the concepts themselves are intrinsically problematic. For instance, he dismisses the logic of

omnipotence through the well-known paradox “Can God create a stone that he cannot lift?” He also denies God’s existence on the basis of worldly problems (47-48). For instance, he argues that for centuries theologians have unsuccessfully attempted to reconcile human suffering with the goodness of God. Finally, he concludes on the basis of these arguments that the odds “a priori and a posteriori, against the existence of an omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent God certainly seem too long to be comfortable” (59), an observation he notes that many theologians and scientists do not endorse.

In what Howson deems “one of the greatest reversals of fortune ever witnessed,” he asserts that science, supposedly the largest threat to religion, has been appropriated by those who defend the existence of God (62). Increasingly, on the basis of scientific theory, physicists, biologists, geneticists, and mathematicians are arguing for the existence of a Cosmic Designer who shaped the world specifically for human purposes (62). Howson challenges the validity of these claims as instances of the highly topical fine-tuning problem which fallaciously concludes that fundamental physical constants appear to have been fine-tuned to permit a “life-friendly universe” in such a way that is vastly too improbable to be the outcome of chance (67).

At this point, Howson’s tone shifts dramatically as he abruptly transfers from the style and jargon typical of a new atheist to the precision characteristic of a logician. Accordingly, in the next two chapters, Howson painstakingly explores a series of mathematical equations based on probability and scientific data in order to demonstrate logical errors in the fine-tuning problem. Though Howson’s invocation of Baysean probability in this section is undoubtedly pertinent to the discussion of the fine-tuning problem, this shift in the book is jarring. One is neither prepared for the weight and complexity of his mathematically formulated arguments, nor is it particularly clear why he felt it necessary to examine this specific area of argument. While I do not doubt Howson’s expertise in the area of Baysean logic, his discussion grows tedious. As a result, for readers unfamiliar with the language of probability, the book temporarily loses what was compelling about the first two chapters: namely, the passionate discussion of the urgent problems posed by religious belief. Howson’s mathematical formulations might ultimately cost him readers.

Resurfacing from his foray into probability-based justification for his views, Howson asserts that there is a negligibly small chance that an all-powerful, all-knowing God would “go through [the] torturous rigamarole” of creating a universe that adheres to laws which provide such small windows of opportunity for life, when this God could surely have thought of “a less

complicated and hazardous way of creating intelligent life” (111). Howson concludes this section of the book by definitively stating that both the prior odds (probability based on speculative evidence) and posterior odds (probability based on hard evidence) for and against theism mutually refute one-another. As such, he claims to have mathematically refuted the existence of God, at least to his own satisfaction.

Howson’s sixth chapter entitled “Moral Equilibrium” is arguably the most compelling and philosophically significant. Howson again changes his focus, exploring the pragmatic argument that God and morality are necessarily related and codependent. Finding an ally in Kant, Howson argues that there is “little genuine morality in doing something simply because it is the will of a very powerful individual who is certain to pursue violations with condign punishment” (137). Thus, he dismisses religion as a true source of morality (137). Refuting the argument that moral awareness in humans substantiates God’s existence, he cites recent research findings that “selfless altruism” is compatible with Darwinian theory (138-9). In addition to scientific data, Howson relies on Hume’s ethical model, asserting that moral virtue is developed partially through social cooperation and convention, and partially through the innate capacity for sympathy, which translates to moral disapprobation. These ultimately preserve one’s own interests (158-60). By this, Howson seeks to provide a counter-argument to the assertions of theists who believe, like Dostoevsky’s character Ivan Karamazov, that “If God does not exist, everything is permitted,” though Howson notes that this famous remark never actually appears in the novel (152). Howson insists that “Anyone older than a year or so will know that what stops undesirable things being permitted is not God at all but an entire hierarchy of people invested by other people with the appropriate authority” (152). In other words, Howson believes that as committed social beings, we ourselves are the clear alternative source of moral authority to God (152).

Howson concludes the book with an argument alluded to in the earlier chapters. Borrowing a theorem developed by mathematician and logician Kurt Gödel, which asserts that a system cannot demonstrate its own consistency, Howson attempts to drive the final nail into God’s coffin. Coupling Gödel’s theorem with Tarski’s Undefinability of Truth Theorem, which states that no language can “contain a predicate which applies to, i.e. is true of, all and only its own true sentences,” Howson reasons that God’s omniscience is accordingly impossible, as “God’s knowledge states transcend God: he can’t faithfully describe them” (203).

Murphy

Lamenting again the persistence of belief despite his view that the rationality of belief has been adequately undermined, Howson writes that “It is time to complete the Copernican revolution and replace Him by his creature, mankind, as the moral centre of our world, and so bid Him - *adieu*” (209).

Howson has provided us with an important, and at times challenging, book. Not only does it bring new atheism into the realm of academia proper, but it pushes strongly and unapologetically against the current trend in religious studies within the context of liberal political correctness to treat religious belief with immense delicacy, as unquestionable and above criticism. Howson cites the intellectual battle to prove that God does not exist to be his most important goal. However, he is at his strongest when discussing the real-world problems posed by belief in God, not the theoretical and intellectualized problems of The God Hypothesis. His moral argumentation is most compelling: the economy and directness of his discussion of practical consequences of belief in God and of acts committed in His name makes this an exciting and crucial work.

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