

The Six Ways of Atheism • Geoffrey Berg • 2009

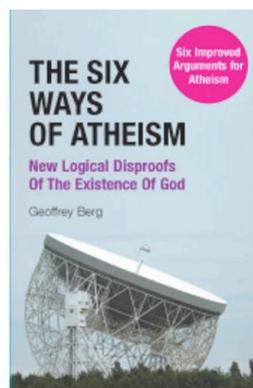
AS AN AGNOSTIC with strong atheistic leanings, I have always held that it is impossible to prove the non-existence of something beyond all doubt, especially when the something is a supernatural God. So when I read that *“For the first time in human history, multiple, absolute, valid, logical, simple disproofs of God’s existence have been published”* (press release for *The Six Ways of Atheism*), I was seriously impressed.

I have always found that God is a slippery customer, and whenever I have attempted to argue for His non-existence, it has first been necessary to insist that His proponent defines in a meaningful way exactly what he means by ‘God’ because, otherwise, as he loses ground he will change his position, redefining God in increasingly vague terms until he’s talking Orwellian ClericSpeak, redefining words and using smoke and mirrors to confuse and dazzle with vague notions of God such as *“the ultimate reality which cannot be denied by definition”* (though Karl Popper showed that any concept which cannot be tested for falseness is meaningless), making further dialogue impossible, and so I never win.

C.E.M. Joad famously prefaced every philosophical utterance (on the BBC *Brains Trust* programme) with: *“It all depends what you mean by ...”*. God is whatever people imagine him to be, and it is absolutely necessary to define what we all mean by ‘God’ before we can argue about him, except that atheists don’t believe in supernatural God or gods however you define them. There is a trick of argument known as the Straw Man ploy, whereby an opponent represents the proponent’s argument in an unfairly weak or exaggeratedly indefensible way and then argues against this position, which the proponent neither holds or defends, and then claims an easy victory.

Now, it turns out that Geoffrey Berg’s atheism extends only as far as disbelief in a very particular monotheistic supernatural God that is necessarily characterised by possessing at least all of the following eight essen-

tial defining qualities: *“eternal, omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, consciously controlling, supremely good, our ultimate creator and purpose-giver”* as well as being *“Infinite in time, space and power”* – otherwise he’s not a God worthy of our worship, and any other concept is simply undeserving of the designation. For Berg, this is the only possible concept of a monotheistic God that needs to be considered and so, wittingly or innocently, Berg has created a straw God that is so encumbered with such an obligatory array of brightly-coloured mutually-contradictory ‘qualities’ that he is unable to stand up to elementary



criticism, which Berg then delivers. Having thus made hay of his particular straw God, Berg then claims to have demonstrated that no God or gods of any sort, however conceived, could possibly exist or ever have existed, which is surely the granddaddy of non sequiturs.

Berg’s first disproof is that it is so highly unlikely that any entity would or could possess even one of the eight required qualities that the statistical odds of an existent ‘being’ simultaneously endowed with all eight must be infinitesimal – which is as good as saying that this (straw) God cannot conceivably exist. So what? Even the Christian Bookshops blog offers a hearty Amen! to this conclusion, since their particular God exists *‘beyond the framework of human experience and comprehension’*, except *‘when he chooses’*, and thus bears no relation at all to Berg’s God specification. But atheism is disbelief in all supernatural

gods, including the Christian Bookshops’ one. Essentially, I suppose, Berg has fallen into the trap of defining God by using words which we can understand, and serious theists don’t (because they daren’t) do that any more. His Straw God thus stands exposed.

His second ‘Way of Atheism’ is really an argument for agnosticism: since humankind is finite and God is necessarily infinite in time, space and power, then it is fundamentally impossible for mere mortals to recognise God if they see him, or to know whether or not he exists though it is surely another *non sequitur* to present this argument as ‘absolute proof’ that he doesn’t.

The third claimed disproof is based on the principle of Occam’s Razor, reducing assumptions about unknown phenomena to the minimum. It is easier to accept that the Universe came about through quantum fluctuations in the void (where particles and their anti-matter counterparts spontaneously flash into and out of existence) than it is to accept that a supernatural ‘God’ was first needed to set it up and command the whole thing into motion. God has added nothing to the explanation; in fact his introduction into the ‘explanation’ has made the whole question infinitely more difficult and complicated, raising the further question *“Where did God come from?”* In fact Occam merely points toward the more likely answer that sometimes the complicated explanation turns out to be correct, so this argument is no disproof of God’s possible existence – it merely shows that there is no need for a God.

Berg’s fourth argument is a rehash of the ‘existence of evil’ argument: God is necessarily good and omnipotent and as a creator he would necessarily have created the best of all possible worlds. Yet our world is imperfect, inconsistent and unfair as between different peoples and different eras, certainly well short of the best of all imaginable worlds.

Therefore this (straw) God cannot exist. Theists counter that *‘God moves in mysterious ways’* and we cannot ➡

know his ambitions, and they speculate that maybe this admittedly imperfect world is a deliberate test of our preparedness for the afterlife, which, they hope, will be absolutely perfect, and where all present injustices will be set straight. Unfortunately this argument is countered by its own first premise: a good God worthy of worship would not treat people unfairly and unequally.

Fifth (and Berg's favourite) is what he calls his Universal Uncertainty Argument, which he presents as a paradox: God cannot exist because God can never be sure that he is God, which seems at first like claiming that a fish can't exist because it doesn't know it's a fish, but turns out to be another straw God ploy. Our monotheistic God, being unique, is lonely; he has no one to refer to, so how can he know if he's mortal or immortal until he dies or not (Berg denies the possibility of God existing outside of time)? How can God know that there is not a greater God living in a different universe? How can he know if there is any limit to his intelligence? Berg concludes that every entity, even an omniscient, omnipotent God, must necessarily be uncertain about its own relationship with the universe. But, he claims, an uncertain God is a contradiction in terms, and so there can be no God.

We return to the list of God's essential properties and learn in Chapter 6 that '*Some of God's Defining Qualities Cannot Exist*' (Chap 6), and nor, therefore, can God. For example, God's supreme goodness would make him the legitimate object of voluntary and respectable human worship and religion, but 'good' means both 'benevolent' and 'just', and since there is no objective way of measuring benevolence or fairness, the concept of supreme goodness cannot exist in objective and absolute form; and the first-hand evidence of this imperfect world further confirms that God is neither exceedingly fair or particularly benevolent.

In another example, God is required as a duty to provide a purpose to human life for otherwise our world would be merely a mammoth meaningless folly. And as the ultimate creator of the universe, it must be God's duty to endow his handiwork with a purpose. We are told by Clerics that our purpose is to worship God, and the purpose of worshipping God is to fulfil our purpose – beyond this circular reasoning they offer no ultimate



Drawing of Quetzalcoatl, a god of ancient Mexico

purpose to our existence, nor is any particular purpose readily apparent to the rest of us who are living life. God's failure to enlighten us in this fundamental matter makes it apparent that God cannot exist.

In fairness, the arguments summarised above are gross oversimplifications of the detailed intricate theses offered by Berg: each Chapter is devoted to a different argument which is laid out methodically, starting with a prologue to introduce the argument and provide some background, followed by a formal summary of the argument and a detailed explanation. The author then considers in detail all the possible objections to the argument that he can think of before

finally reviewing the argument in perspective.

This gives the book an air of academic weight, as well as making for pretty heavy reading in places – Berg goes into deep consideration of the possible pro's and con's of each aspect of the argument, yet he skips like a butterfly over the sweeping preliminary assumptions about God's supposed attributes that enabled him to reach such fine detail.

For despite its sub-title promising six new logical disproofs of God's existence, I finished the book feeling dismayed and disappointed that I still felt that I had not yet seen even one disproof, logical or otherwise, of the possible existence of a God. □