

## Nietzsche and the New Atheists

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**Abstract:** The following work illustrates that there is little that can be considered “new” in “New Atheist” literature. To show this I will delineate how Nietzsche’s polemics were picked up by such thinkers as Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens and Daniel Dennett—the four horsemen of the “New Atheist” movement. Ultimately, I will argue that much of what the “New Atheists” have to say has already been said by Nietzsche and that their failure to consult his works not only ignores the foundations of their own positions but also leaves much of their argument open to criticism by one of their own.

**Keywords:** Friedrich Nietzsche, Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris

When surveying the growing corpus of material that comprises the New Atheist movement, one finds a relative dearth of references to Friedrich Nietzsche. It is as if these authors are afraid if they enter into conversation with Nietzsche they too might contract a case of syphilis and go mad. Christian apologists arguing against New Atheism, on the other hand, have not had a problem championing Nietzsche as the ideal atheist who correctly critiques religion. The following quote by Christian apologist David Bentley Hart epitomizes this stance:

Friedrich Nietzsche may have had a somewhat limited understanding of the history of Christian thought, but he was nevertheless a man of immense culture who could appreciate the magnitude of the thing against which he had turned his spirit, and who had enough of a sense of the past to understand the cultural crisis that the fading of Christian faith would bring about. Moreover, he had the good manners to despise Christianity, in large part, for what it actually was—above all, for its devotion to an ethics of compassion—rather than allow himself the soothing, self-righteous fantasy that Christianity’s history had

been nothing but an interminable pageant of violence, tyranny, and sexual neurosis.<sup>1</sup>

In the following work, I will argue that there is little that can be considered “new” in New Atheist literature. To show this, I will compare and contrast Nietzsche’s writings with the seminal works put out by Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett and Sam Harris—the four horsemen of the New Atheist movement—to illustrate that although Nietzsche’s thought often goes unacknowledged, his impact is undeniable.

Ultimately, the New Atheist failure to consult his works not only ignores the foundations of their own positions but also leaves much of their argument open to criticism from an inside perspective. I begin with analysis of the author that most closely approximates Nietzsche’s style and content, the unapologetically venomous Christopher Hitchens.

### **I. Hitchens and Nietzsche: Ignorance, the Death of God, and Religion as Original Sin**

Of the authors that comprise the New Atheist movement, Christopher Hitchens is the least learned, and this is perhaps most apparent in his ignorance of Nietzsche’s writings. In his book *The Portable Atheist: Essential Readings for the Nonbeliever*, Hitchens compiles small excerpts from notable critics of religion. The reader can peruse pieces written by Lucretius, David Hume, Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, Bertrand Russell and roughly thirty other authors.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> David Bentley Hart, *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 6

<sup>2</sup> Christopher Hitchens, *The Portable Atheist: Essential Readings for the Nonbeliever* (Philadelphia: Da Capo Press, 2007)

One would have thought that this book would be the perfect medium to showcase some of Nietzsche's succinct critiques of the religious worldview. Certainly, if any piece of writing is "essential reading for the nonbeliever" it is the words Nietzsche places in the mouth of the madman who announces to all that "God is Dead!"<sup>3</sup> In his parable of the madman, Nietzsche challenges readers to seriously contemplate what it means to live in a world without God. However, these imaginings find no sanctuary in *The Portable Atheist*. Hence, it is prudent to give a brief overview of the parable here, before moving on.

Nietzsche, at times using the madman as an avatar for his own ideas, asks, "What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Where is it moving to now? Where are we moving to? Away from all suns? Are we not continually falling?"<sup>4</sup> With the death of God, the answers proffered for these questions no longer make sense. Before the madman begins his interrogation, those who do not believe in God laugh at his ranting because they do not truly grasp the implications of living in the world without God. In these few questions, Nietzsche focuses on cosmology, but one could easily interject all sorts of questions here, such as how the death of God affects human being's conceptions of the afterlife, how they express gratitude and where they direct their sorrow. Nietzsche is attempting to call attention to the fact that liberation does not happen by merely killing God, but rather it only occurs when one faces the task of replacing God.

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<sup>3</sup> While the phrase "God is dead" appears in §§ 108, 125, and 343 of Nietzsche's *The Gay Science*, the parable of the madman, as it appears in §125, is the most famous iteration. For further information see Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, ed. Bernard Williams, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 120

In a bit of self-aggrandizing rhetoric, Nietzsche has the madman aver, “There was never a greater deed [than killing God]—and whoever is born after us will on account of this deed belong to a higher history than all history up to now!” Nietzsche views his task of killing God to be of paramount importance—one capable of elevating humanity to a level it had yet to achieve. However, this celebration may be a bit premature. The response of the onlookers is quite telling in this regard. “Here the madman fell silent and looked again at his listeners; they too were silent and looked at him disconcertedly. Finally he threw his lantern on the ground so that it broke into pieces and went out. ‘I come too early’, he then said; ‘my time is not yet. This tremendous event is still on its way, wandering; it has not yet reached the ears of men.’” Like the madman’s lamp that is shattered on the ground, the light that Nietzsche attempts to bring to humanity is indefinitely extinguished.

This raises the question as to whether the message of the madman will ever be heard by the philosophers of the future. One would think that his ideal audience would be the New Atheists, yet, after surveying their material, one might be unsure if there would be any good news to report to Nietzsche.

Nevertheless, Hitchens’s ignorance of this foundational text of atheism is not a contagion that infects the other authors in his book. In his short chapter entitled “Memorial Service,” scholar H.L. Menken asks, “Where is the graveyard of dead gods?”<sup>5</sup> He then proceeds to list the names of one-hundred and forty gods who have met their demise. Menken concludes by alluding to the presumable fate of the God of our current age by referencing the deaths of the gods that have come before: “They

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<sup>5</sup> H.L. Menken, “Memorial Service,” in *The Portable Atheist: Essential Readings for the Nonbeliever*, ed. Christopher Hitchens (Philadelphia: Da Capo Press, 2007), 143

were gods of the highest standing and dignity—gods of civilized peoples—worshipped and believed in by millions. All were theoretically omnipotent, omniscient, and immortal. And all are dead.”<sup>6</sup> Just as all the prior gods have passed, so too will our own.

Maybe I should cut Hitchens a bit of slack here. He is just a journalist after all, and he does not claim to be a philosopher or a theologian. Perhaps this would be easier to do if it was not for the fact that so many people approach his work as though it were a piece of academic literature, but I digress. Hitchens does share quite a few commonalities with Nietzsche, for example his biting wit and stinging rhetoric. Still, I would like to dig a little deeper and compare the views of Nietzsche and Hitchens on a topic with a bit more substance: the idea of religion as original sin.

Chapter fifteen of Hitchens’s book *god is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, is titled “Religion as Original Sin.” In it, Hitchens argues there are “several ways in which religion is not just amoral, but positively immoral.”<sup>7</sup> For Hitchens, these crimes are not found in the behavior of religious adherents, but rather in the original precepts of the religions themselves. Hence, he equates religion, and not believers, with original sin. Hitchens identifies five areas of major concern: presenting a false picture of the world to the innocent and the credulous;

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 146

<sup>7</sup> Christopher Hitchens, *god is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Twelve, 2007), 205.

the doctrine of blood sacrifice; the doctrine of atonement; the doctrine of eternal reward and/or punishment; and the imposition of impossible tasks and rules.<sup>8</sup>

Hitchens begins his discussion by pointing out how the creation myths espoused by all the religions have proven to be false, and that they have since been replaced by far superior scientific explanations. Hitchens sees a need for religion to apologize for forcing its myths upon an unsuspecting populace and for taking so long to accept that this is what they had done.<sup>9</sup> While I agree that Hitchens provides an accurate account of a minority position held by religious fundamentalists, it is rather arrogant of Hitchens to assert that he somehow has access to the *true* meaning of the text when the majority of religious folks would argue otherwise.

Hitchens continues by examining the role of blood sacrifice in both primitive societies and contemporary monotheistic religions. Primitive people would not hesitate to sacrifice humans, even infants, to propitiate their gods, and modern monotheists have been able to continue this tradition, albeit in animal form.

To give evidence of this, Hitchens lists a number of examples mined from the Abrahamic faiths. Hitchens notes, "Pious Jews are at this moment trying to breed the spotlessly pure 'red heifer' mentioned in the book of Numbers, chapter 19, which if slaughtered again according to the exact and meticulous ritual will bring about the return of animal sacrifices in the Third Temple, and hasten the end of time and the coming of the Messiah."<sup>10</sup> This proclivity for animal sacrifice is by no means limited to Jews: "Other sacramental guttings and throat-cuttings, particularly of lambs,

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid

<sup>9</sup> Ibid

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 206

occur every year in the Christian and Muslim world, either to celebrate Easter or the feast of Eid.”<sup>11</sup>

Hitchens traces the Abrahamic thirst for blood back to the progenitor of these three traditions, Abraham:

Abraham’s willingness to make a human sacrifice of his son, is common to all three monotheisms, and descends from their primitive ancestors... Perhaps afflicted by a poor conscience, but at any rate believing himself commanded by god, Abraham agreed to murder his son... At the last available moment his hand was stayed, not by god as it happens, but by an angel, and he was praised from the clouds for showing his sturdy willingness to murder an innocent in expiation of his own crimes...The curse of Abraham continues to poison Hebron, but the religious warrant for blood sacrifice poisons our entire civilization.<sup>12</sup>

Hitchens traces the rise of inter-religious violence and sectarianism to arguments over sacred places where these blood sacrifices were performed. However, he completely ignores the sacrificial element involved in acts of charity or religiously based altruism.

The third issue Hitchens attempts to deconstruct is the doctrine of atonement. For Hitchens, “Once again we have a father demonstrating love by subjecting a son to death by torture, but this time the father is not trying to impress god. He *is* god, and he is trying to impress humans... In consequence of this murder, my sins are forgiven me, and I may hope to enjoy everlasting life.”

For Hitchens, there are several attendant beliefs that accompany the last line above. Namely, one must believe that he is responsible for the flogging, mocking, and crucifixion of Christ, even though this event occurred almost two-thousand

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 206-8

years ago. Second, to the extent that the believer denies this responsibility, he only increases Christ's agony. Furthermore, Christ's death was necessary so that humankind could be forgiven for an even earlier crime that they could not have possibly taken part in—the sin of Adam. The believer's culpability is deemed "original" and thus is inescapable. This prompts Hitchens to conclude, "The collectivization of guilt, in short, is immoral in itself, as religion has been occasionally compelled to admit."<sup>13</sup> It is unfortunate that Hitchens identifies all religion as Christianity writ large. If he had undertaken a more serious research regiment, he would have found that this idea of corporate guilt is anathema in several other traditions, Islam being but one.

The end of the chapter is a two-pronged attack on the doctrine of eternal punishment and the imposition of impossible tasks on believers. Hitchens sees a symbiotic relationship between these two aspects of the religious worldview. The doctrine of eternal punishment leads to moral hypocrisy—the sale of indulgences by the Catholic Church and the Dalai Lama telling believers that they can visit prostitutes as long as someone else pays her are two examples. Hitchens claims, "This pathetic moral spectacle would not be necessary if the original rules were ones that it would be possible to obey."<sup>14</sup>

For Hitchens, making rules that are impossible to obey is the essential principle of totalitarianism. He goes on to list myriad ways religions reflect this principle. "This objection applies even to some of the noblest and some of the basest rules. The order to 'love thy neighbor' is mild yet stern: a reminder of one's duty to

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 210

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 212



others. The order to ‘love thy neighbor *as thyself*’ is too extreme and too strenuous to be obeyed. Urging humans to be superhumans, on pain of death and torture, is the urging of terrible self-abasement at their repeated and inevitable failure to keep the rules.”<sup>15</sup> For many Christians, the inability to achieve perfect moral status is yet another symptom of our fallen nature, but to what extent this can be said of all religions is, again, debatable.

Finally, Hitchens touches upon the impossible expectations of believers in relation to sex. He avows that, “One could write an entire book that was devoted only to the grotesque history of religion and sex, and to holy dread of the procreative act and its associated impulses and necessities, from the emission of semen to the effusion of menstrual blood.”<sup>16</sup> While I generally agree with what Hitchens is saying here, he fails to also consider the detrimental effects of patriarchal society and its impact on sexual mores, or other non-theological influences on sexual behavior—for example, the taboo nature of incestuous relationships.

Having outlined some of Hitchens main arguments against religion, I would now like to turn to the writings of Nietzsche. Before comparing the five points given by Hitchens to Nietzsche’s work, I will spend some time exploring what Nietzsche means when he equates religion with original sin.

In his book *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche writes, “Since there have been men, man has enjoyed himself too little: that alone my brothers, is our original

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 213

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 215

sin!"<sup>17</sup> To understand what Nietzsche is getting at here, one must understand his view of the properly ordered individual. We can gain a glimpse of this in an excerpt from *Twilight of the Idols*:

The most general formula at the center of all religions and moralities is: 'do this, don't do that—and then you'll be happy! Otherwise...' Every morality, every religion, is this imperative,—I call it the great original sin of reason, the *immortal unreason*. In my mouth, this formula changes into its opposite—*first* example of my 'revaluation of all values'—someone who has turned out well, a 'happy one', *has to* perform certain acts and will instinctively avoid others, he is the physiological representative of the system he uses in dealing with other people and things. In a word: his virtue is the *effect* of his happiness (emphasis in the original).<sup>18</sup>

Religions, viewing human beings as rational animals, want humans to embrace their rational side, often to the detriment to of their animality. This for Nietzsche is religion as original sin and also signifies a significant departure from many of the current tropes that claim religion is the antithesis of reason.

There is an important difference here between the approaches of Hitchens and Nietzsche that ought to be noted, namely, that Hitchens views religion as inherently irrational and thus deserving of reproach, whereas Nietzsche claims that religion embraces rationality to the detriment of our natural animalistic inclinations. This distinction may help to illustrate one of the reasons why theists are more likely to side with Nietzsche over Hitchens.

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<sup>17</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. Clancy Martin (New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2005), 78

<sup>18</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*, eds. Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman, trans. Judith Norman (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 177

Nietzsche extrapolates on this point when he argues that a properly ordered individual will act upon his physiological instincts and because he does so, will become one of the 'happy ones'. The properly ordered religious individual, on the other hand, embraces his rational side, and believes if he follows the dictates of the church he will become one of the 'happy ones'. However, because the religious individual neglects his animal instincts, he will never be happy, and therefore, becomes sickly.

Had Hitchens done his homework, he would have found that Nietzsche had already articulated much of what he had to argue, and did so over a hundred years prior. In §48 of *The Antichrist*, Nietzsche questions the reader, "Has the famous story that stands at the beginning of the Bible really been understood? The story of God's hellish fear of *science*? It has not been understood."<sup>19</sup>

Nietzsche argues that Eve eating from the tree of knowledge is the beginning of science, and this is the point where man becomes a rival to God, "for science makes godlike—it is all over with priests and gods when man becomes scientific."<sup>20</sup> Nietzsche surpasses Hitchens' critique that Christianity merely presents believers with a faulty cosmology and instead argues that Christianity, in its account of creation and the fall of man, purposefully places believers against the scientific mindset.

Concerning the doctrine of blood sacrifice, Nietzsche declares, "They left marks of blood along the way they went, and their folly taught that with blood the

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<sup>19</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Antichrist," in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), 628

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 629

truth is proved. But blood is the worst witness of truth; blood poisons even the purest teaching and turns it into delusion and hatred of the heart.”<sup>21</sup> For Nietzsche, no good can come from blood sacrifice. Perhaps this is the reason why his hero, Zarathustra, when surrounded by a band of animals, chooses to make a sacrifice of honey rather than make a sacrifice of one of his furry friends. However, once alone Zarathustra sees no use in making the honey sacrifice and ends up forgoing it altogether. Nietzsche is thus illustrating the futility of performing any sacrificial rite.<sup>22</sup>

Closely tied to any discussion of blood sacrifice is the doctrine of atonement, the blood sacrifice of God’s only Son. According to the doctrine of atonement, all believers are indebted to Jesus for paying the price for their sins. For Nietzsche, sacrifices are the perfect means of ensuring that debtors do not forget their debt:

Things never proceeded without blood, torture, and victims, when man thought it necessary to forge a memory for himself. The most horrifying sacrifices and offerings (including sacrifice of the first-born), the most repulsive mutilations (castrations, for example), the cruelest rituals of all religious cults (and all religions are at their deepest foundations systems of cruelty)—all these things originate from that instinct which guessed that the most powerful aid to memory was pain.<sup>23</sup>

Nietzsche finds the doctrine of atonement to be an absolute affront to morality. When the early Christians were searching for a justification for Christ’s crucifixion, “the small community found an altogether horribly absurd answer: God gave his son for the remission of sins, as a *sacrifice*. In one stroke, it was all over with

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<sup>21</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 81

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, 203

<sup>23</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals: A Polemic*, trans. Douglas Smith (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 42-3

evangel. The *trespass sacrifice*—in its most revolting, most barbarous form at that, the sacrifice of the *guiltless* for the sins of the guilty! What gruesome paganism!”<sup>24</sup>

A few pages later Nietzsche returns to the picture of Christ on the cross, “*God on the cross*—are the horrible secret thoughts behind this symbol not understood yet? All that suffers, all that is nailed to the cross, is *divine*. All of us are nailed to the cross, consequently *we* are divine. We alone are divine.”<sup>25</sup> Christianity, therefore, ought to be avoided because it divinizes sorrow and suffering rather than embracing all that is healthy and joyful.

Underlying both of Nietzsche’s criticisms is his denial of the imputation of the sin of Adam onto believers. He equates the spread of this belief with the spread of sickness—a sickness that is necessary for the existence of the priestly class: “Christianity *needs* sickness just as Greek culture needs a superabundance of health—to make sick is the true, secret purpose of the whole system of redemptive procedures constructed by the church... Nobody is free to become a Christian: one is not ‘converted’ to Christianity—one has to be sick enough for it.”<sup>26</sup>

In contrast to Hitchens’s view of eternal reward and punishment, it is not the moral depravity of religionists seeking loopholes to their ethical codes that is of central concern to Nietzsche, but rather, how a preoccupation with an afterlife derails the believer from living a fulfilling life in the here and now. Nietzsche claims this same idea can be found in the writings of Epicurus: “One should read Lucretius to comprehend *what* Epicurus fought: *not* paganism but ‘Christianity,’ by which I

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<sup>24</sup> Nietzsche, *The Antichrist*, 616

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, 634

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, 633

mean the corruption of souls by the concepts of guilt, punishment, and immortality...to deny immortality was nothing less than a real *salvation*.”

Furthermore, Nietzsche posits that Paul’s use of an afterlife was the only hope for Christianity’s eventual usurpation of Rome: “This was his moment at Damascus: he comprehended that he *needed* the belief in immortality to deprive ‘the world’ of value, that the concept of ‘hell’ would become master even over Rome—that with the ‘beyond’ one *kills life*. Nihilism and Christianity: that rhymes, that does not only rhyme.”<sup>27</sup>

Finally, there is the issue of the impossible tasks expected of believers. As I have pointed out above, the church needs sin in order to justify its existence. Pushing the envelope once again, Nietzsche writes, “The ‘law,’ the ‘will of God,’ the ‘holy book,’ ‘inspiration’—all mere words for the conditions *under* which the priest attains power, *with* which the priest preserves his power; these concepts are found at the basis of all priestly organizations, of all forms of priestly or philosophic-priestly rule.”<sup>28</sup> By requiring impossible tasks, priests ensure that they will always have problems to solve.

Nietzsche is especially vehement in his denunciation of the Christian view of sex. “Really, how can one put a book in the hands of children and women which contains the vile dictum: ‘to avoid fornication, let every man have his own wife, and let every woman have her own husband... It is better to marry than burn’? And how

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 650

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 641-2

can one be a Christian so long as the notion of the *immaculate conceptio* christianizes, that is, *dirty*s, the origin of man?"<sup>29</sup>

Moreover, in his "Law Against Christianity," a piece that was eliminated from numerous editions of *The Antichrist* because of its virulence, Nietzsche proposes that the "preacher of chastity is a public incitement to anti-nature. Contempt for sexuality, making it unclean with the concept of 'uncleanliness', these are the real sins against the holy spirit of life."<sup>30</sup>

While it may appear that I have spent a disproportionate amount of space comparing Nietzsche and Hitchens, there are numerous reasons for doing so. First among these is the similarity in writing styles. Both authors are addressing a general audience and they do so in an intentionally provocative way. Secondly, much like the madman above, neither was taken seriously as a scholar by his contemporaries. The only answer I can envision as to why Hitchens does not reference Nietzsche is that he is either ignorant of his work, or he has some personal dislike for him. I continue the current study with an examination of evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins. Of the four authors being studied, Nietzsche would most likely find Dawkins's work to be the most abrasive.

## **II. Dawkins and Nietzsche: Friends or Foes?**

I begin the current section with an exploration of the refutation of philosophical arguments for the existence of God put forward by Dawkins and Nietzsche before moving on to the charges of scientism that are often hurled at

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 642-3

<sup>30</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, "Law Against Christianity," in *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*, eds. Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman, trans. Judith Norman (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 67

Dawkins. If these assertions are accurate, they may present these two authors with an unbridgeable gap concerning their views on the role of science and rationality.

Let us begin with a few of Dawkins' arguments against the existence of God. Almost a third of Dawkins' immensely popular book *The God Delusion* is spent refuting classic philosophical arguments for the existence of God.<sup>31</sup> For our purposes it will suffice to scrutinize just two of these: the Cosmological Argument and the Ontological Argument.

The Cosmological Argument is one of the five proofs for the existence of God put forth by Thomas Aquinas. In a simplified version, retold by Dawkins, this argument states, "There must have been a time when no physical things existed. But, since physical things exist now, there must have been something non-physical to bring them into existence, and that something we call God."<sup>32</sup> Closely related to the Cosmological Argument are two other proofs offered by Aquinas. The first is the argument of the unmoved mover, which states that nothing moves without a prior mover. In order to prevent an infinite regress of previous movers, one needs to posit a first mover, and for Aquinas, this is God. The second proof offered by Aquinas is the argument of the uncaused cause, which states that every effect has a cause, and the only way one can thwart an infinite regress in this instance is to terminate the chain of causes in a first cause, God.

Dawkins is correct in pointing out that each of these arguments relies on God terminating an otherwise infinite regress and that they make "the unwarranted assumption that God himself is immune to the regress. Even if we allow the dubious

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<sup>31</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), 75-161

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, 77



luxury of arbitrarily conjuring up a terminator to an infinite regress and giving it a name, simply because we need one, there is absolutely no reason to endow that terminator with any of the properties normally ascribed to God.”<sup>33</sup>

While Dawkins may be justified in critiquing Aquinas’ assumption that God is immune to the regress, he seems to be going a bit too far in stating that Aquinas is arguing for an omniscient, omnipotent, omnibenevolent God in any of the three proofs given here. Returning to the issue of God as the terminus of all causes, Dawkins notes, “it is more parsimonious to conjure up, say, a ‘big bang singularity’, or some other physical concept as yet unknown. Calling it God is at best unhelpful and at worst perniciously misleading.”<sup>34</sup> However, he fails to give adequate evidence as to why he believes the scientific explanation is superior.

Although Nietzsche does not expend much energy in a systematic refutation of philosophical arguments for the existence of God, he does seem to take some joy in mocking them. Nietzsche writes, “The *other* idiosyncrasy of the philosophers is just as dangerous: they confuse what comes first with what comes last. They take what comes at the end... and place it at the beginning, *as* the beginning.”<sup>35</sup> Nietzsche, writing on the philosopher’s conception of God, claims, “It is the last, emptiest, most meager idea of all, and it is put first, as cause in itself, as *ens realissimum*... Why did humanity have to take the brain disease of sick cobweb-weavers so seriously?—It has certainly paid the price!”<sup>36</sup> For both Dawkins and Nietzsche, the concept of God

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 78

<sup>35</sup> Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, 168

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 169

as the first cause is not only empty and misleading, but also potentially harmful to humanity.

Having examined the views of Nietzsche and Dawkins on one of the most famous *a posteriori* arguments for the existence of God, I would like to shift gears and look at their positions concerning one of the most famous *a priori* arguments for the existence of God, Anselm's Ontological Argument.

Anselm claimed that God is that which nothing greater could be conceived. Dawkins' rendition of Anselm's position is quite humorous and worth quoting in full:

Let me translate this infantile argument into the appropriate language, which is the language of the playground:

'Bet you I can prove God exists.'

'Bet you can't'

'Right then, imagine the most perfect perfect *perfect* thing possible.'

'Okay, now what?'

'Now, is that perfect perfect *perfect* thing real? Does it exist?'

'No, it's only in my mind.'

'But if it was real it would be even more perfect, because a really really perfect thing would have to be better than a silly old imaginary thing. So I've proved that God exists. Nur Nurny Nur Nur. All atheists are fools.'<sup>37</sup>

I find it quite ironic that although Dawkins finds Anselm's argument so infantile that it is best elucidated in the vernacular of schoolchildren, nowhere does he attempt to refute it himself. Instead, Dawkins relies on the counter-arguments of Bertrand Russell, J.L. Mackie, Kant and Hume before settling on Douglas Gasking's inversion of Anselm's argument, which he uses to prove the non-existence of God.

Gasking argued the following:

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<sup>37</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 80

1. The creation of the world is the most marvelous achievement imaginable.
  2. The merit of an achievement is the product of (a) its intrinsic quality and (b) the ability of its creator.
  3. The greater the disability (or handicap) of the creator, the more impressive the achievement.
  4. The most formidable handicap for a creator would be non-existence.
  5. Therefore if we suppose that the universe is the product of an existent creator we can conceive of a greater being – namely, one who created everything while not existing.
  6. An existing God therefore would not be a being greater than which a greater cannot be conceived because an even more formidable and incredible creator would be a God which did not exist.
- Ergo:
7. God does not exist.<sup>38</sup>

I should emphasize that Dawkins lends as much credence to Gasking's argument as he does Anselm's, the difference being that Gasking was funny on purpose.

Nietzsche, on the other hand, takes a much different approach in his handling of the Ontological Argument. With his usual polemical dismissiveness, Nietzsche writes, "Possessing even the tiniest bit of piety in the body, we should find a god who cures a cold at the right time or who bids us enter a coach at the very moment when a violent rainstorm begins, such an absurd god that we should have to abolish him if he did exist. A god as servant, as mailman, as calendar man—at bottom, a word for the most stupid of all accidents."<sup>39</sup> For Nietzsche, this conception of god is one in which a greater can be conceived—namely, one that is sovereign and not subject to the demands of his believers.

Indisputably, there are certain convergences in the thought of Dawkins and Nietzsche, but what about the differences, especially on the issue of science?

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 83

<sup>39</sup> Nietzsche, *The Antichrist*, 637

Christian apologist Dinesh D'Souza brings these differences to the fore when he writes:

Nietzsche accepted Darwin's theory of evolution as true, but he detested Darwinism for what he took to be its exaltation of a certain brutish type that survived in nature through raw force. Nietzsche's atheism is of a very different pedigree than Dawkins's. Nietzsche would have taken Dawkins's breed of Darwinism as the mark of a particularly low and unimaginative human type, widely found in England. Nietzsche too was interested in survival of the fittest, but to him this meant the cultural survival of great and noble and artistically imaginative forms of humanity.<sup>40</sup>

Apart from their views on evolution, there seems to be a large chasm separating how Dawkins and Nietzsche view science's ability to answer "how" questions. Dawkins writes an entire section critiquing Stephen Jay Gould's concept of NOMA (non-overlapping magisteria), which states that the realm of religion is mainly concerned with the "why" questions of life, whereas science is mainly concerned with answering "how" questions. According to Gould, "To cite the old clichés, science gets the age of rocks, and religion the rock of ages; science studies how the heavens go, religion how to go to heaven."<sup>41</sup>

For Dawkins, this division of labor is a joke because even if you were to accept Gould's thesis, any action that God takes in the universe automatically falls under the purview of science. This would include any miracles or religious experiences. The most a believer could hope for is the non-interventionist God of the Deists. Dawkins thinks that science's ability to answer these questions significantly weakens the believer's belief in God.

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<sup>40</sup> Dinesh D'Souza, *What's so Great about Christianity* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 2007), 27

<sup>41</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 55

Conversely, Nietzsche avers, “If you have your ‘*why*’ of life, you can get along with almost any ‘*how*?’.”<sup>42</sup> Moreover, “What is *science* to a priest? He is above that! And up until now the priest has ruled! He determined the concepts of ‘true’ and untrue!”<sup>43</sup> This is not to say that Nietzsche saw no use for science—he did see room for certain forms of science to be beneficial—but for Nietzsche, even when believers are confronted with scientific truth, this will not alter their worldview.

In the end, Dawkins was probably wise in not using Nietzsche in his book, as most of what Nietzsche wrote concerning those who made an idol of rationality was negative. Nietzsche says as much in the description of his work *Beyond Good and Evil* “This book (1886) is in essence a *critique of modernity*, including modern science, modern art—even modern politics—, along with indications of an opposite type who is as un-modern as possible, a noble, affirmative type.”<sup>44</sup> Nietzsche admonishes his readers “not to cleave to a science, though it lures one with the most precious discoveries seemingly reserved precisely for *us*.”<sup>45</sup> Since we have explored the writings of the two scholars with whom Nietzsche has the most and least in common, let us now turn to the only one of the New Atheist authors who bothers to cite Nietzsche in his work, Daniel Dennett.

### III. Daniel Dennett Deciding to Doubt

It seems to make sense that the only professionally trained philosopher of the New Atheist corps would also be the only one to use Nietzsche in his own work.

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<sup>42</sup> Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, 157

<sup>43</sup> Nietzsche, *The Antichrist*, 579

<sup>44</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*, eds. Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman, trans. Judith Norman (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 135.

<sup>45</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 70

Dennett says the following about the intentions behind his book, *Breaking the Spell*: “The spell that I say *must* be broken is the taboo against a forthright, scientific, no-holds-barred investigation of religion as one natural phenomenon among many.”<sup>46</sup> In the following section, I will outline Nietzsche’s position on doubting religious claims, give his account of the natural phenomenon of religion, and attempt to trace lines of possible influence on Dennett.

Writing on the relationship between faith and doubt, Nietzsche avows, “Because sickness is of the essence of Christianity, the typical Christian state, ‘faith,’ must also be a form of this sickness, and all straight, honest, scientific paths to knowledge must be rejected by the church as forbidden paths. Even doubt is a sin... ‘Faith’ means not *wanting* to know what is true.”<sup>47</sup> Clearly, it is in the church’s best interest to ensure no one questions its doctrines. There is no better way to accomplish this than making belief in everything the church says a virtue, whilst at the same time making doubt a sin.

In §89 of *Daybreak*, Nietzsche tackles the exact issue Dennett is attempting to address:

*Doubt as sin*—Christianity has done its utmost to close the circle and declared even doubt to be sin. One is supposed to be cast into belief without reason, by a miracle, and from then on to swim in it as in the brightest and least ambiguous of elements: even a glance towards land, even the thought that one perhaps exists for something else as well as swimming, even the slightest impulse of our amphibious nature—is sin! And notice that all this means that the foundation of belief and all reflection on its origin is likewise excluded as sinful.

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<sup>46</sup> Daniel C. Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, 17

<sup>47</sup> Nietzsche, *The Antichrist*, 635

What is wanted are blindness and intoxication and an eternal song over the waves in which reason has drowned!<sup>48</sup>

Here Nietzsche is arguing that being a believer is similar to being an amphibian that is prohibited from even considering going to land—even though this is in its best interest. It is better for those in power if the believer were to perish in the waters of belief than if they were to attempt to challenge their conception of truth, particularly when this entails questioning the origins of their truth.

With this in mind, let us consider what Nietzsche thought of the natural origins of belief. For Nietzsche, the conception of God begins with a society who believes in itself. Individuals project their pleasure in themselves, their feelings of power, onto a being to whom they can offer thanks. Such a god “must be able to help and to harm, to be friend and enemy—he is admired whether good or destructive... The evil god is needed no less than the good god: after all we do not owe our own existence to tolerance and humanitarianism.”<sup>49</sup>

To the extent that a society dominates its neighbors through force, its god will also reflect these “virtues.” When a society declines and its members become the subjects of an occupying force, their concept of god changes with them, and becomes a “good” god, one worthy of worship by every person. This leads Nietzsche to conclude, “Indeed, there is no alternative for gods: *either* they are the will to

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<sup>48</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*, eds. Maudmarie Clark and Brian Leiter, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 52

<sup>49</sup> Nietzsche, *The Antichrist*, 583

power, and they remain a people's gods, *or* the incapacity for power, and they necessarily become *good*.”<sup>50</sup>

Sigmund Freud would later mimic the paradigm set by Nietzsche in his own account of religion as a natural phenomenon. In his book, *The Future of an Illusion*, Freud claims that in man's attempt to comprehend and control nature, he creates the idea of god in the image of his father.<sup>51</sup> Freud believes the mother is the first love-object, and the first protector, of an infant. However, the father ultimately takes over these roles until the child reaches maturity. Yet, because the infant, when it was under the care of the mother, viewed the father as a possible danger, he continues to view the father as one who is “feared no less than he is longed for and admired.”<sup>52</sup>

As the child reaches adulthood, he comes to understand that he will always be in need of protection so he projects the qualities of his father onto his conception of god. For the grown man, god is one “of whom he is afraid, whom he seeks to propitiate, and to whom he nevertheless entrusts the task of protecting him.”<sup>53</sup> This is a very concise account of Freud's beliefs on the formation of religion, but noteworthy nonetheless.

Dennett follows the path cleared by Freud and Nietzsche. Dennett agrees that our ideas of god begin with our parents, because children are willing to believe almost anything their parents tell them, “One's parents—or whoever are hard to distinguish from one's parents—have something close to approaching a dedicated

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid

<sup>51</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion* (Blacksburg, VA: Wilder Publications, 2010), 30-35

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, 35

<sup>53</sup> Ibid



hotline to acceptance, not as potent as hypnotic suggestion, but sometimes close to it.”<sup>54</sup>

Seeing that we instinctually believe that our parents know everything, “our ancestors were unwittingly summoning up fantasies about *their* ancestors in order to relieve some of their quandaries about what to do next.”<sup>55</sup> Over time, these conceptions of all-knowing ancestors were slowly replaced with the concept of an omniscient God, whom a person is able to consult in times of trouble.<sup>56</sup> While Dennett only covers the concept of omniscience in this chapter, he continues by investigating religious practices such as divination and faith healing before explicating the process of evolution that occurs within religions, beginning with ancestor worship and concluding with the organized religions of today.

Nietzsche and Dennett no doubt share many of the same premises, but the way they go about articulating their ideas is quite different. Nietzsche is much more antagonistic toward religion, whereas Dennett is more of a grandfatherly figure who is merely prodding believers to consider some of what he has to say. The focus of the projects also differs; Nietzsche is much broader in his approach, whereas Dennett focuses on a single issue. Nonetheless, I believe Nietzsche would be supportive of Dennett’s project, even if he would have gone about it another way. It is a pity that Dennett does not provide the reader with an in-depth analysis of either Freud or Nietzsche’s account, as this would have only strengthened his argument.

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<sup>54</sup> Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, 130

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid*, 131

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid*

The last author I will be considering is the young gun of the New Atheist posse, Sam Harris. Harris is the *New York Times* bestselling author of *The End of Faith* and the recently released *The Moral Landscape*.<sup>57</sup> His grounding of morality in science is the most relevant aspect in our discussion of Nietzsche and the New Atheists and hence, this comparison will play a predominate role in the following section.

#### **IV. Sam Harris: Master or Slave Morality?**

One cannot help but think of the distinction made by David Bentley Hart between Nietzsche and the New Atheists, as quoted in the introduction, when reading Harris's *End of Faith*. Harris emphasizes the lowlights of religious belief, especially its propensity for violence. Giving an account of the fate of heretics in the Middle Ages, Harris writes, "Because the stain of heresy runs deep, your flesh will be continually larded with fat to keep it from burning too quickly. Or you may be bound to a bench, with a cauldron filled with mice placed upside-down upon your abdomen. With the requisite application of heat to the iron, the mice will burrow into your belly in search of an exit."<sup>58</sup>

Fortunately, for those who repent their sins, "these compassionate and learned men—whose concern for the fate of your eternal soul really knows no bounds—will do you the kindness of strangling you before lighting your pyre."<sup>59</sup> I can imagine Nietzsche quipping back, "It is not their love of men but the impotence

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<sup>57</sup> Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2005) and *The Moral Landscape: How Science can Determine Human Values* (New York: Free Press, 2010).

<sup>58</sup> Harris, *End of Faith*, 81

<sup>59</sup> Ibid

of their love for men which hinders the Christians of today from—burning us.”<sup>60</sup> However, as I highlighted above, Harris’s mudslinging is not of vital interest to the current study. Instead, I think it would be more productive to explore the area where Nietzsche would have the most to say and this, without a doubt, would be on Harris’s conception of morality. Thus, it is worthwhile to consider Nietzsche’s two main forms of morality—that of the master and that of the slave—before moving on to Harris’s proposition.

The first distinction that Nietzsche makes between master and slave moralities is that originally everything which was noble and refined was considered “good,” whereas everything which was common, plebian, or of the lower classes was associated with what is “bad.” For the master it was fairly easy to be good, in the sense that he only had to remain noble and refined, embracing the life he had been given.<sup>61</sup> However, this situation caused *ressentiment* on the part of the slave, and he began to wish for revenge on the master class. This would eventually lead to the slave revolt in morals, and the replacement of the terms of “good” and “bad” with the new signifiers “good” and “evil.”<sup>62</sup>

Nietzsche clarifies this transition in the following manner: “the question which should be asked is rather: *who* is actually ‘evil’ according the morality of *ressentiment*? In all strictness, the answer is: *none other* than the ‘good man’ of the other morality, none other than the noble, powerful, dominating man.”<sup>63</sup> What occurs then is a complete transvaluation of all morals. Nietzsche sees principles

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<sup>60</sup> Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 96

<sup>61</sup> Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, 15-16

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid*, 22-25

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid*, 25

such as compassion, equality, and democracy—ideas that all tend to benefit the lower classes—become virtues. Nietzsche sees this as the beginning of the degeneration of man, the sacrifice of the stronger species of man to the will of the weaker masses.<sup>64</sup> What Nietzsche is essentially arguing for is a reevaluation of all values in order to champion once again the higher man. It is on this point that I think Harris and Nietzsche diverge.

Harris wants to claim that one is able to measure the correctness of an action based upon how well that action increases the well-being of the self and others. Although this science is only in its infancy, Harris believes that a human being's level of well-being can be measured neurologically, and that this can supply researchers with empirical evidence for which actions are "right" and "wrong."<sup>65</sup>

Harris, writing on the issues of fairness and hierarchy, states:

The neuroscience of morality and social emotions is only just beginning, but there seems no question that it will one day deliver morally relevant insights regarding the material causes of our happiness and suffering. While there may be some surprises in store for us down this path, there is every reason to expect that kindness, compassion, fairness, and other classically 'good' traits will be vindicated neuroscientifically—which is to say that we will only discover further reasons to believe that they are good for us, in that they generally help our lives.<sup>66</sup>

At first glance, Harris's morality appears to be in direct opposition to the master morality posited by Nietzsche, but certainly Harris's absence of God would make his morality more palatable to Nietzsche. Let us consider another scenario, in the hopes

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid, 59

<sup>65</sup> Harris, *The Moral Landscape*, 1-15

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, 80

of establishing what the relationship between Harris and Nietzsche may have been like.

If we were to imagine Nietzsche agreeing with Bertrand Russell's statement, "I say quite deliberately that the Christian religion, as organized in its churches, has been and still is the principle enemy of moral progress in the world," then we might imagine him doing so on the grounds that Christianity embraces suffering.<sup>67</sup> Therefore, if Harris embraces suffering, perhaps this will give us a definitive answer to our quandary.

Harris is direct in his handling of this issue: "It seems clear that ascending the slopes of the moral landscape may sometimes require suffering. It may also require negative social emotions, like guilt and indignation. Again, the analogy with physical health seems useful: we must occasionally experience some unpleasantness—medication, surgery, etc.—in order to avoid greater suffering or death."<sup>68</sup> It seems as though by embracing suffering Harris falls right in line with the Christians. However, as Nietzsche makes explicit, "The aspect of suffering which actually causes outrage is not suffering itself, but the meaninglessness of suffering."<sup>69</sup>

Unfortunately, space does not allow for deeper investigation of Nietzsche's presumable position on Harris's morality, although it appears as though much could be done in this area. Sometimes it is not the answers that are given, but rather the questions that are posed that present us with the best opportunity for advancement.

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<sup>67</sup> Bertrand Russell, *Why I am not a Christian and Other Essays on Religion and Related Subjects*, ed. Paul Edwards (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957), 21

<sup>68</sup> Harris, *The Moral Landscape*, 21-22

<sup>69</sup> Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, 49

## **V. Conclusion**

In the preceding pages, I have traced possible lines of influence from Nietzsche to the New Atheists and have posited reasons for their hesitancy in using him as a source. There is, of course, at least one prospect I did not pursue, and this is the fact that many readers have a hard time wrapping their head around what it is that Nietzsche is arguing. It is hard to catch many of the allusions Nietzsche is making throughout his works without an understanding of the writings and works of those that influenced him. The sophomoric philosophical background of writers such as Hitchens or Dawkins almost instantly excludes them from adequately engaging Nietzsche on a deeper level.

Yet, to the extent that each of these writers are railing against religion and asserting their own will to power, I think Nietzsche could rest assured knowing that his message to the philosophers of the future, whom he held so dearly, did not fall on deaf ears.

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