

Does a Good God Exist? – A Debate with Christopher Hitchens

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The Existence of God

Good morning and thanks for this opportunity to debate the existence and goodness of God. I'll start by addressing God's existence and then turn to God's goodness. God's existence is the weightier question – once that's settled, God's goodness follows straightforwardly.

Although I could rehearse standard arguments for God's existence, I want in this debate to take a different tack. Christopher Hitchens disbelieves in God's existence. Why? Lack of evidence and evils perpetrated in the name of religion, he says. Yet his book *God Is Not Great* reveals a more basic reason. Hitchens, as a scientific reductionist, believes science has given us new knowledge that destroys religious faith. What is this new knowledge? According to Hitchens, it is Darwinian evolution.

You may ask what a chapter on evolution is doing in a book defending atheism. At the end of that chapter, Hitchens explains: "We no longer have any need of a god to explain what is no longer mysterious." Let this sink in. Religion, according to Hitchens, renders biological origins mysterious. But now that Darwin has come and shown how natural selection explains biological origins, all is clear. Fellow atheist Richard Dawkins puts it more memorably: "Darwin made it possible to be an intellectually fulfilled atheist."

It's no coincidence that Richard Dawkins, the world's best known atheist, is also an evolutionary biologist. Atheists, like everyone else, need a creation story. Without God in the picture, something like Darwinian evolution has to be true. And so Hitchens, though a humanities guy, lectures his readers on proofs of evolution. Let's look at a few of these proofs as he gives them.

(1) "Junk DNA." If Darwin got it right, then our genes are cobbled together over a long evolutionary history, accumulating lots of useless DNA (junk) because it's easier for natural selection to keep copying such junk rather than edit it out. This sounds plausible, but it is subject to experimental test. In fact, recent findings show that much of this so-called junk DNA regulates gene expression. This is true even of repetitive DNA, the quintessential DNA junk. A forthcoming book titled *The Myth of Junk DNA* details these findings.

(2) "The Cambrian explosion." This refers to a narrow slice of the fossil record in which all the main animal body plans appear suddenly without precursors. The Cambrian explosion was a mystery in Darwin's day and remains a mystery to this day. Paleontologist Peter Ward writes about the Cambrian explosion:

"The seemingly sudden appearance of skeletonized life has been one of the most perplexing puzzles of the fossil record. How is it that animals as complex as trilobites and brachiopods could spring forth so suddenly, completely formed, without a trace of their ancestors in the underlying strata? If ever there was evidence suggesting Divine Creation, surely the Precambrian and Cambrian transition, known from numerous localities across the face of the earth, is it."

Ward, like Hitchens, is an atheist, so he tries to soften this statement later. But the mystery remains. For more on the Cambrian explosion, see my book *The Design of Life*.

(3) "The inverted retina." Vertebrate eyes have nerve cells in front of the light-sensitive retinal cells. This means that light first has to pass through a barrier before being detected. This seems counterintuitive, but there are good functional reasons for it. A visual system needs three things:

speed, resolution, and above all sensitivity – if the eye isn't sensing light, it's useless. Now, it turns out that light-sensitive cells are the most oxygen-greedy cells, and they get their oxygen from blood. The sensitivity here is truly astounding – some frog eyes can sense the smallest unit of light (the photon). Positioning the nerves in front of the light-sensitive retinal cells ensures maximal blood supply to the retina and thus maximal sensitivity.

But the story gets better. In 2007 it was reported in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* that Müller glial cells act as optical fibers conveying light to the retina. As the abstract to this article notes,

"Their parallel array in the retina is reminiscent of fiberoptic plates used for low-distortion image transfer. Thus, Müller cells seem to mediate the image transfer through the vertebrate retina with minimal distortion and low loss. This finding elucidates a fundamental feature of the inverted retina as an optical system and ascribes a new function to glial cells."

So the vertebrate eye is much more sophisticated than Darwinists, on their low view of design, suspected. And thanks to these Müller glial cells, the eye's resolution is magnificent.

The problems with Hitchens' proofs of evolution don't end here. All his proofs are easily deconstructed (I'm happy to do so during the Q&A – I have his book with me). Hitchens is obsessed with the human eye (the same eye that has allowed him to read and educate himself as an atheist). Observing different types of eyes in nature, he repeats the chestnut that natural selection gradually turned a light-sensitive spot into a full-fledged camera eye. No mention that eyes have to be built in embryological development or that eyes are only as good as their associated neural processing. No details about the genetic changes that would be needed to effect such a transformation.

To really make the case, Hitchens cites Dan Nilsson and Susanne Pelger's mathematical model of eye evolution, which he claims shows that eyes could evolve in a geological instant. Let me tell you a secret about mathematical models and computer simulations – unless you tether them to real observable processes, you can use them to prove anything, in which case they prove nothing. The model of Nilsson and Pelger, which Hitchens praises loudly, is of this sort. I can write a computer simulation that evolves Richard Nixon into Christopher Hitchens (that's a scary thought). Such simulations prove nothing.

I know what you're all thinking. Since the evidence for evolution is so underwhelming and since Hitchens has hitched his wagon to evolution, shouldn't he now be ready to abandon evolution and reconsider theism? Yet this is precisely what he will not do. His atheism demands a materialistic form of evolution, and there's only one going theory of it, namely Darwinism. The alternative, which places us here as the result of design, is for him unthinkable.

In regarding design as unthinkable, Hitchens puts himself in an atheist straitjacket. For the atheist, we must be here as the result of a blind, purposeless evolutionary process – there are no other options. Atheism demands evolution. For the theist, on the other hand, it's possible that God used an evolutionary process to deposit us here; but it's also possible that God deposited us here in ways that make his design evident. Either of these are live options for the theist, and the theist can consider them fairly. Atheism, however, cannot live without Darwin.

Hitchens needs evolution to be true. His treatment of it is therefore calm and deferential (albeit mistaken). By contrast, his treatment of theology and biblical studies is boorish and obtuse. For instance, Hitchens dismisses Israel's time in Egypt and Sinai as myths lacking all archeological evidence. Yet that evidence is readily available. Take, for instance, James Hoffmeier's books on the

topic, published by that flaming fundamentalist publisher ... Oxford University Press. Or consider Hitchens' view of Jesus. There is, according to him, "little or no evidence for the life of Jesus." Come again? It's one thing to deny the miracles attributed to Jesus. But to say, as Hitchens does, that Jesus is "not a historical figure" is contrarian silliness.

For all his talk about freedom of inquiry and Enlightenment rationality, Hitchens exhibits a very selective concern for truth. What seems to matter most to him is not whether a claim is true but whether it makes a good stick to beat religion. Deny that Jesus was real? If it helps advance the atheist agenda, go for it, especially since it's easy to get away with in an age of theological illiteracy.

Whenever Hitchens invokes science against religion, one gets the impression that a juggernaut is rushing forward, crushing everything in its path. Science advances, religion retreats. This is wishful thinking. The fact is, as any historian of science understands, science is not a cumulative enterprise, so reversals, retractions, and revolutions play as much a role in science as insights, illuminations, and intellectual breakthroughs. Thus, new scientific advances, far from undercutting religion, can in fact overturn antitheistic conclusions derived from prior scientific mistakes.

Chemical evolution is a case in point. Chemical evolution attempts to describe how non-living chemicals arranged themselves into first life. Atheism requires that chemicals have this ability. Darwin attempted to strengthen the atheists' hand by arguing that first life was so simple that it required no designer. Darwin's argument (made in a letter to Joseph Hooker) has since shown itself to be a failed argument from ignorance. Precisely because of what Darwin didn't know about the complexity of the cell, microscopy being quite limited in the mid 1800s, he thought the cell was so simple that it could easily self-assemble from ordinary non-living matter.

The revolution in molecular biology of the last fifty years has given the lie to this misconception. We now know that every cell (and all life is composed of cells) is a vastly complicated assembly of interconnected technologies that argue for intelligent design. We need to be engineers to understand what's inside the cell, and the level of engineering we find there far exceeds anything humans have invented. If you want to see what I'm talking about, call up YouTube on your PDA and punch in "inner life of the cell."

I just mentioned what for Hitchens is a dirty word – "intelligent design." For Hitchens, intelligent design, or ID, is just rebranded creationism. It is religion and not science. But in fact, intelligent design covers a broad range of special sciences, including forensic science, archeology, and the search for extraterrestrial intelligence (or SETI). Intelligent design, by definition, is *the study of patterns in nature best explained as the product of intelligence*. It is a basic feature of human rationality to identify the products of intelligence and distinguish them from the products of natural forces. Many special sciences capitalize on this distinction.

In 1998, I published a statistical monograph with Cambridge University Press titled *The Design Inference*. In it I laid out a probabilistic method for drawing this distinction between design and accident. Essentially, this method triangulates on design by identifying independently given patterns, known as specifications, that are complex in the sense of being hard to reproduce by chance. Accordingly, the method identifies what has come to be called *specified complexity*. In *The Design Inference* I showed how this method applies outside biology. In subsequent work, when my colleagues and I started applying this method of design detection specifically to biology, we found that Darwinian evolution came up short and that ample evidence supported design. For a nice summary, see Stephen Meyer's *Signature in the Cell*.

Just as getting from Darwinian evolution to atheism is not a big stretch, so getting from design in biology to theism is not a big stretch. Are we therefore ready to agree that God exists now that we've seen Hitchens' proofs of evolution to fail, the intelligent design alternative to succeed, and his critiques of theology to be self-serving? By itself, my argument establishes a designer behind the universe (a Kantian architect, if you will). For the purposes of this debate, however, I think we're ready to close escrow.

Note that the full positive case for God's existence can and should be fleshed out. Typically, such a case flows from critical reflection on the big questions of life: Why is there something rather than nothing? Where did we come from? Where are we going? Why should we take morality seriously? Why is the world comprehensible to our minds? Why does mathematics, presumably a human invention, have such a precise purchase on physical reality? Each of these questions can, in my view, be answered better within a theistic than atheistic worldview. And if time permitted, I would address them. But for now let's leave it here.

The Goodness of God

Last time up, I argued that God exists. The next order of business is to establish God's goodness. It's here that Hitchens mounts his loudest attack against religious people and against God himself. His motto in such attacks is heads-I-win-tails-you-lose. Thus, if religious people behave badly, that counts against God. On the other hand, if they behave well, that means nothing because non-religious people can also behave well.

In establishing God's goodness, let's therefore first level the playing field. The sixth century Christian philosopher Boethius helps us here. In his *Consolation of Philosophy*, Boethius states the following paradox: "If God exists, whence evil? But whence good, if God does not exist?" Boethius contrasts the problem that evil poses for theism with the problem that good poses for atheism. The problem of good does not receive nearly as much attention as the problem evil, but it is the more basic problem. That's because evil always presupposes a good that has been subverted. All our words for evil make this plain: the New Testament word for sin (Greek *hamartia*) presupposes a target that's been missed; deviation presupposes a way (Latin *via*) from which we've departed; injustice presupposes justice; etc.

So let's ask, who's got the worse problem, the theist or the atheist? Start with the theist. God is the source of all being and purpose. Given God's existence, what sense does it make to deny God's goodness? None. Indeed, denying God's goodness is logically and rationally incoherent – it's absurd. To see this, consider what it would mean to assert that God is not good. Presumably this would mean that God violated some moral standard. Whose moral standard? One devised by Christopher Hitchens? God owes Hitchens nothing.

To say that God is not good must therefore mean that God has violated an objective moral standard. But since God is the source of all being and purpose, any such objective moral standard cannot reside outside God. If it did, how could it be objective, much less command God's obedience? Such a standard must therefore derive from God himself. But in that case, how can God violate it? God is the standard.

God's goodness follows as a matter of definition once God's existence is taken for granted. This may seem like a cheat, but it's not. The problem of evil still confronts theists, though not as a logical or philosophical problem, but instead as a psychological and existential one. The problem of evil can therefore be reformulated as the following argument:

Premise 1: Since God is good, he wants to destroy evil.

Premise 2: Since God is all-powerful, he can destroy evil.

Premise 3: Evil is not yet destroyed.

Conclusion: Therefore God will *eventually* destroy evil.

As time-bound creatures, our problem here is with the word "eventually." We want to see evil destroyed right now. And because we don't see it destroyed right now, and thus experience the suffering that evil invariably inflicts, we are tempted to doubt God's existence and goodness. Our challenge, therefore, is to continue trusting God until evil is destroyed. Hitchens' long litany of evils, especially those committed in the name of religion, is designed to derail our trust in God's goodness by getting us to think that if God were really good, he would have taken care of evil by now.

God's goodness in face of the world's evil is, as Boethius noted, a problem. It's not an insuperable problem, but neither is it a trivial one. By contrast, the problem of good in the face of God's non-existence (the other half of Boethius's paradox) is, I submit, insuperable.

The problem of good as it faces the atheist is this: nature, which is nuts-and-bolts reality for the atheist, has no values and thus can offer no grounding for good and evil. As nineteenth century freethinker Robert Green Ingersoll used to say, "In nature there are neither rewards nor punishments. There are consequences." More recently, Richard Dawkins made the same point: "The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but blind pitiless indifference."

Values, on the atheist view, are subjective and contingent. They reflect inclinations to behave and feel in certain ways given the conditions of survival and reproduction under which our ancestors evolved and the social conditions under which we've been reared. Hitchens speaks of moral values as being innate and waxes indignant when they are violated. But on atheist principles, what is the force of morality and what justifies such indignation?

Hitchens, for instance, is incensed with religious communities that practice female genital mutilation. So am I. But without an objective moral standard, which atheism cannot deliver, Hitchens himself is at bottom a complicated piece of matter that evolutionary and social conditioning have inclined to react in certain ways to certain behaviors – in particular, he reacts quite negatively to female genital mutilation.

The religious communities that engage in this practice, however, are quite content to continue it. Moreover, on atheistic principles, they have the better argument, for they are surviving and reproducing quite nicely, indeed, outreproducing the secular West. On atheist principles, morality is, as Michael Ruse and E. O. Wilson note, "an illusion fobbed off by our genes to get us to cooperate." This statement by Ruse and Wilson is very widely quoted, but too often the punch line gets omitted, which is this: "[Morality] is illusory inasmuch as it persuades us that it has an objective reference."

That's the kicker. Christopher Hitchens is morally earnest. So is the female genital mutilation community. Try to convince either that they're wrong, and get into the fight of your life. But their passionate moral convictions, on atheist principles, merely show that they've fooled themselves into thinking that morality is objective and thus universally binding. No, on atheist principles, all that's going on is one group of material objects (Enlightenment rationalists like Christopher Hitchens) inclined to one set of behaviors, and another group of material objects (female genital mutilators) inclined to another set of behaviors.

Just to be clear, I'm not saying that atheists can't act morally or have moral knowledge. But when I ascribe virtue to an atheist, it's as a theist who sees the atheist as conforming to objective moral values. The atheist, by contrast, has no such basis for morality. And yet all moral judgments require a basis for morality, some standard of right and wrong. So the atheist is cheating whenever he makes a moral judgment, acting as though it has an objective reference, when in fact none exists.

But perhaps such cheating is inconsequential. The American pragmatist philosopher C. S. Peirce held that for a difference to be a difference it has to make a difference. Christopher Hitchens claims that atheists can behave just as morally as theists (in fact, he claims they will behave better than theists because religion poisons everything). At the end of his book, he therefore poses the following question: "Name an ethical statement or action, made or performed by a person of faith, that could not have been made or performed by a nonbeliever. I have since asked this question at every stop and haven't had a reply yet."

But Hitchens has posed the wrong question. Since God exists and has created us, we all have moral knowledge built into us by God and thus are capable of performing the same ethical actions. Hitchens' question therefore answers itself. A far more interesting question would have been this: "Given a moral action, what is the profile of those who engage or refrain from engaging in it, and do religious as well as anti-religious factors play a significant role?"

Consider eugenics, euthanasia, and abortion. Those who oppose these actions are largely people of faith. They see humanity as made in God's image and therefore human life as sacred. Accordingly, it would be a profanation for them to engage in eugenics, euthanasia, or abortion. Conversely, those who embrace these actions are largely anti-religious secularists. They see humans as evolved mammals, pieces of complicated matter in motion, with no transcendent value. Obviously, then, theism and atheism have profoundly different moral consequences. Here is a difference that makes a difference. At the heart of this difference is the existence and goodness of God.

Conclusion

In Alexander Schmemmann's critique of secularism, he remarked, "It is not the immorality of the crimes of man that reveal him as a fallen being; it is his 'positive ideal'—religious or secular—and his satisfaction with this ideal." A common criminal knows that he is a criminal and doesn't try to rationalize his crimes or cast himself as a benefactor of humanity. But an ideologue, who knows what's best for humanity and cannot find satisfaction until everyone is on board with his "positive ideal" – with his ideology – such a man can rationalize anything and is truly dangerous.

Schmemmann's insight captures what's right and what's wrong with Christopher Hitchens' case against religion. Religion can be a problem, yes. Religious people, confident that theirs is the only way to build a better world, have felt it their moral duty to coerce, torture, and kill others. Hitchens sees this clearly. But secularism can be as guilty as religion in this respect. Secularists, confident that theirs is the only way to build a better world, have likewise felt it their moral duty to coerce, torture, and kill others.

Nevertheless, Hitchens refuses to admit any parity between religious and secular evil. Recount atrocities committed by religious people, and Hitchens is delighted – yet another nail in the coffin of religion. But mention a person, community, or movement whose atrocities flow from their secular ideals, and Hitchens changes the subject. And to what subject does he change it? Why to religion, of course.

For instance, mention Stalin and the millions he killed, and Hitchens will tell you how Stalin started out as a seminarian for the Orthodox priesthood and how Russian Orthodox believers presently make icons of Stalin (complete with halo). Mention the Nazis, the holocaust, and Hitler (Hitler, by the way, likened Christianity to small pox), and Hitchens will regale you with how many SS were churchgoers. Mention North Korea and its crazy communist dictators, and Hitchens will inform you that North Korea is the closest thing he can imagine to the Christian heaven, complete with a holy trinity comprising Kim Il-sung, Kim Jong-il, and Kim Jong-un.

Changing the subject in this way, however, doesn't change the fact that secularism can be just as ideologically driven as religion. The irony is that Hitchens' own atheist crusade is itself ideologically driven. The subtitle of Hitchens' book reads *How Religion Poisons Everything*. Gripped by the idea that religion poisons everything, he cannot allow that religious people, precisely because of their religion, might do good. Hitchens takes this idea to ridiculous extremes in his attack on Mother Teresa. In his 1994 BBC documentary *Hell's Angel*, in his 1995 book *The Missionary Position*, and briefly in *God Is Not Great*, Hitchens portrays her as a self-serving hypocrite.

In the audience today is my good friend Mary Poplin, a professor at Claremont. She was in Calcutta with Mother Teresa when Hitchens came out with his book against her. Recently, Poplin published *Finding Calcutta*, in which she recounts her time with Mother Teresa. Poplin writes:

"Hitchens also accused Mother [Teresa] of receiving the best in health care when it was not available to the poor. However, I took an offer to her from a colleague's brother, who was involved in developing a new pacemaker, to replace her old pacemaker with the new and improved one. She said she could not accept it, but she would accept it for the poor. She [also] refused another medical offer ... When I called and repeated these offers upon her becoming more ill a few months after I left, she again refused and asked for prayers instead. My impression is that she mostly received good health care when she was too ill to fight it."