

Deconstructing modern atheism

A review of
*The Devil's Delusion:
Atheism and Its Scientific
Pretensions*

by David Berlinski
Basic Books, New York,
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This is an unusual book. The author is not a Christian, he is a secular Jew. Although his book is heavily philosophical, Berlinski is a mathematician, not a philosopher. This work does not defend religion, nor attempt to prove the existence of God *per se*. Rather it examines the claims of modern atheism, particularly the notion that 'science has disproved God'.

The Holocaust is often cited as proof of the nonexistence of God. Berlinski, whose maternal grandfather, Samuel Goldfein, perished at Auschwitz, rejects such thinking. He points out that the Third Reich has been buried in its WWII ruins, while the Jewish people not only continue to exist, but also flourish. So God did save the Jewish people, although not in a manner that many would have wanted.

If there is no God, then anything goes. Vocal militant British atheist Richard Dawkins expressed his rebellion against traditional Judeo-Christian sexual morality (p. 18). Actually, this is nothing new. Well-known, professing atheists in the past (e.g. Aldous Huxley) had admitted that their rejection of God had been motivated by a desire to be free of moral restraints, especially in sexual behaviour.¹ So, in essence, their intellectual objections had been a smokescreen for their real motives for rejecting God.

One feature of modern atheists is their abusive language directed at

believers. Actually, this is nothing new either. The militant unbelievers of old, such as Voltaire and Ingersoll, also had an unmistakably scurrilous tone in their attacks on religion.²

Morality without God?

Let's expand the fact that 'If there is no God, then anything goes.' Berlinski could have added that some prominent atheists in the past, such as Friedrich Nietzsche, had recognized the fact that the end of God meant the end of morality.

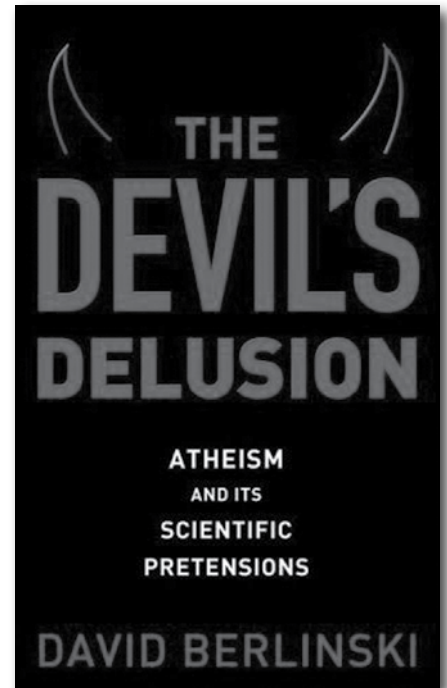
Many modern atheists, in contrast to Nietzsche, insist that we can be moral without God and religion. In contrast, Berlinski is unimpressed with the premise that humans can be moral without a fear of God. After all, how law-abiding would people be if there was no police and no law enforcement? I can speak from personal experience. For a time in Chicago, there was seldom any consequence for failure to pay fines for parking violations. They became almost a joke, and only about 15% of parking-violation citations were ever paid.

Now consider the liberal Dutch euthanasia laws. Just as had been predicted by some, assisted suicide has expanded to include murder. Berlinski cites a study from *The Journal of Medical Ethics*. It estimated that a quarter of the assisted 'suicides' were actually involuntary (p. 32).

Some atheists also insist that humankind is getting nobler and nobler with time—all without religion. The events of the 20th century very much contradict that notion, as elaborated in the following section.

Murderous religion or murderous secularism?

Predictably, atheists engage in selective historical memory by bringing up the Inquisition and other



persecutions done by, and in the name of, religion. Berlinski replies:

"The twentieth century was not an age of faith, and it was awful" (p. 19).

"Hitler's Germany was a technologically sophisticated society, and Nazism itself, as party propagandists never tired of stressing, was 'motivated by an ethic that prided itself on being scientific'" (p. 27).

Berlinski tabulates dozens of acts of genocide and state-sponsored mass murder in the 20th century, which totaled well over 100 million victims. So much for the myth of humankind getting better and better!

Berlinski could have noted that the number of people put to death by the Spanish Inquisition, about 3,000 in the years 1550–1800, were less than those put to death by secular authorities for secular offenses during the same time period.³ Alexander Solzhenitsyn, the famous Russian writer, pointed out that the Communist secret police, the Cheka, acting immediately following the Russian revolution, needed only just over one year to match the total number of victims of the centuries-long Spanish Inquisition.⁴ Nor was it a matter of improved

technology for killing: a large fraction of the more than 100 million murdered 20th-century victims perished from low-tech methods such as knives, clubs, starvation and overwork, etc.

Atheists have tried to confuse the issue by alleging that the actions of Mao and Stalin had nothing to do with their atheism. Oh really? Can one seriously suppose, as pointed out by Berlinski, that Mao and Stalin would have gone ahead with their monstrous crimes had they believed that there was a God watching them, and to whom they would one day be accountable? On the other had, if there is no God, then anything goes.

Berlinski could have added that atheism is not tangential to Mao and Stalin. Atheism was and is an *integral* part of Communist ideology, and the goal of destroying religion is at least as urgent a goal as destroying political liberty and free enterprise. Consistent with this, Mao and Stalin, and their followers, displayed an especial cruelty towards religious leaders and followers.

Religion as unscientific

A common theme of modern atheists, reviewed by Berlinski, is their tendency to portray religion as something not only discredited by science, but made into nonsense by it. The fact that there were many eminent scientists who were believers contradicts this premise. So atheists often assert that religious scientists made their discoveries in spite of, not because of, their religious beliefs. To the contrary! Berlinski mentions how Isaac Newton was inspired to write his *Principia Mathematica* as a result of his belief that God had planned and ordained the movement of celestial bodies (p. 52).

God is often dismissed as unscientific because He is unempirical. To the contrary, modern scientists, notably physicist and cosmologists, commonly invoke the existence of entities that are non-empirical. He comments:

“When scientists appeal to various unobservable entities—universal

forces, grand symmetries, twice-differential functions as in mechanics, Calabi-Yau manifolds, ionic bonds, or quantum fields...” (p. 143).

A clear double-standard is at work here.

Berlinski even defends an element of the God-of-the-gaps thinking. Atheists tell us that God is invoked for things that are not understood, and once they are all understood, God will be permanently unemployed. Berlinski argues that the gaps will never be filled: new discoveries create new mysteries (that is, new gaps) as well as solving old ones. Several examples of this are given (p. 184). While some gaps will be filled, others may not be, and may in fact be genuine manifestations of the Hand of God.

God as the First Cause

Thomas Aquinas elaborated upon God as the First Cause, and Berlinski devotes a fair amount of detail to him. He suggests that, despite the fact that the big bang posits that time itself began along with the universe itself, modern atheists are uncomfortable with the big bang because it implies that the universe had a definite beginning.

To get around this awkward fact, atheists have suggested a quantum cosmology explanation, in which case the universe began spontaneously out of nothing. Berlinski expounds on quantum cosmology in a question-and-answer format similar to that of Catholic catechism (pp. 104–105). He points out that

“This catechism, I should add, is not a parody of quantum cosmology. It *is* quantum cosmology” (p. 106).

Again, Berlinski could have taken his reasoning further. If the universe is ‘just one of those things’ that came out of nothing, then so could anything and everything else. The tree in my back yard may well have come out of nothing. And why not? This is magical thinking with a vengeance—the exact antithesis of cause-and-effect scientific reasoning.

A fine-tuned universe

It has often been remarked that our universe is fine-tuned in terms of chemical and physical properties. Were they even slightly different, life on Earth would be impossible. Atheists would have us believe that the universe looks like a put-up-job (using Berlinski’s terminology) but actually is not. Berlinski suggests at least the possibility that the universe looks like a put-up job because it *is* a put-up job.

Why does the electron continue to behave like an electron? Einstein was impressed by the laws of nature, and saw them as pointing to God. Modern atheists assume that any explanation is better than God, including the *ad hoc* belief in an infinite number of universes, many of which have no internal function because their entities do not behave regularly. Berlinski finds this reject-God-at-any-cost mentality unwarranted, and considers the infinite-universe (also including the Landscape and Anthropic Principle) as no less *ad hoc* than the epicycles of the Ptolemaic cosmology (p. 128).

However, Berlinski could have taken this further. The *reductio ad absurdum* of the infinite-universes supposition is that anything becomes possible. I could find a watch on a beach and, disregarding the possibility that the owner forgot it there and will return to claim it, contend that the watch developed spontaneously out of sand and water. After all, if there are an infinite number of universes, containing an infinite number of planets, with an infinite number of beaches, surely there may be at least one beach in one universe in which watches develop spontaneously out of sand and water. And, had I not come across the watch, I would not have been asking this question.

The Galileo affair revisited

The author discusses the Galileo affair in some detail. Unfortunately, he treats the biblical account as one that endorses the Ptolemaic cosmology. Berlinski’s understanding of the

relevant biblical texts is disappointing, although of course this is outside his area of expertise. In particular, Berlinski doesn't mention verses within Joshua Chapter 11 that do not support Ptolemy's cosmology. Note that the sun stood over Gibeon and the moon over the valley of Ayalon (Joshua 11:12). Why would this detail be included except to make it clear to the reader that the stoppage of the sun and moon were relative to the observer on Earth, not in any absolute sense (and therefore not an endorsement of any particular cosmogony)?

Also, bearing in mind that, according to Ptolemy's cosmology, both the sun and moon go around the Earth, and do so independently, why would the stoppage of the sun across the sky be associated with the simultaneous stoppage of the moon across the sky? Note that the purpose of the miracle described in Joshua 11 was the provision of prolonged daylight for Israel's military purposes (Joshua 11:13), and the moon during daytime contributes a relatively trivial additional amount of light. So why would the moon stop along with the sun, unless the same process that halted the sun's motion across the sky (namely, stoppage of the earth's rotation) also stopped the moon's relative motion across the sky? This, of course, corresponds to the modern geokinetic cosmology, not the Ptolemaic cosmology.

God and evolution don't mix

Although Berlinski does not directly address the matter of so-called theistic evolution as 'reconciliation' between atheistic evolution and special creation, his reflections on this subject show the bankruptcy of theistic evolution. He writes:

"If God did not create the world, then what is His use? And if He did, then what is His explanation? A child's question has given way to an adult's dilemma. A God too indisposed to do the work of creation is fated to drift into irrelevance, if only because His

demand for adoration would be considerably out of line with His record of accomplishment" (p. 140).

The ad hoc internally-inconsistent nature of evolution

The Evolution-is-Fact mantra permeates modern thinking. Berlinski chides the likes of Eugenie Scott for attempting to suppress all questioning of evolutionary theory by the "avoid debate because there is nothing to debate" self-serving position. He then engages in some deconstruction of this dogma. For instance, he observes that "The fossil record may be used to justify virtually any position, and often is" (p. 188).

When it comes to the (presumed) evolutionary origin of new forms of life, Berlinski cites a 2007 paper by Eugene Koonin. "Major transitions in biological evolution", Koonin writes, "show the same pattern of sudden emergence of diverse forms at a new level of complexity" (p. 192).

Evolutionary psychology has been invoked to explain such things as the kinds of women (e. g. svelte ones) that men find the most sexually attractive. Berlinski quips:

"If sexual preferences are rooted in the late Paleolithic era, men worldwide should now be looking for stout muscular women with broad backs, sturdy legs, a high threshold to pain, and a welcome eagerness to resume foraging directly after parturition. It has not been widely documented that they do" (p. 168).

Berlinski has a sense of humor. When confronting the contention that humans and chimps are 'extremely similar to each other', so much so that extraterrestrial visitors would have a hard time discerning the differences between the two, he comments:

"I suppose that if a fish were thoughtfully to consider the matter, she might have a hard time determining the differences

we treasure between Al Gore and a sperm whale. Both of them are large, and one of them is streamlined" (p. 161).

Cover words, which parallel those used by magicians, are used by evolutionists to hide glaring flaws in their theory. Consider, for instance, the origin of life. Berlinski writes:

"No one has the faintest idea whether the immense gap between what is living and what is not may be crossed by any conceivable means. It is therefore no surprise that the National Academy of Sciences has taken pains to affirm that it already has been crossed ... Difficulties are accommodated by the magician's age-old tactic of misdirection" (p. 202).

God and the miraculous: a conclusion

Far from discrediting God and the miraculous, modern science may have facilitated its acceptance. Berlinski concludes:

"We may allow ourselves in the early twenty-first century to neglect the Red Sea and so regard with unconcern the various loaves and fishes mentioned in the New Testament. We who are heirs of the scientific tradition have been given the priceless gift of a vastly enhanced sense of the miraculous. This is something that the very greatest scientists—Newton, Einstein, Bohr, Goedel—have always known and always stressed" (p. 207).

References

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2. Linton, I. H., *A Lawyer Examines the Bible*, Creation-Life Publishers, San Diego, CA, e.g. p. 99, 1977.
3. Peters. E., *Inquisition*, University of California Press, CA, p. 87, 1989.
4. Solzhenitsyn, A., *The Gulag Archipelago*, parts I-II, Harper and Row, New York, NY, p. 435, 1973.