

John F. Haught

God and the New Atheism: A Critical Response to Dawkins, Harris, and Hitchens.

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The term ‘new atheism’ is frequently used today to refer to a recent revival of popular atheism. Apparently first used in 2006 by Gary Wolf, editor of WIRED magazine, it has gained currency as a description of positions articulated in books by Sam Harris (*The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (2004) and *Letter to a Christian Nation* (2007)), Richard Dawkins (*The God Delusion* (2006)), Daniel Dennett (*Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (2006)), and Christopher Hitchens (*God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (2007)). The new atheists were a reaction to what was often called the ‘new creationism’ or ‘Intelligent Design’ theory, a view defended in the 1990’s by, among others, James Porter Moreland, ed. in *The Creation Hypothesis: Scientific Evidence for an Intelligent Designer* (1994), Phillip Johnson, *Darwinism on Trial* (2nd ed. 1993), Michael Behe in *Darwin’s Black Box: The Biochemical Challenge to Evolution* (1996), and William Dembski in *The Design Inference* (1998) and *Intelligent Design: The Bridge Between Science and Theology* (1999).

The writings of the new atheists have been remarkably successful, often appearing in the top ten of the New York Times list of best-selling books and remaining there for as much as a year. Dawkins’ book has sold particularly well and has been translated into more than thirty languages. Given the popularity of books defending the new atheism, it is not surprising that (usually Christian) authors have launched a counteroffensive. A plethora of books have appeared with titles like *The Delusion of Disbelief*, *The Dawkins Delusion*, and *The Irrational Atheist*. Actually, plethora is too weak; flood would be more accurate. Within the last three or four years, at least two dozen book-length responses to the new atheism have been published in addition to those mentioned in the text. A sampling: *The Truth Behind the New Atheism*; *Beyond the God Delusion*; *God Is No Delusion: A Refutation of Richard Dawkins*; *Why Richard Dawkins is Wrong About God*; *The God Solution*; *The New Atheist Crusaders and Their Unholy Grail: The Misguided Quest to Destroy Your Faith*; *A Confutation of the New Atheism*; *The Devil’s Delusion: Atheism and its Scientific Pretensions*; *Answering the New Atheists: The Noncase Against God*, and *Atheism Remix: A Christian Confronts the New Atheists*.

John Haught’s recent book is a slim but significant contribution to the counteroffensive. Formerly Professor of Theology at Georgetown University, and now Senior Fellow in Science and Religion at the Woodstock Theological Center, Haught has written widely on the relation between science and religion in general and Christianity and evolutionary theory in particular, including *Science and Religion: From Conflict to Conversation* (1995), *God After Darwin: A Theology of Evolution* (2000, 2nd ed. 2007), *Deeper Than Darwin: The Prospect for Religion in the Age of Evolution* (2003), *Is*

Nature Enough? Meaning and Truth in the Age of Science (2006), and *Christianity and Science: Toward a Theology of Nature* (2007).

The pace of the present book is brisk—perhaps too brisk. In seven chapters averaging about thirteen pages in length, Haught considers the following questions: Is the new atheism really all that new? Just how atheistic is it? Does theology, the intellectual side of religion, matter? Is God an empirical hypothesis to be confirmed or rejected by scientific evidence? Why are people inclined to religious belief at all? Can people be moral without God and religion? And, Is the idea of a personal God believable in an age of science? A final, slightly longer chapter deals more explicitly with the (or at least a) response of Christian theology to the new atheism. Haught generally writes in a clear, accessible, and engaging style; but those who are inclined to agree with him are likely to think that he hasn't treated any of his subjects in sufficient detail, and the new atheists will insist that he has either ignored or failed to resolve the problems they raise with respect to religious belief and the social influence of religions.

The intellectual basis of the new atheism is what Haught calls 'scientific naturalism' (SN) (x, xiii-xiv, 41). As he characterizes it, SN makes the following claims: 1) only nature, including humans and their creations, is real; apart from that there is nothing. There is no God, no soul, and no life after death; 2) nature is self-originating, not the creation of God; 3) although individual human lives can be lived purposefully, the universe has no overall point or purpose; 4) all causes and explanations are purely natural and only science can give us reliable knowledge of reality. Science is also capable of yielding a complete knowledge of reality (Haught refers to these claims as 'scientism', 11, 17, 30); 5) since there is no scientific evidence for the existence of God, any reasonable, scientifically educated person should therefore repudiate belief in God; 6) all the various features of living beings, including what seems to be special aspects of human intelligence and behavior (morality and religion, e.g.) can be explained ultimately in purely natural terms, where today this usually means in evolutionary, specifically neo-Darwinian, terms. To these tenets of SN, the new atheists add the following: 7) faith in God is the cause of innumerable evils and should be rejected on moral grounds; 8) morality does not require a belief in God, and people behave better without faith than with it.

Haught rightly argues that the new atheists are generally not very sophisticated in defending SN as a tenable world-view, or in arguing that, given the results of contemporary science, all reasonable people should be atheists, or in confronting the often subtle writings of Christian theologians (e.g. Paul Tillich and Teilhard de Chardin; see 44, 61, 63, 76, 93). There are certainly better arguments for SN and atheism than we find in Dawkins, Harris, or Hitchens. Cf., e.g. Owen Flanagan's *The Really Hard Problem: Finding Meaning in a Material World* (2007), and more sophisticated philosophical treatments of atheism by Nicholas Everett, *The Non-Existence of God* (2003) and Michael Martin, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism* (2006). The new atheists are philosophically superficial, which Haught mentions but does not stress. They are also theologically ignorant, which he does stress. Indeed, one of his ongoing complaints, in this book and elsewhere, is that the new atheists either ignore theology or

have only the most superficial understanding of what they summarily reject (see, esp., Ch. 3). In saying this, Haught is surely right. To the extent that they discuss theology at all, new atheists mostly aim at biblical literalists and make no effort to engage other, more tenable forms of theological reasoning. They don't want to talk to theologians, because (I am quite sure) academics are not their intended audience.

A new atheist might reply that Haught does not himself ever engage stronger forms of SN or stronger arguments for atheism. But it's not incumbent on him to do that in order to reveal the philosophical shallowness of the 'new' atheism. By contrast, it seems more than fair of him to demand that the new atheists address the strongest, most defensible arguments in favor of theism, rather than attend only to narrow-minded fundamentalists or to the (often) unsophisticated views of ordinary believers (e.g., polls indicate that about 60% of Americans still believe that Satan really did seduce Eve to eat the forbidden fruit and that that's the reason we die). After all, the new atheists are advancing truth claims (about the non-existence of God, e.g. or the perniciousness of religious belief), so they should not be allowed to get away with making simplistic and unfounded generalizations or with demolishing strawmen, which is usually what they do.

Haught argues that the new atheists are all explanatory reductionists (38-9): 1) they reduce, or try hard to reduce, all religious believers to scriptural literalists, dogmatic extremists, sentimental escapists, or fanatics who perpetuate human suffering; 2) they reduce the meaning of faith to mindless belief in whatever has no evidence; 3) they reduce the meaning of 'evidence' to whatever is accessible to natural science, thereby reducing the whole of reality to what can be known by science; 4) they reduce the idea of God to a hypothesis, which they think has been disconfirmed by the results of recent science. New atheists are also explanatory monists. For them there are only two options: theism, which they think has been disconfirmed, and NS, which they think has been abundantly confirmed. Haught argues, instead, that there are levels of explanation, so that one can agree that religion and religious belief have an evolutionary basis while at the same time thinking that, at its best, it opens us up to the goodness, beauty, and truth that God offers (xi, 60-61, 85, 87, 89).

In a related argument (see Chapter 8), Haught neatly points out the curious link, in fact a mirror image, between the new atheists and their fundamentalist/orthodox enemies. This has been done before, but rarely so well. (One conspicuous exception is Stephen R. L. Clark, *Understanding Faith: Religious Belief and its Place in Society* (2009), who argues that 'militant' atheists and 'militant' theists are, in important respects, flip sides of a single ignorant, dogmatic, and intolerant common coin.) The upshot is that if, for example, 'young earth' creationists appear unsophisticated, misguided, and sometimes intentionally dishonest, the same can be said of the new atheists, who lack theological and philosophical acumen but seldom care about either. Keep it simple, seems to be the intent, even if that involves large distortions (xvi, 12).

One of the stale charges rehearsed by all the new atheists is that while science is a matter of evidence, religion is just a matter of groundless belief. Thus, e.g., Dawkins: 'Faith, being belief that isn't based on evidence and is often belief contrary to the

evidence, is the principal vice of any religion Science...is free of [this vice]' (24). This is an old canard that Haught dissects in Chapter 4, which cogently argues: 1) that God is not an empirical hypothesis, 2) that reflective religious people have good reasons for believing what they do, even if their beliefs may not pass scientific muster, and 3) that even atheistic scientists have faith in a lot of things, else they would not do the work they do and could not, in any case, ever trust their findings. The same could also be said of atheistic philosophers.

Here new atheists usually reply that whatever 'faith' commitments *they* have are based on good reasons. So, for example, human reason has been reasonably successful in permitting us to understand the way the world works and to control (or at least manipulate) it. If human reason hadn't evolved in the way that it did, giving us reliable access to the reality of our environment, the human species would not have been selected for and perpetuated, but instead would have become extinct. So there is good reason to have 'faith' in scientific reason, but none at all to subscribe to religious beliefs. The proper reply to this response is to say that at the heart of the scientific vocation is a basic belief that must be taken on faith: the belief that the universe is not random, capricious or arbitrary, but is instead lawful, orderly and understandable. And that basic belief cannot plausibly be explained as the result of blind evolutionary processes alone, no matter how adaptive.

Certainly more could be said about these and other issues that Haught addresses, but this must suffice. I recommend his book for readers who would like a general overview of the new atheism and an outline of one form of theistic reply to it.

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