

RECONSIDERATIONS

EXPLORING CHRISTIAN THOUGHT IN THE UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY

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THE FOLLOWING ESSAY is an excerpt from a chapter in Dr. Horner's book project, *Pascal and the Postmodern*. This excerpt does not include Dr. Horner's discussion of Pascal's own thoughts about science, but if you would like to see the full chapter and the rest of Dr. Horner's manuscript, please contact Nora, our Office Manager, at nora@christianstudycenter.org. She will gladly give you access to the chapters that we have already discussed in our "Works in Progress" sessions. In the excerpt below Dr. Horner has moved from the seventeenth century into the twenty-first and is discussing the anti-theistic prejudices of the so-called "new atheism."

THE ENDURING POWER OF SCIENTISM

By Richard V. Horner

ONE IMPORTANT QUESTION that the authors of the "new atheist" manifestos of recent years have raised is whether there is a method or approach to inquiry regarding our most basic questions about human experience that does not prejudice the outcome from the outset. Is there a method that does not have its conclusions hidden in its premises? More specifically, is there an approach to our most basic questions about how to understand human experience that is equally open, as a method, to considering theistic, agnostic, and atheistic conclusions? We are not asking for a method that will, in the end, affirm all viewpoints as equally valid. In fact, we are weary of such conclusions. We are only asking for a starting point that is equally open and fair toward all serious-minded students of human experience who want sound reasoning to determine the outcomes of our inquiries and arguments. It would be nice to think that, at least as we begin, we might be able to identify such a method—a method that neither eliminates some possibilities nor gives secret advantage to other possibilities before we even begin considering them. Is there a fair-minded process of inquiry in which it will be good reasons

rather than methodological prejudices that determine the outcomes of our inquiries and arguments?

The new atheists recognize that there is an issue here, and they point to a couple of egregious examples of methods that do have their conclusions built into their premises. Richard

Dawkins describes the exasperation of being involved in debate with theologians in Cambridge who defined themselves into "an epistemological Safe Zone where rational argument could not reach them because they had declared by fiat that it could not." The most important of these Safe Zones, Dawkins notes, were ways of knowing that looked to "personal, subjective experiences of God" as

authoritative and unchallengeable.¹ David Mills also criticizes theistic arguments whose conclusions are built into their premises. "Such a premise assumes the conclusion that it supposedly proves, and therefore proves nothing at all," he notes.² Dawkins and Mills are right to complain about these Safe Zones, and so is Daniel Dennett when he criticizes the "question-begging" nature of "untrumpable appeals to the sacred."³ The tendency of some theists to appeal to sacred texts or to religious traditions

“Is there a fair-minded process of inquiry in which it will be good reasons rather than methodological prejudices that determine the outcomes of our inquiries and arguments?”

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as unquestionable authorities is truly a conversation stopper. “Anybody who professes that a particular point of moral conviction is not discussable, not debatable not negotiable, simply because it is the word of God,” Dennett writes, “should be seen to be making it impossible for the rest of us to take their views seriously.”⁴

In criticizing such methods we side with the new atheists.

Having acknowledged instances in which the new atheists rightly criticize theists for hiding their conclusions in the premises of their methods, however, we want to point out that the new atheists commit the same error that they criticize in others. By considering the question of God to be a scientific question, they frame their argument in a way that closes off theistic possibilities from the start. The fact that science, by definition, deals in natural causes and is rightly reductionistic suggests that the super-natural is outside its domain, and when forced into a scientific rubric God is not going to fare well. Though appearing open to “the God hypothesis,” by placing the question of God within the province of the natural sciences they set him up for failure. The new atheists run a completely appropriate notion of methodological naturalism, which is the province of the natural sciences, together with an unwarranted commitment to metaphysical naturalism in a manner that leads handily to conclusions they have already embraced and to which they want to lead their readers. As a result, their readers come to share the new atheists’ conclusions without realizing that those conclusions do not flow from sound reasoning but from the premises and prejudices of the method. If one accepts their methodological assumptions, one will almost certainly end up sharing their conclusions. The question is whether we are either wise or reasonable in accepting their assumptions.

Victor Stenger and Richard Dawkins are both quite explicit in approaching the question of God as a scientific question and more specifically as a scientific hypothesis. Stenger entitles his book *God: The Failed Hypothesis*, and Dawkins is equally clear in the second chapter of *The God Delusion*. Under the title, “The God Hypothesis,” Dawkins writes, “I shall suggest that the existence of God is a scientific hypothesis like any other. [...] God’s existence or non-existence is a scientific fact about the universe, discoverable in principle if not in practice.” He argues that “the presence or absence of a creative super-intelligence is unequivocally a scientific question.”⁵ It will come as no surprise to hear

that having set the question up in these terms, these writers then judge God, as a scientific hypothesis, to be a failure. God doesn’t turn out to explain much in the ways that natural science is supposed to explain things, and because God does not turn out to be the sort of explanation sought, he is judged to be a failed hypothesis. When God fails as a scientific hypothesis, we are then told that absence of evidence becomes evidence of absence, and that we ought, therefore, to conclude that “the God hypothesis – is untenable. God almost certainly does not exist.”⁶ In his *Letter to a Christian Nation* Sam Harris makes a similar move, arguing that science can and should pronounce on the question of God. Like Dawkins and Stenger, he presents this view as an indication of his openness to theism, but it is clear from the start what sort of demonstration on God’s part is going to count in Harris’s eyes. As expected, God fails on Harris’s terms. Similarly, Dennett states that he is quite willing to let the opposition have its say. “Those who insist that they *know* God exists and can prove it will have their day in court,”⁷ he writes, but having already framed religion as a natural phenomenon that is subject to proof and that can be studied like any other natural phenomenon, the conclusion is foregone. The fate of God is clear. Both Harris and Dennett invite God to prove himself, and both conclude that he fails to do so. Together with Stenger and Dawkins they conclude that God fails as a scientific hypothesis, and therefore, we ought to conclude that God does not exist.

While it is clear that the approach these thinkers take does lead to the conclusion that the God hypothesis fails, it is not clear that this gets us very far. We suppose that it is possible that some God, who may exist, might appreciate Stenger’s and Dawkins’s and Harris’s and Dennett’s offers to prove himself, but this does not mean that we can safely assume that every possible God would agree to the terms that they have established. Some God, who may exist, might not be interested in proving his existence by empirical means—and for good reason. Indeed, this God may already have come quite reasonably to share the new atheists’ conclusion that he does not function well as a scientific hypothesis and therefore has no interest in trying to do so. Perhaps the new atheists have demonstrated that the sort of God who would want to demonstrate his existence on the terms set by these writers does not seem to have succeeded in doing so, but this does not begin to exhaust the possibilities either for the existence of God or for believing in God for good reasons. While the new atheists portray themselves as open to the existence of God, then, it seems clear enough from the beginning that the

handwriting is on the wall. By considering God as a scientific hypothesis, the new atheists have created an “epistemological Safe Zone” that allows them to pose as open to the possibility of God while framing their inquiry in a way that eliminates this possibility from the start. They have created a safe zone, in which they need not fear that God will show up. Once the terms of the inquiry are set, we know that the method employed has to come out where it does. God will not turn out to be the sort of explanation for which science seeks. If one buys the method of inquiry, one will very likely come out where the new atheists come out, and the argument for God will fail. If one is willing to get on the new atheist train, one will almost certainly end up where the train tracks of scientism lead.

We must acknowledge, however, that the new atheists are not the only ones to blame for putting God in a position where he is bound to disappoint. Indeed, the new atheists have often simply adopted a rubric provided over the centuries by theists who have proposed God as the “explanatory cause” of any number of natural

phenomena. Prior to the blossoming of modern science, people were understandably mystified by many things that are at least somewhat less mystifying today—by lightning and thunder, by the lights in the heavens, by eclipses of the sun or moon, and so much more. In ignorance of the natural causes, we learned to propose God as the “causal explanation.” Over the centuries these arguments for the existence of God have gradually waned as scientists have provided scientific narratives in the languages of chemistry, biology, physics, etc., that explain in a natural way what God was supposed to have explained in a supernatural way. While the existence of “a creative super-intelligence” may turn out to be a compelling, non-scientific way to make sense of the human story on this planet, we would all do well to learn to let scientific questions be scientific questions and to become comfortable living with a healthy dose of agnosticism. Today this means specifically that we would do well to let go of God-of-the-gaps arguments that often propose God as a scientific hypothesis in much the same way that the new atheists do. The two parties to the debate just come to opposite conclusions on the question of whether God succeeds or fails as a scientific hypothesis. As a result, a God of the gaps, and a Science of the gaps fight it out. On the God-of-the-gaps side are those who

offer an interventionist view of God as a way of filling the gaps in our scientific knowledge. On the other side are those who have made a faith commitment to metaphysical naturalism, which pushes them to look to science to fill the gaps in their knowledge even when science has not actually filled those gaps adequately.

Positing God as a scientific hypothesis is always problematic. Critics of the God-of-the-gaps argument are right to complain that its proponents are not being scientific when they propose God as a scientific explanation, because whatever role God is playing it is not that of a *natural* cause and, therefore, does not constitute a *scientific* explanation. This is why the courts have consistently determined that God hypotheses have no place in

science classrooms. It is exactly this insight, however, that reveals the central problem in the new atheists’ argument. If God does not constitute a properly scientific explanation, then it is unfair to set him up for failure by asking him to prove himself to be what he is not. The new atheists talk as if they are open to theistic conclusions, but the terms that

they set for such a possibility are the terms of natural science: natural causes for natural processes. As Mills admits, science “addresses only naturally occurring phenomena and thus, by definition, excludes consideration of the supernatural.”⁸ Having set the terms of inquiry as they have, then, it comes as no surprise to learn that the “God hypothesis” fails. Their conclusions lie in the premises of their method. The natural sciences ought to be reductionistic; natural causes for natural processes is the right rubric for science. It is the wrong rubric for exhausting all possibility of knowledge and understanding.

About a century before the so-called “new atheist” literature appeared, the pragmatist William James addressed the issue of scientism as lucidly as anyone ever has. Like Blaise Pascal, William James understood that science itself is not the problem.⁹ The problem lies in scientism, or what James calls “dogmatic empiricism.” The problem arises when science is viewed as the ultimate authority or when all questions are viewed finally as scientific questions. In fact, both Pascal and James defended science against its detractors and against those who tended to think more highly of science than is reasonable. James asserted simply, “I am [...] myself a complete empiricist so far as

“... natural causes for natural processes
is the right rubric for science.
It is the wrong rubric for exhausting all
possibility of knowledge and understanding.”

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my theory of human knowledge goes" (466).¹⁰ Indeed, he gave the name of "radical empiricism" to his way of thinking. What made James' empiricism radical, however, was not only that he practiced empirical method rigorously but also that he refused to allow his method to become dogmatic. James chose the term "radical" in contrast to "dogmatic" in order to criticize the tendency of his generation to make a dogmatic and exclusive commitment to science alone to which science alone is not capable of leading. James understood that the attempt to maintain that there is nothing of importance to know beyond the reach of science is every bit as much a metaphysical commitment as any religious commitment to the supernatural. He understood that an exclusive commitment to the natural sciences is driven not by reason but by human passion, and that those who make such a commitment do so by faith. We all live by faith, James argued, and making a commitment to scientism requires a step of faith as does a commitment to any other epistemological or philosophical stance.

Concerned that his early twentieth-century audience was so deeply imbued with "a scientific temperament" that they were unable to recognize the role of faith in their commitment to science, James reminded his colleagues and students that there are two ways to miss the truth. One way lies in falling short of the truth; the other lies in overshooting it. James asserts that the particular form of "mental weakness" of people who trust exclusively in science is that they think "There is something called scientific evidence by waiting upon which they shall escape all

danger of shipwreck in regard to truth." James argues, however, that, "there is really no scientific or other method by which men can steer safely between the opposite dangers of believing too little or believing too much. To face such dangers is apparently our duty, and to hit the right channel between them is the measure of our wisdom" (449). James points out that, "Skepticism is not avoidance of option; it is option of a certain particular kind of risk. *Better risk loss of truth than chance of error.*" Although the skeptic thinks of himself as a faith vetoer, James writes, he "is actively placing his stake as much as the believer is; he is backing the field against the religious hypothesis, just as the believer is backing the religious hypothesis against the field" (475). Both options are chosen by faith, both require judgment, and both involve risk. To the skeptic or agnostic he writes, "You may wait if you so choose, but you must at least recognize that you are as much in peril of missing the truth by waiting as by believing and acting. In either case we act, taking our life in our hands" (478).

James also recognized that dogmatic empiricism is not only biased but also unreasonable when, from the beginning, it eliminates from consideration specific candidates for belief that might possibly be true. To limit our search for truth in such a way that we eliminate certain types of potential truth from the outset strikes James as both unfair and unreasonable. James refuses, therefore, to begin where the dogmatic empiricists or agnostics begin. Against scientists who maintain that, "science has already ruled all possible religious hypotheses out of court," James writes, "I, therefore, for one, cannot see my way

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to accepting the [...] rules for truth-seeking” of the dogmatic empiricist.

I cannot do so for this plain reason, that *a rule of thinking which would absolutely prevent me from acknowledging certain kinds of truth if those kinds of truth were really there, would be an irrational rule.* That for me is the long and short of the formal logic of the situation, no matter what the kinds of truth might materially be.” (477)

James does not insist that his readers accept truths that go beyond the scope of science, but he does say that the tendency of his peers to adopt methods of inquiry that eliminate possible truths *a priori* is wrongheaded. One’s framework for inquiry should allow for the consideration of ideas that one might or might not find compelling in the end. To eliminate such ideas before even beginning is not only unfair, it is unreasonable.

In his discussion of the scientific temperament and prejudices of his day William James criticizes not only the “dogmatic empiricists” of his day but also the “new atheists” of our own. In pointing out both the danger of falling short of the truth and the danger of eliminating possible truths before we even begin inquiring, he makes it clear why it is not reasonable to get on the new atheist train. In short, it eliminates possible truths from even being fairly considered. Its naturalistic conclusions lie in its scientific premises. James sees this; the new atheists do not. We side with James, therefore, in saying that we cannot see our way to accepting the rules for truth-seeking of the dogmatic empiricists and new atheists, and our reason is simple and clear. We “cannot do so for this plain reason, *that a rule of thinking which would absolutely prevent me from acknowledging certain kinds of truth if those kinds of truth were really there, would be an irrational rule*” (477).

William James also provides a fairer, more open, and more reasonable method for how to frame inquiry and argument. James joins Pascal in urging us to resist abstractions and instead to allow shared experience to generate questions worth both-ering over. He then suggests that we try on alternative ways to

answer our shared questions, and that we decide among these alternatives on the basis of the best reasons we can manage. The process is open-ended and fair, and it appeals to good reasons for why we would hold to one conclusion over another. It respects the findings of science but does not submit all questions to the authority of science, nor does it appeal to the authority of some sacred text or personal spiritual experience. “There are two ways of persuading men of the truths of our religion,” writes Pascal. “One by the power of reason, the other by the authority of the speaker.” He continues, “We do not use the latter but the former. We do not say: ‘You must believe that because Scripture, which says it, is divine,’ but we say that it must be believed for such and such a reason.”¹¹ Meanwhile, James observes, “at the outset, at least, [pragmatism] stands for no particular results.” (510) “Devoted though she be to facts,” James writes, pragmatism “has no such materialistic bias as ordinary empiricism labors under.” (518) He continues, “She has in fact no prejudices whatever, no obstructive dogmas, no rigid canons of what shall count as

proof. She is completely genial. She will entertain any hypothesis, she will consider any evidence.” (522) As simple as it sounds the method that James and Pascal share, of beginning with shared experience, trying on alternative ways of understanding it, and weighing those alternatives against each other for the best reasons available offers a far more open, fair and potentially reasonable approach to inquiry and argument.

“Scientism continues to shape and prejudice our thinking in ways that bring us up short of the deeper truths that alone are adequate to human experience.”

In this more fair and open framework we invite the new atheists to propose “scientific naturalism as a comprehensive world view,” but we also welcome ways of understanding human experience that have been driven to the margins at the hand of modern scientism. As Leszek Kolakowski explains, once “scientific rationalism” or scientism was put in place, it “inevitably reduced [theistic] faith to a poor relative of science.”¹² This is not to declare on the truth-value of the “poor relative” or of its rival, Kolakowski notes. It is only to say that once the methods of science were established as the only legitimate means of attaining knowledge, the privileged method obviously favored one set of outcomes and resisted others. It became blind to its own prejudices and judged God to be a “failed hypothesis.” Sadly, the scientism that troubled James’s day continues to plague our own and has a subtle hold on

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RECOMMENDED RESOURCE:

BLAISE PASCAL, *Provincial Letters* (1657)

by Richard V. Horner

While the great majority of Pascal's most intriguing thoughts appear in his *Pensées*, Pascal wrote several other works that include the *Provincial Letters*, a series of letters written anonymously, in which Pascal criticized the hair-splitting legalism of the Roman Catholic hierarchy. Most twenty-first century readers would find Pascal's detailed and often tedious arguments hard going, but there are sections that merit the effort of reading these letters. If you do pick up the book, be sure to read through to the eighteenth and final letter in which Pascal dives head-first into the tensions between science and religion. The trial of Galileo began just as Pascal was entering adolescence and it continued to play out over Pascal's lifetime. In his final provincial letter, he addresses the issues that the trial raised.

Pascal understood that there are questions that go beyond the reach of science, but he also argued that scientific questions should be answered by science, not by philosophy or theology. As the trial of Galileo dragged on, Pascal submitted to the authority of Scripture but he also defended experimental science. Pascal warned the Church's leadership that taking an obstinate stand against science would do more harm than good. "So far from procuring respect to the Scripture," the Church's insistence on holding views that science was demonstrating to be false,

would only expose it to the contempt of infidels; because, as St. Augustine says, "when they found that we believed, on the authority of Scripture, in things which they assuredly knew to be false, they would laugh at our credulity with regard to its more recondite truths, such as the resurrection of the dead and eternal life," "And by this means," adds St. Thomas, "we should render our religion contemptible in their eyes, and shut up its entrance into their mind."

Again, Pascal warns, "Matters of fact can only be proved by the senses" not by "the force of authority."

When conflicts do arise between our reading of Scripture and the findings of the senses, then, we must not abandon either the scripture or the testimony of the senses.

When we meet with a passage even in the Scripture, the literal meaning of which, at first sight, appears contrary to what the senses or reason are certainly persuaded of, we must not attempt to reject their testimony in this case, and yield them up to the authority of that apparent sense of the Scripture, but we must interpret the Scripture, and seek out therein another meaning agreeable to that sensible truth. [...] We must in these matters adopt as the true interpretation of Scripture that view which corresponds with the faithful report of the senses.

There need be no final conflict between the senses and faith or between science and scripture. In fact, one can assume an ultimate agreement, but the senses must be allowed to do their proper work. As St. Augustine and St. Thomas taught, "so far from faith destroying the certainty of the senses, to call in question the faithful report of the senses would lead to the destruction of faith."

Pascal challenges the "Reverend Fathers" to produce the evidence for their views. "Matters of fact can only be proved by the senses," Pascal observes. So, "If the position which you maintain be true, show it, or else ask no man to believe it—that would be to no purpose. Not all the powers on earth can, by the force of authority, persuade us of a point of fact, any more than they can alter it; for nothing can make that to be not which really is." The King of Spain, Pascal argues, had been right a century earlier to trust the report of Christopher Columbus, who had actually traveled to the new world, rather than to trust "the judgment of the Pope, who had never been there."

Then, with specific reference to Galileo, Pascal rebukes the Church Fathers by pointing out that,

It was to equally little purpose that you obtained against Galileo a decree from Rome condemning his opinion respecting the motion of the earth. It will never be proved by such an argument as this that the earth

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remains stationary; and if it can be demonstrated by sure observation that it is the earth and not the sun that revolves, the efforts and arguments of all mankind put together will not hinder our planet from revolving, nor hinder [the Reverend Fathers] from revolving along with her.

The natural world is what it is, and we will gain our best understanding of it through science. If the earth revolves, then the Holy See revolves with it, no matter what the Church's opinion on the question may be.

In the *Pensées*, meanwhile, Pascal defends science but also notes its limitations and warns against the hubris of those who ask

more of science than science can reasonably give. Reflecting on the grandeur of the natural realm Pascal laments the way that, "men have rashly undertaken to probe into nature as if there were some proportion between themselves and her. Strangely enough they wanted to know the principles of things and go on from there to know everything, inspired by a presumption as infinite as their object." Rather than tempt us to pride, Pascal argues, scientific inquiry should instill humility and lead us to worship the Creator. "Curiosity changing into wonder," the scientist "will be more disposed to contemplate the [infinite spaces] in silence than investigate them with presumption" (*pensée* # 199), but it is the presumption and not the investigation that needs to be held in check. 🙏

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many of us. It continues to shape and prejudice our thinking in ways that bring us up short of the deeper truths that alone are adequate to human experience. It is time to reconsider, and in the more open space that James and Pascal create, we can fairly consider all candidates for truth and weigh them against each other for the best reasons available to us.

Thomas Nagel, University Professor of Philosophy and Law, Emeritus, at New York University, who publishes widely in both philosophical and popular journals, is an atheist himself, but in contrast to the new atheists Nagel engages his readers as a fellow traveler who rejects the premises of scientism and honestly and humbly weighs alternative understandings of human experience against each other. Nagel appears late in the modern story as what Nietzsche called a "man of theory" who "remains eternally hungry."¹³ He recognizes that the scientism of the new atheists leaves something to be desired. In the two-paragraph preface to *Secular Philosophy and the Religious Temperament* Nagel writes, "I am resistant to the broad acceptance of scientific naturalism as a comprehensive world view. Theism is one form that such resistance can take, but I believe that there must be secular alternatives."¹⁴ We share Nagel's sense that "scientific naturalism as a comprehensive world view" is lacking and inadequate to life. We sympathize with his dissatisfaction and with his interest in fairly and reasonably weighing alternative understandings against each other. We also hope that efforts such as Nagel's will open the conversation once again to the deeper understandings that have

been unfairly driven from consideration by the reductionistic prejudices of scientism. Given the importance of the questions, it would be sad indeed if the reason for failing to find the deeper, more satisfying answers turned out to lie in the prejudices of the inquiry rather than in the force of the arguments. 🙏

Notes

1. Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006), p. 154.
2. David Mills, *Atheist Universe* (Ulysses Press, 2006), p. 124.
3. Daniel C. Dennett, *Breaking the Spell* (Penguin Books, 2007), pp. 240, 336.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 296-97.
5. Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, pp. 50, 58.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 158.
7. Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, p. 27.
8. Mills, *Atheist Universe*, p. 154.
9. For Blaise Pascal's defense of science against both philosophical and theological opposition, see the unabridged draft of this chapter on our website. You may request access by contacting the Study Center office.
10. All citations of William James come from *The Will to Believe: And Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*. Page numbers that appear in parentheses refer to William James, *William James: Writings, 1878-1899*, The Library of America (Harvard University Press, 1975).
11. Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, Krailsheimer translator (Penguin), #820.
12. Leszek Kolakowski, "The Illusion of Demythologization," *Modernity on Endless Trial*, (University of Chicago Press, 1990), p. 97, 98.
13. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy* (Doubleday & Company Inc., 1956), p. 112.
14. Thomas Nagel, "Preface," *Secular Philosophy and the Religious Temperament* (Oxford University Press, 2010).



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