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**BACHELOR THESIS**

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**WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO CALL ONESELF AN ATHEIST?  
AN EXAMINATION OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT ATHEISTIC  
WORLDVIEW**

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*How unreasonable people are! They never use the freedoms they have but demand those they do not have; they have freedom of thought – they demand freedom of speech.*

– Søren Kierkegaard<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Kierkegaard 1987, p. 19.

## **Declaration of Originality**

I declare that this Thesis is my own work and has not been published in part or in whole elsewhere. All used literature and other sources are attributed and properly cited in references.

Bratislava, 30.04.2012

Jozef Majerník

## Abstrakt

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Názov práce: What Does It Mean to Call Oneself an Atheist? An Examination of the Atheistic Worldview

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Témou tejto bakalárskej práce je ateizmus chápaný z filozofického hľadiska. Jej cieľom je odhaliť myšlienkové vzorce, ktoré sa skrývajú pod povrchom ateistického postoja, a tak oponovať populárnemu názoru, že ateizmus je jednoducho racionálny postoj odmietania toho, čo nemôže byť dokázané. Cieľom tejto práce je dokázať, že existuje ateistický svetonázor, ktorý má svoje korene v osvietenskej ére.

Na dosiahnutie svojho cieľa táto práca ponúka interpretáciu troch spomedzi najdôležitejších diel moderného ateizmu: *Zdravý rozum* baróna d'Holbacha, prednášku Bertranda Russella *Prečo nie som kresťanom*, a knihu Richarda Dawkinsa *Boží blud*. Interpretatívne kapitoly vysvetľujú vnútornú logiku týchto diel a ponúkajú koherentný obraz ateistického myslenia. Práca následne sumarizuje a vysvetľuje spoločné črty svetonázoru osvietenského ateizmu tak, ako vyplýva z analyzovaných diel. Ateistický svetonázor je následne kritizovaný na základe svojej vlastnej nepodloženosti, protirečivosti, a neschopnosti seriózne konfrontovať náboženskú tradíciu.

Vo svojom závere táto práca skúma politické idey osvietenského ateizmu a obzvlášť ich vzťah s náboženstvom, jeho hlavným oponentom. Aj keď tieto idey sú navonok založené na liberálnom chápaní politiky, významný spôsobom mu odporujú práve vo vzťahu k náboženstvu. Toto napätie je analyzované na základe Schmittovej koncepcie politického a domyslené do svojich logických dôsledkov, vrátane jeho možných rozuzlení.

## Abstract

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The topic of this Bachelor's Thesis is atheism philosophically considered. It aims to discover the patterns of thought that are hidden behind the atheistic attitude, contrary to the popular belief that atheism is simply the rational stance of not believing in what cannot be proved. The goal of this Thesis is to establish that there is such a thing as an atheistic worldview that goes back to the Enlightenment era.

To achieve its goal, this Thesis offers an interpretation of three of the most important works of modern atheism: Baron d'Holbach's *Good Sense*, Bertrand Russell's lecture *Why I Am Not a Christian* and Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion*. The interpretive chapters explain the inner logic of the works in question and offer a coherent picture of the atheistic thought. After that, the common features of the worldview of Enlightenment atheism (as it follows from the works analyzed) are summarized and expounded. The atheistic worldview is then critiqued on grounds of its own arbitrariness, self-contradiction and insufficient engagement with the religious tradition.

Finally, this Thesis examines the political ideas of Enlightenment atheism, especially as they pertain to religion, its main antagonist. Although these ideas are ostensibly based in the liberal understanding of politics, they contradict it in a significant way precisely when it comes to religion. This tension is analyzed on the basis of Carl Schmitt's conception of the political and followed to its logical consequences, including its possible resolutions.

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## **1. General Introduction**

One of the defining signs of modernity – that is, the age we are living in – is its secular character. In his seminal study *A Secular Age* (2007), Charles Taylor argues that there are three dimensions to this secularity: the first is the secularization of the public space, the second the decline of individual religious belief and practice, and the third the fact that “the eclipse of all goals beyond human flourishing becomes conceivable” (ibid., p. 19). The subject of this Thesis is the phenomenon of atheism, in which all three of these tendencies are manifested more forcefully than elsewhere. Atheism will here be examined from a philosophical perspective, considered on its own terms, with the ultimate goal of evaluating its intellectual merit.

### **The self-contradictory appearance of atheism**

The atheists are often proud to say that besides the rejection of God and organized religion there is no content inherent to atheism. Among others, Dawkins (2006, p. 27) says that “organizing atheists has been compared to herding cats, because they tend to think independently and will not conform to authority”. This implies that atheists can be liberal or conservative, pro-life or pro-choice, that they may or may not support gay rights, or anything else. Yet while this statement is in principle true (cf. the discussion in Taylor 2007, pp. 8-10), in practice it is easy to notice that public statements of various atheists are surprisingly alike. Over time my suspicion grew that there is a deep kinship between these supposed intellectual mavericks, or “freethinkers”, as they sometimes call themselves.

The relevance of this subject for the contemporary reader becomes apparent when one considers the resurgence of atheism in the last decade, which was provoked by the attacks of 9/11 (Sam Harris, the author of the first “New Atheist” book, writes about it [2005, p. 333]: “I began writing this book on September 12, 2001”). I wish to show that this kinship goes far beyond the now-prominent group of New Atheists, the most popular of them being Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris and Christopher Hitchens. The New Atheists explicitly aim to engage the general public, but especially the religious believers in dialogue and to demonstrate by rational argumentation that religious faith should be abandoned. Let us consider what Richard

Dawkins (2006, p. 28) says about the purpose of *The God Delusion*: “If this book works as I intend, religious readers who open it will be atheists when they put it down.” Yet despite this stated aim, the New Atheists are marked mostly by the dishonesty of their rhetoric. Dawkins offers us again a good example: a sentence after the previous quote he asserts that “dyed-in-the-wool faith-heads are immune to argument” (ibid.) and therefore not many conversions to atheism are in fact to be expected. This statement also tells us, the readers, that if we are unconvinced by Dawkins, the fault lies with us, not with him.

Furthermore, the New Atheists are committed to other radical claims, such as that religion is not only false, but also outright dangerous, malevolent and detrimental to the well-being of the whole mankind (i.e. immoral). This tendency gives us an important lead to the basic beliefs the atheists hold, and I aim to follow this lead to its source. I believe these matters to be urgent for two interlocking reasons: first, atheism (both generally and this particular incarnation of it) is nowadays all-too-easily considered the paragon case of critical thinking and rationality, and second (as a consequence), its intellectual credentials are by and large left unexamined – they are simply taken for granted. Yet, despite some of the atheists like Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett being prominent scientists and philosophers, the reasonableness of their thoughts on God and religion needs to be scrutinized as carefully as anything else, an approach with which they themselves would agree given their emphasis on rationality and critical thinking as opposed to blind faith.

### **Goal of the Thesis**

It is not the purpose of this Thesis to argue what atheists are and what they are not, or what makes one an atheist; these are subjects meriting separate research. Instead, this Thesis examines the arguments of those prominent atheists who are both self-professed atheists and who wrote treatises in defense of their atheism, with the aim of demonstrating that atheism can be considered a complete worldview not limited to the metaphysical<sup>2</sup> proposition of the non-existence of God, but encompassing domains as diverse as epistemology, ethics and politics. Important in my considerations will be the historical dimension of atheism: the goal of this thesis is

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<sup>2</sup> Throughout this Thesis I will use the term 'metaphysics' to refer to questions of God's existence and of the structure and functioning of the universe

not just to show that there is such a thing as an atheistic worldview, but also that this worldview exhibits a strong historical continuity that can be traced back to the Enlightenment era. Hints for this may be found e.g. in Stark 1999, which explores the preconceptions atheists have historically infused in their analyses of religion.

This Thesis will examine modern atheism only. While it is true that already in Antiquity there were philosophers described as “atheists” (most notably Lucretius), atheism hasn’t been a widespread view, not to speak of practice (Bremmer 2007 speaks only of “theoretical” atheism in the Antiquity [p. 22]). Furthermore, atheism as a significant force in political and social life is a phenomenon peculiar to the modern world.

I will limit my examination of atheism to the Enlightenment tradition, which is the source of the greatest part of contemporary atheism, at least from the perspective of public visibility. This, unfortunately, means two of the most prominent atheists of the Western culture - Marx and Nietzsche – will not be considered in this Thesis. While they testify to the truth of the statement that an atheist can believe anything, their intellectual roots are very different from the Enlightenment atheistic tradition (from now on, “Enlightenment atheism”). The beliefs of Marxist atheists have been determined by their Marxism, while Nietzsche is a hard nut for the interpreter all by himself. Thus they are not directly relevant to my thesis of intellectual continuity of the Enlightenment atheism. The connection of these two kinds of atheism to Enlightenment atheism is a distinct subject for further inquiry.

This concession will allow me to examine in greater detail the deep continuity within Enlightenment atheism, which has two significant claims to prominence. The first of them is its historical priority. Baron d’Holbach wrote earlier than either Marx or Nietzsche, and he was already deeply rooted in earlier Enlightenment thought (Israel [2006, p. 43] counts him among the “Radical Enlightenment”). The second claim concerns its contemporary political relevance. Marxists are nowadays, after the failure of Marxism has been demonstrated by the failure of regimes built upon Marxist principles, a dying breed, and Nietzscheans are invisible to the general public. On the contrary, the New Atheists, who by their own admission are heirs of the Enlightenment (Hitchens [2007, p. 268] writes that “above all, we are in the need of a renewed Enlightenment”), enjoy a prominent status in the current debate on religion.

### **General plan of the Thesis and intended results**

This Thesis will first interpret individual atheistic works, and then establish the continuity between contemporary atheism and its forerunners. This will be done by analysis of the works in question, including their structure, individual arguments, as well as the fallacies the atheists commit in their argumentation. Following this, a critique of the inconsistencies discovered in the course of the interpretation will be offered, and an analysis of what these inconsistencies tell us about the deeply-held views in which the atheists base their thinking, since a deeply seated and historically consistent fallacy is revealing of an author's (or, in this case, a group of authors') fundamental beliefs.

Proceeding chronologically, I will first examine Baron d'Holbach's *Good Sense*. D'Holbach was an 18<sup>th</sup> century naturalist, translator, and radical philosopher; he was also an important social figure in the French Enlightenment, one of the first self-professed atheists, as well as one of the most famous atheists of not just his own era, but of Western history. His importance for this Thesis is mainly historical, to show that the basic outlines of the atheistic worldview have been formulated already in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

Next I will analyze *Why I Am Not a Christian*, a lecture by Bertrand Russell, one of the most famous and influential philosophers of the twentieth century, who made lasting contributions to fields as diverse as logic, mathematics, and epistemology. As Griffin (2003, p. 1) writes, "It is difficult to over-estimate the extent to which Russell's thought dominated twentieth century analytic philosophy: virtually every strand in its development either originated with him or was transformed by being transmitted through him". In addition to this, he was a co-author of the famous *Principia Mathematica*. Although Russell called himself agnostic, he holds that "an Agnostic does not believe in God" (Russell 2009b, p. 559), and thus lives his life without any recourse to the religious tradition. For the purpose of this Thesis that is atheistic enough, especially when one considers that Russell was one of the most prominent critics of religion of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Then I will move on to consider Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion*, a major bestseller of the last decade, with millions of copies sold (Dawkins 2010). Dawkins' rootedness in earlier Enlightenment atheism will be emphasized to show that his

heavy reliance on evolutionary theory is more of a surface change, while the fundamental critique of religion remains in its origins as well as purposes the same as that of his predecessors.

Finally a summary of the findings of the Thesis will be offered: the worldview of Enlightenment atheism will be outlined, the principles of thought and presuppositions which the contemporary atheists share with their historical forerunners will be spelled out, and the premises upon which it is built will be shown. I will also consider the inconsistencies of the atheistic position, the premises it is built upon and their arbitrary nature, and (as a consequence) its ultimately inadequate character by the atheists' own standard. The merits of the atheistic critique of religion will be evaluated on the basis of the thought of Leo Strauss, who has considered the conflict between reason and revelation with great depth and discipline without trying to establish the superiority of one over the other.

Special attention will be paid to the political commitments of Enlightenment atheism which arise directly from its worldview. These will be analyzed with the help of Carl Schmitt's understanding of the political. As a final note, this Thesis is understood by its author as a basis for a more comprehensive study of atheism, which will go beyond the three representative thinkers considered in it. Therefore it will point to possibilities for further research, but will remain focused on making the case for the worldview of the Enlightenment atheism.

## 2. A Brief Analysis of Baron d'Holbach's *Good Sense*

In this chapter I will offer a summary of one of d'Holbach's works advocating atheism – *Good Sense* – and expound the arguments he uses in it, with an emphasis on the presuppositions underlying these arguments. *Good Sense*, written in 1772, is arguably the most elaborate defense of atheism presented in this Thesis, and so it is well suited to give us a picture of Enlightenment atheism.

The *Author's Preface* gives us a succinct statement of d'Holbach's general argument. As a foundation for the later exposition of individual arguments, we may state his position as follows: the cardinal problem of the world is that men don't use their reason. Theology, the purported rational foundation of religion, is under scrutiny revealed to be “ignorance of natural causes [and] a tissue of fallacies and contradictions” (d'Holbach 2007, p. 6). “God” is a vague term, and all that is attributed to him is false either factually or logically (i.e. self-contradictory). This is however no amusing matter, because it is the root of many evils. It makes men dogmatic and causes conflict with those of a different persuasion. It fosters cruelty – against others, and even against oneself. Religion is instrumental in the oppression of the majority of mankind, which prevents them from attaining happiness, and it blinds them to the true morality that leads to happiness. But this is the case only because men believe religion to be a matter of the highest importance. Had they found out the truth about it, they would stop caring about it and all of these evils would be abolished.

The way out of this miserable state is clear: “Knowledge, Reason, and Liberty, can alone reform and make man happier” (ibid.), because human nature is such that “men will be good, when they are well instructed” (ibid.). Once men are allowed to reason and are shown the truth – their true interests and what leads to satisfying them – they will get both happier and more moral. True morality, that “virtue is advantageous and vice disadvantageous to [men]” (ibid., p. 9), can be discovered by plain reasoning, while God is known to us only by the account of his ministers, who describe him as “the most capricious, unjust, and cruel of tyrants” (ibid.). The *Preface* ends with d'Holbach's exhortation to the theologians to cease their imposture and

embrace the truth of philosophy. Having established this, let's see how these statements are supported.

### **D'Holbach's metaphysics**

In §39 d'Holbach (2007) tells us that the universe itself is the cause of its own existence and is eternal: nature is for him self-sufficient. In a rejection of the Newtonian claim of "matter being wholly inert" (Israel 2006, p. 211) and its religious consequences, he also claims that motion is "essential" (d'Holbach 2007, §41) to matter (which is all that exists). As an example of this he offers the spontaneous combustion of phosphorus when exposed to air. Furthermore, "the diversity of motion ... constitutes alone the diversity of matter" (ibid., §40). God as a "spiritual mover" (ibid., §40) can in no way interact with the material world. In §43 (ibid.) d'Holbach claims "every thing is subject to fixed laws" of a deterministic character, and talk of chance is merely "ignorance of true causes". Prominent among these laws is causality, which is the true source of the order of universe. Causality is never broken: in case of what the ignorant call "miracles" there are merely other unknown – but natural – intervening causes which disturb the habitual course of nature (ibid., §44). Natural disasters are too products of causality (ibid., §44).

Human perception is completely based in matter: matter in motion is the source of all phenomena, as well as of the perceptions our material bodies have of them (ibid., §41). All possible human knowledge is thus confined to knowledge of the material world. At birth, man's mind is a *tabula rasa* (ibid., §33). D'Holbach readily asserts that man himself too is a product of nature, and while he admits that it is unclear how he could have been created naturally, nevertheless it is a more plausible hypothesis than creation by a pure spirit, who by definition cannot interact with matter (ibid., §42). §46 (ibid.) explains that a body is a necessary prerequisite for intelligence to arise. Immaterial soul is nonsense (ibid., §101), and after death the body simply decomposes: there is no such thing as life after death (ibid., §102). Invoking spiritual causes where we do not know the material causes is simply reveling in one's ignorance (ibid., §104), and in no way contributes to our knowledge of the world.

Man's free will is a "chimera" (ibid., §80), since human life and actions are as much subject to the fixed laws of nature as anything else. Our actions are determined by the world around us and our social environment. Even in our thoughts we are not

free: man “can desire and will only what he judges advantageous to himself” (ibid., §80), that is pleasure, and strives to avoid pain. We resist our desires only with the prospect of a greater future desideratum. Our feeling of freedom is an illusion. But since men are determined by nature, we cannot pretend that punishing criminals serves to make them repent: it is a mechanism of self-preservation on part of the society (ibid., §81) to protect itself from the “ill-formed springs, which disturb the order, progress, and harmony of society” (ibid., §83). The question of how can man be improved – which is the principal purpose of *Good Sense* – is answered by extolling the power of truth over most men’s minds; truth itself is, dubiously, asserted to be a “cause” despite being immaterial.

### **The irrationality of religion**

§1 (d’Holbach 2007), titled *Apologue*, puts forward in a concise manner all of d’Holbach’s arguments for the irrationality of theology, and thus of religion. God wishes to be known and obeyed by men, yet he never reveals himself to them and instead lets his ministers speak on his behalf, who are first to admit that they do not know God. Furthermore, the ministers are divided in many sects who not just issue contradictory teachings, but also enter bloody conflicts to assert the truth of their particular teaching. Even individual theologians contradict themselves in their many statements. God is called “supremely good”, yet the multitudes suffer; his “wisdom” is not reflected in the state of the world; his “justice” favors the wicked; his love of “order” left this world in chaos; his “omniscience” does nothing to prevent evil; the works of this “perfect” being are imperfect and perishable; he aims to make men happy, yet “for the most part they want necessities” (ibid., p. 17). And finally, his laws are such that men perpetually offend him by their actions, even though they revere and adore him immensely. Thus the chief objection against theology is that it is demonstrably false and contradicting itself.

Religion is not just irrational; there is also no plausible evidence to support it empirically. Reports of miracles are untrustworthy: they “are improbable tales, related by suspected people, who had the greatest interest in giving out that they were the messengers of the Most High” (ibid., §126), i.e. the priests invent miracles for their own benefit, just as they do with the idea of God (ibid., §166). Witnesses and written accounts of miracles suffer from the same problem. Furthermore, the same claims of



miracles and martyrs for divine cause are made by all religions – which, if anything, makes their claim for absolute truth even less believable (ibid., §127). Prophecies are unclear and demand interpretation, which is always to the benefit of the interpreters (ibid., §128). Furthermore, the very idea of a miracle – a disturbance of the order of nature – contradicts the perfection attributed to God (ibid., §129), since it implies that if God needs to intervene miraculously, his original creation was imperfect. By the same token, if there can be only one true revelation that is to be accepted on faith but in fact there are many mutually exclusive revelations, all these “revelations” become the more implausible (ibid., §131).

And finally, if there truly was a universal God, he ought to have revealed a universal religion to all nations, to give all men equal opportunity to please him and to prevent religious discord (ibid., §114), and thus to greatly increase the happiness of men and nations – but he has not.

### **The origins of religion**

Despite the manifest falsity of religion the multitudes believe in it, and consider it a matter of highest importance. “Ignorance and fear are the two hinges of all religion” (d’Holbach 2007, §10). All children are born atheists (ibid., §30), and religion is introduced to them only later by the process of childhood indoctrination, in which the tender minds of children are infused with religious ideas at a time when they cannot protect themselves (ibid., §32). This is further cemented by blind reverence to authority, to which we are led by our elders (ibid., §34).

The origin of this vicious cycle lies deep in the past: “All the gods ... are of savage origin” (ibid., §120), and were invented in “ignorant and uncivilized nations” (ibid., §120). This explains their barbarism and cruelty: they are products of unenlightened minds and were made obsolete by moral progress (in §119 [ibid.], religion is compared to the belief that “the sun moved round the earth”). The various religions are imitations of other and/ or earlier religions, and there is nothing original or true in their rituals; “Moses was merely a schismatic Egyptian” (ibid., §200).

Religion is perpetuated by the priests, who benefit the most from it, which is perfectly natural, as it again shows that men act to further their interests. The “vulgar” people believe in religious ideas because they are enticed by mystery (i.e. “a palpable

absurdity”, §111 [ibid.]) more than by truth (ibid., §12), and this in turn further prevents them from using their reason (ibid., §§112-113). The most dangerous aspect of religion is that it keeps men in ignorance of their true interests (ibid., §198), and thus in subjection and misery. Thus, besides priests also the monarchs and tyrants benefit from religion, since it makes men into obedient and unquestioning slaves.

This critique of religion does not square with d’Holbach’s determinism, since according to it religion, as everything else, is a mere result of the unfolding of natural causes. The criminal is excused by being recognized as an “ill-formed spring” of the machine of society (ibid., §83), yet the believers are ridiculed as credulous fools and priests are denounced as power-hungry manipulators. Religion and its followers receive the shorter end of the stick here.

### **Morality religious and natural**

Moral philosophy for Baron d’Holbach “is the science of how to manage human needs, desires, and aspirations, the ‘science of happiness,’” (Israel 2010, pp. 196-7). This morality is fiercely egalitarian and hedonistic, thus standing in a sharp contradiction to what d’Holbach regards as the God-ordained social hierarchy, piety and asceticism of Christian morality. He “conceived of justice as standing in opposition ... to the Christian principles of compassion and forgiveness” (ibid., p. 165). This understanding of morality offers countless possibilities to deplore Christianity as being in fact immoral (by d’Holbach’s standards), reducing its moral claims to pretensions and callous manipulation.

Christianity claims to bring men to morality, but only a few men behave according to its precepts (d’Holbach 2007, §161) and so Christ died “in vain” (ibid., §164). This is because it is “by its essence ... an enemy to the joy and happiness of men” (ibid., §161). It asks men to suffer instead of being happy. By offering ways of making amends and thus of preventing divine punishment for one’s crimes, it does nothing to deter criminals from their crimes (ibid., §165). Thus it destroys the true motivations men have for moral behavior (pleasure that is men’s self-interest), and does not offer any other motivations: “unknown or remote punishments [in the afterlife] strike the multitude far less forcibly than the sight of the gallows” (ibid., §175). This, however, would nowadays in the light of the French revolutionary Reign of Terror hardly be considered an enlightened method of making people more moral.

Organized religion is parasitic on society (ibid., §174): it collects tithes and other payments from the productive parts of the society and it doesn't give any real benefits in return. The same is true of its devotees. According to §162 (ibid.) strict adherence to Christian morality means shunning the world, pleasures, and human nature itself, as well as abstaining from such beneficial enterprises as science ("hurtful to faith"), commerce (since it is done for the sake of riches, which are "fatal for salvation"), or serving fellow citizens as a magistrate (since offices make one proud). Such a rigid Christian is at best useless for the society, and this alone makes him detestable (cf. ibid., §171); at worst, he is directly damaging the society (ibid., §163). "In a word, the sublime Morality of Christ ... would break all the bonds of society [if it was universally adopted]" (ibid., §162).

All gods are, as summed up in §160 (ibid.), violent, bloodthirsty, misanthropic or otherwise immoral, and this, if anything, is the example they give to the common man. The height of God's evil is punishing men with eternal torment, and that for actions which cannot endanger him in the slightest (ibid., §66) and which are ultimately attributable God himself as their creator. All natural (ibid., §78), as well as human (ibid., §72) evil is ultimately God's responsibility too.

Since God is unknown, basing morality in obedience to God in effect means basing it in obedience to the priests' whims (ibid., §168), which only breeds tyranny. Furthermore, as noted in the previous section, religion keeps men ignorant. Ignorance breeds fear, and fear in turn breeds cruelty (ibid., §155). Cruelty fosters discord and needless violence among men, in general as well as under the pretext of protecting true religion (ibid., §158). These are the actual effects of religion on morality: making men miserable and pushing them towards immoral actions.

The true end of all men's actions is happiness: in §163 (ibid.) we learn that man is "obliged to seek, desire, and love what is, or what he thinks is, conducive to his happiness". In §171 (ibid.) pleasure is identified as an exemplary good, and pain as an exemplary evil. Contrary to the religious understanding, pleasure is not incompatible with virtue: as asserted in §83 (ibid.), "virtue" is simply striving for happiness in a manner beneficial for society, while "vice" is the opposite. Natural passions are necessary for the virtuous life, as "[a] man without passions would be

equally indifferent to vice and to virtue” (ibid., §163). One must embrace his passions instead of shunning them, and guide them to beneficial ends (ibid., §163).

Yet in §82 (ibid.) d’Holbach admits that “interest of some men ... necessarily oppose the admission of truth”. What this reveals is that even if all men wish only for happiness, they can and do have ideas of it very different from d’Holbach’s, and are not afraid to act upon them. No argument is offered as to why his account of happiness is superior to the rival accounts.

True morality is based in human experience: “The rules of Man's conduct are derived from his own nature which he is capable of knowing” (ibid., §171). One of these rules “obliges man not to injure, and even to do good to others” (ibid.). Or alternatively, “I feel, and another feels like me; this is the foundation of all morals” (ibid.). All we need for moral behavior is the consciousness of these laws on our part, and the realization that they alone lead to happiness. Men would act upon these laws if only their reason wasn’t clouded, which is predominantly the fault of religion. This morality – striving for pleasure and thus for happiness without harming others – is superior to Christian morality by the virtue of respecting human nature (ibid., §172) and actually making men happy.

However, even the natural morality needs to suppress certain features of human nature, such as greed or hunger for power, in order to achieve its goal of happiness for everyone. If “not accepting human nature” is an objection against Christian morality, it applies with equal force to d’Holbach’s “true” morality. D’Holbach cannot defend himself by arguing that those who act on the antisocial urges are unnatural, since according to his determinism all that arises by natural causes (i.e. everything that exists) *is* natural.

### **The world ruled by reason**

Since religions always struggle for power, and “*the best argument has been always that of the strongest party*” (d’Holbach 2007, §139; emphasis original; also referring to the “*cuius regio, eius est religio*” principle of the Peace of Westphalia), d’Holbach believes that religion ought to be taken out of the public sphere altogether. China is hailed as a model secular state, “flourishing, fertile, populous”: “the people

there follow such superstitions as they please”, while their magistrates keep a healthy suspicion of religion and keep the priestly power in check (ibid., §139).

Toleration of different persuasions is required, since differences in faith are often merely differences in education, and it is “liberty of thinking alone [that] can give men humanity and greatness of soul” (ibid., §155). The lack of toleration d’Holbach perceives results from the idea of the jealous God, who despite holding all men accountable cares only for a chosen few (ibid., §156).

Real sources of human misery need to be abolished instead of the religious practice of almsgiving, which cures only the symptoms, not the causes of social ills. These causes are princely disregard for property rights (which reduces hard-working men to beggars), heavy taxes (which “produce discouragement, sloth, and poverty”, which in turn beget crime), and tyranny in general, which makes men unfree (ibid., §169). A just ruler should support industry and commerce, and not wage wars which only serve his own interests and immiserate his subjects. To make men happy in this world, a just government should “respect their liberty and property, watch over their education, encourage them in their labours, reward their talents and virtues, repress licentiousness; and [should] not [be] concern[ed] ... with their manner of thinking” (ibid., §196). This is, however, a dishonest statement, as the whole point of rational education is to change the believers’ manner of thinking (see the next paragraph). D’Holbach then affirms that “Truth, reason, and equity” are the sole solid foundations of rule (ibid., §189).

Religion belongs to the sources of human misery, and so to further progress human reason and thus happiness, it should be abandoned. Priests, who at present according to d’Holbach wage “war against Reason” (d’Holbach 2007, §190) are to “assume, at length, the language of reason” (ibid.) and become teachers of men. They should teach virtues to the people and “become the apostles of reason, the defenders of liberty, and the reformers of abuses” (ibid.). As atheism results from the proper use of reason (“Every man, who reasons, soon becomes an unbeliever”), and not from scorn as it was popularly asserted (ibid., §182), we see that this education would result in the abandonment of and thus in the destruction of religion.

Atheists are moral and rational men, as d’Holbach forcefully argues (ibid., §178). Atheists follow the natural morality described above, to which they are led by

reason; they act towards good for themselves, as well as for their fellow men. They are afraid of real punishments for their transgressions (such as prison or gallows), not of imaginary ones. They are virtuous, because they know vices are inimical to their happiness. In §179 (ibid.) d'Holbach defends also "political atheism", i.e. the capacity of atheists to be good governors of public matters (which would include the reforms outlined above), and even asserts that no atheist can surpass the abuses of power the devout rulers have committed. Yet after the reign of an atheistic ideology in 20<sup>th</sup> century Russia and the unspeakable horrors it committed, it is hard to see how one would defend this thesis nowadays.

In §181 (ibid.) we are offered a defense of the libertine lifestyle, associated with both atheism and immorality: d'Holbach objects that lifestyle belongs to one's individual choices, and in fact there is nothing immoral about it as long as it is pleasurable and does not harm anyone. It becomes clear that atheists are not just as good and virtuous citizens as the believers, but even superior to them, as they lack the many vices to which religious observance leads.

And unless there were any doubts left about the evils of religion, and the necessity of getting rid of it, in the final paragraph of the book (ibid., §206) we are told that "It is only by dispelling the clouds and phantoms of Religion, that we shall discover Truth, Reason, and Morality", d'Holbach's greatest desiderata – and to achieve this dismantling of religion, political atheism is needed.

### **3. Bertrand Russell's *Why I Am Not a Christian***

This chapter will offer a short exposition of Russell's criticisms of Christianity and by proxy of all religion, as he laid them down in his 1927 lecture *Why I Am Not a Christian*, and explore the beliefs these criticisms are founded upon.

#### **Russell's understanding of religion**

The lecture starts with a definition of Christianity to specify the object of Russell's criticisms. Rejecting both a cultural definition (as in being raised in a Christian culture) and "a person who attempts to live a good life" (Russell 2004, p. 1) as too vague – such definitions would include also people who do not consider themselves Christians (such as Russell himself), and in the latter case also people of different religions – Russell identifies Christianity as a set of propositional beliefs in which everyone who wants to call himself a Christian must believe. As the most basic of these beliefs he lists the belief in God, immortality of the soul and the belief in Jesus as the morally best and wisest of all men, if not outright of divine origin (cf. *ibid.*, p. 2). This opportunity is also used to show the dubious character of dogmatic belief, which changes over time despite purportedly expressing eternal truths. An example of this is the belief in hell in the Church of England, which used to be a dogma, but is not anymore.

#### **Is there a rational basis for belief?**

After having defined who is a Christian, Russell proceeds to show that basic Christian beliefs – represented by the most basic of them, belief in God – are irrational by virtue of there being no good reasons for belief in them. "Good reason" for him means exclusively a rational or scientific argument; thus a philosophical proof of God's existence, were it valid, would count as a good reason. Furthermore, both theology and the actual churches are founded upon the premise of God – and if God could be disproven, these structures would fall apart. Given the importance of arguments for the existence of God, Russell spends the first half of the lecture on disproving the most popular arguments for the existence of God.

First considered is the argument of the first cause, which says that if everything has a cause, then there ultimately has to be a first cause of all things, which we then proceed to call God. Russell maintains that this argument falls prey to a simple regress ad infinitum: if God is the cause of everything, what is then the cause of God? If one replies “God is the uncaused cause”, then the world too can be the uncaused cause – and Occam’s razor (as a principle of rational argumentation) demands that we choose the simpler solution as the more plausible (cf. Russell 2004, p. 4). This betrays Russell’s assumption of materialism, according to which if God exists, he must abide by the laws of nature as anything else. No thought is given to the possibility that while the world must abide by the laws of nature and thus cannot be its own cause, God as the source of the natural law (and a supernatural being by definition) doesn’t have to, even if Russell’s own system of types states that a condition (e.g. causality) can be predicated of a type (e.g. all created things) without being predicated of the type from which it is derived (e.g. the creator).

Next is the argument from natural law, according to which God set down the laws of nature so that they allow for human life. Russell counters with three arguments: first of them is that the natural law argument is obsolete, because based on Newtonian metaphysics, which was deposed by scientific progress in favor of Einstein (cf. *ibid.*, p 5).

His second counterargument – the most compelling, in my opinion – states that this is merely a result of confusion between human and natural laws: while the former require a lawgiver, the latter are simply “a description of how things do in fact behave” (*ibid.*, p. 6). We simply happen to live in a world governed by laws that allow for human existence – in an inhospitable world there would be no humans to ponder these questions. And finally, there is the question of why did God issue the laws of nature he did issue: if he did it without any reason, he is not subject to the natural law, and if he did have a reason, he is subject to a force higher than himself. Russell sees both variants as unsatisfactory – but, as a matter of fact, neither of them precludes God’s existence.

The final philosophical argument examined is the argument from design, which claims that “everything in the world is made just so that we can manage to live in the world” (*ibid.*, p. 7), and that this is an evidence of divine design. This argument



has not only been defused by Darwin, who has shown that the organisms adapt to their environment (and not vice versa) and thus no design is needed for their survival, but also offers an argument against the existence of a benevolent God: if the world is really designed by an omnipotent and benevolent God, why does it contain so many manifest “defects” (ibid., p. 7), such as Fascism or the Ku Klux Klan? Calling these “defects” is, however, based on the understanding that they are evil because they cause suffering, and that the goal of a benevolent God is to allow everyone on Earth live in happiness – and on the denial of human freedom, which can easily be regarded the source of Fascism or the Ku Klux Klan. The assumptions of hedonism and determinism underlying these criticisms are simply taken for granted.

After these metaphysical arguments Russell turns to the moral arguments for the existence of God. First of these – that God is the source of our understanding of what is good and what is evil – he attributes to Kant (cf. ibid., p.9). This argument falls prey to the Eutyphro dilemma: if “good” and “evil” are simply products of divine whim, then for God himself there is no difference between them and it becomes meaningless to say that God is good. And if God had reasons to set down “good” and “evil” as he did, he is subordinated to a higher power, and not the supreme ruler of the universe people imagine him to be. Either way, the traditional understanding of God falls apart. But it should be noted that even if good and evil are arbitrary for God, that does not mean good and evil are arbitrary for us.

The second moral argument says that God is required to remedy the injustice in the world. Russell counters in two most curious ways: first by saying that empirically considered, if there is injustice in this world – the only world we know – it is likely to be in any other world. By the way of analogy he argues (ibid., p. 10) that

Supposing you got a crate of oranges that you opened, and you found all the top layer of oranges bad, you would not argue: ‘The underneath ones must be good, so as to redress the balance.’ You would say: ‘Probably the whole lot is a bad consignment’; and that is really what a scientific person would argue about the universe.

This compares well to §88 of *Good Sense*, where d’Holbach points out that if a perfect and immutable God allowed injustice in this world, the same can happen in the next world as well. D’Holbach’s argument is here even stronger than Russell’s, since Russell argues inductively, but d’Holbach deductively and thus more forcefully (as

opposed to deduction, inductive reasoning is not logically valid). But to continue in Russell's analogy, the future life would be a completely different box of oranges, on which the state of oranges in this box has no bearing. This is hardly a rational, much less a scientific argument.

His second rebuttal claims, ignoring the possibility of human freedom, that the injustice in the world is ultimately the fault of the world's creator – and so, if anything, this argument shows the malevolence of God. Thus Russell in effect subscribes to d'Holbach's logicism (2007, §72):

Whence then does [evil] come? From man. But, who made man? God. Evil then comes from God. If he had not made man as he is, moral evil or sin would not have existed in the world. The perversity of man is therefore chargeable to God.

The overall goal of these sections was to show that none of the arguments for the existence of God can stand up to thorough intellectual scrutiny, because they come from times when the rules of rational argumentation were not yet discovered, and so they “embody certain quite definite fallacies” (Russell 2004, p. 6). Thus (according to Russell) there is no rational basis for belief in God – and therefore the belief in God must be irrational. It would, however, be more compelling if Russell would show the inner inconsistency of the arguments for the existence of God without having recourse to unfounded and/ or fallacious arguments of his own. Now Russell turns to explaining religious belief in a naturalistic manner.

### **On religion as a human invention**

Russell understands religion as a set of propositions of a dogmatic character, i.e. the truth of which is not to be doubted (cf. Russell 2004, p. 2), with religious practice being derived from the doctrines. This is why he thinks that e.g. belief in hell leads to immoral actions, and why he can claim (ibid., p. 16) that

In the so-called ages of faith, when men really did believe the Christian religion in all its completeness, there was the Inquisition, with all its tortures; there were millions of unfortunate women burned as witches; and there was every kind of cruelty practiced upon all sorts of people in the name of religion.

This echoes Baron d'Holbach, who also wondered how popular morality is affected by the knowledge that “God, so powerful and perfect, is often forced to make use of criminal actions in order to accomplish his designs” (2007, §158).

After having established that belief in God is not rational, Russell attributes the belief of the ordinary believers to irrational causes. The “main reason” (Russell 2004, p. 10) he takes to be childhood indoctrination, to which he thinks also Kant succumbed (writing that “he believed implicitly in the maxims that he had imbibed at his mother’s knee” [ibid., p. 8]). The other reason is the wish for safety resulting from the lack of security the world offers us – from fear. Fear is also “the parent of cruelty, and therefore it is no wonder if cruelty and religion have gone hand in hand” (ibid., p. 18). This explains why so many violent and immoral deeds are done in the name of religion – they have the same source. Thus religion is a kind of a crutch for weak and fearful people, incapable of living without illusions – but a crutch that comes at a great price.

Russell then turns to the character of the believers, which demonstrates two prominent and negative traits: credulity and hypocrisy, an intellectual and a moral shortcoming, respectively. Yet both are fostered by the religious belief. Their credulity shows in many instances when they expected the Second Coming, which never happened. Their hypocrisy shows in their approach to morality: although they claim to follow the teachings of Jesus, they only follow those that they find convenient at the moment. Turning the other cheek, not judging others, or giving one’s property to the poor and needy are attitudes not exactly widespread in the contemporary Christian culture. As d’Holbach (2007, §161) noted, “All Christians admire and extol the Morality of the gospel; which they do not practise”. Russell admits being no better, but since he is not a Christian, he at least is not a hypocrite.

### **“The Moral Problem”**

Russell is a hedonist, believing that happiness, meaning as much pleasure and as little suffering as possible (cf. Russell 2004, p. 17), is the proper goal of human life. This is based on the understanding that all humans by nature wish for happiness, and the best morality is that which makes all of them happy. Although he does not state these beliefs directly, they can be inferred e.g. from his criticism of the belief in hell, according to which men’s finite offences are punished with eternal suffering, in which “any person who is really profoundly humane” (ibid., p. 13) cannot believe. Here he shares d’Holbach’s (2007, §66) sentiment that “Every sensible mind must revolt at the bare recital of the torments, [even when] inflicted on the greatest criminal [in hell]”.

D'Holbach furthermore notes the malevolent character of a God that punishes finite transgressions with infinite suffering.

With regard to Christian morality, Russell distinguishes between the morality of Jesus, whose maxims such as “judge not lest ye be judged” he interprets as endorsements of nonviolence and a hedonism similar to his own, the goal of which is happiness for everyone. The moral defects Russell finds in Christ are also judged to be defects from the perspective of hedonism: to these belong Christ’s beliefs in hell, in the sin against the Holy Ghost (“that text has caused an unspeakable amount of misery in the world” [Russell 2004, p. 14]), and his vengefulness – all of them causes of suffering. Jesus had other intellectual and character flaws as well: first, many of his teachings, although good, were unoriginal. Second, he believed his second coming was imminent and thus caused confusion and suffering among his faithful. Third, at times he was cruel, hateful and vengeful. Socrates and Buddha thus were clearly better and wiser men than Jesus, contrary to the popular belief that he was the best and wisest of men.

The morality of Jesus is contrasted with the arbitrary morality of the churches. The churches, due to their insistence on “what [they] choose to call morality” (ibid., p. 17), i.e. their non-hedonistic criteria of what is moral, are often the source of real and unnecessary suffering – which for Russell is evil. An example of this is the Catholic sexual morality, which forces married people to stay together until they die and ignores all the suffering this causes for the sake of adherence to the dogmas of the church. Examples of this suffering are the unhappiness of partners that are not allowed to divorce, or syphilitic children that get born if infected people fulfill their natural urges and don’t stay celibate as the Church would have it.

Russell also addresses the final argument for acceptance of religion – the notion that Christian faith makes men moral. He retorts that the more intense has religious belief (i.e. the acceptance of the dogmas) been, the more cruel and violent have men been: there was the Inquisition, witch burnings and torture in the “ages of faith” (ibid., p. 16). Furthermore, “It seems to me that the people who have held to [Christianity] have been for the most part extremely wicked” (ibid., p. 16). On the same subject we may consult §140 of *Good Sense*, according to which in the most devout nations we

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find proud tyrants, oppressive ministers, perfidious courtiers, shameless extortioners, corrupt magistrates, knaves, adulterers, debauchees, prostitutes, thieves, and rogues of every kind, who have never doubted either the existence of an avenging and rewarding God, the torments of hell, or the joys of paradise.

Thus Christianity is revealed to be actually a source of immorality – the opposite of what it pretends to be. And this isn't a matter of a distant past: Christianity and its churches have always been, and still are, “the principal enemies of moral progress in the world” (Russell 2004, p. 17), since they have opposed improving the criminal law, diminishing wars, slavery and racism. It should be pointed out that “moral progress” here means progress towards the hedonistic ideals, which are nowhere in the lecture justified; their truth is again only assumed and not defended by any reasoning.

### **How to fix the world**

Following d'Holbach's (2007, §120) insight that “religious opinions are ancient monuments of ignorance, credulity, cowardice, and barbarism of their ancestors”, Russell claims that “fear is the basis of [religion]” (Russell 2004, p. 18). So is cruelty, and so it is only natural that these two go hand in hand and reinforce each other. If we want to get rid of them, we need to remove fear, their source – and this is possible only with science. Scientific progress helps us overcome our fears by giving us mastery over things. But it too has been retarded by religion – in Russell's words, science has “forced its way step by step against the Christian religion” (ibid., p. 18). Since it gives us knowledge about ourselves, and about what pleases us, science is also the best guide humans have to be able to live the good life.

Science is not just the means of human emancipation; the scientific method is also the sole legitimate form of knowledge. Russell believes that we can only know the natural world as perceived by our senses – that empiricism shows us the limits of human knowledge. This is the basis of Russell's understanding of reason or rational argumentation, and the believers' insistence on the existence of God, a being immaterial and not subject to the laws of nature, is his main argument for their irrationality – since such claims are necessarily illusions of no intellectual significance. Empiricism is furthermore understood as “the only philosophy that affords a theoretical justification of democracy” (Russell 2009a, p. 440).

To achieve the true goal of morality, namely ensuring a pleasurable life for everyone, we need to get rid of fear (and of its products, cruelty and religion) and use reason and science instead to conquer the world. Religious submission – and religion itself, being “the words uttered long ago by ignorant men” (Russell 2004, p. 19) – needs to be discarded, since it is “unworthy of free men” (ibid., p. 18). People should embrace their kindness instead and devote their moral feelings to mitigating any and every suffering that now exists. Most importantly, we have to concentrate our efforts to improving this world, not an imaginary afterlife: even if we don’t succeed completely, the results will certainly be better than the misery caused by the churches. And finally, we need to have a progressive attitude: hope for a better future instead of aping the follies of the past. It is clear that religion has no place in this “better future”.

## ***4. The God Delusion***

This book starts in a manner similar to Bertrand Russell's lecture – by a definition of religious faith that is going to be argued against throughout the book. This faith is not the admiration of the laws of nature that is quite frequent among modern scientists, but belief in “the God hypothesis”, as Dawkins calls it. This, at its most basic and inclusive (so as to encompass as many religions as possible), means believing that “there exists a superhuman, supernatural intelligence who deliberately designed and created the universe and everything in it, including us” (Dawkins 2006, p. 52).

It might be reasonably said that to prove or disprove such a proposition is beyond human capacities, but Dawkins passionately disagrees with such extreme caution. He contrasts this kind of agnosticism, dubbed “Permanent Agnosticism in Principle” with “Temporary Agnosticism in Practice” (ibid., p. 70), which is a result of only a temporary lack of evidence that will eventually be resolved, and the question which one is agnostic about will have a reasonable, evidence-based answer. Dawkins then surprisingly sidesteps the fact that science is limited to the exploration of the natural world and thus by definition cannot say anything about the supernatural, and proclaims that the existence of God is a “scientific hypothesis like any other” (ibid., p. 72). Although we may not be able to conclusively answer it, we can quite well calculate its probability, just as we would do with any other inconclusive scientific question.

### **On the non-existence of God**

Further following Russell's suit, Dawkins then proceeds to disprove arguments for the existence of God which, if valid, would increase the probability of his existence. The first three of Thomas Aquinas' proofs – the Uncaused Cause, the Unmoved Mover, and the Cosmological Argument – are rejected on the same grounds: they all involve regress ad infinitum and use God to make an end to this regress, while making “the entirely unwarranted assumption that God himself is immune to the regress” (Dawkins 2006, p. 101). This echoes Russell (2004, p. 4), who was dissuaded from the first-cause argument precisely by the question “Who made

God?” Argument from Degree, according to which we can perceive goodness of things only on the basis of the standard of maximum goodness which is God, is dismissed as sheer nonsense, and the Argument from Design is dismissed as being stripped of all its power by Darwin.

Dawkins then impatiently does away with the Ontological Argument (which says that if God is the most perfect being conceivable and to exist is more perfect than not to exist, then God exists), which he calls “infantile” (Dawkins 2006, p. 104) and complains that “the very idea that grand conclusions could follow from such logomachist trickery offends me aesthetically” (ibid., p. 105). His actual refutation relies on Kant’s discovery that, logically speaking, existence cannot be said to be “perfection”. Dawkins then notes that the beauty of the world, or works of art, does not in any way prove that there is a divine creator; nor is he proven by personal experience, which is much more likely to be a hallucination. The same is true of alleged miracles, which are untrustworthy and likely to be tricks of the mind. Quoting David Hume, Dawkins sums up his approach to miracles as follows: “No testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony be of such a kind, that its falsehood would be more miraculous than the fact which it endeavours to establish” (ibid., pp. 116-7).

The basis of religion as we know it is no intellectual argument, but revelation as conveyed to us by the Scripture. Dawkins knows this and remains unimpressed. He notes the many contradictions between the four Gospels as regards e.g. Jesus’ place of birth (Matthew and Luke saying he was born in Bethlehem, John contradicting them), or the mismatch between the census and the rule of King Herod (who died before the census took place). The veracity of the Bible is further lowered by the fact that it was copied “by fallible scribes who, in any case, had their own religious agenda” (ibid., p. 118). Dawkins notes in passing that there are many more gospels, from which the official four were chosen “more or less arbitrarily” (ibid., p. 121), and concludes that all gospels were written long after Jesus’ death by people who “almost certainly never met Jesus personally” (ibid., p. 122). Thus, the New Testament is a work of fiction, and not reliable evidence for the divinity of Jesus or the existence of God.

In Chapter Four Dawkins presents his ultimate argument to show that God “almost certainly” (ibid., p. 137) doesn’t exist. In form it is similar to the argument



from design (stating that living beings are too complex to have arisen by chance, and therefore are evidence for a designer), and turns it against God: if life is improbably complex and requires a designer, then this designer himself is even more complex and requires an explanation of its own. And while the complexity of life can be sufficiently explained by natural selection, there is no such possibility for God (for if he was a product of *natural* selection, he wouldn't be a *supernatural* being). This shows us that the existence of God is too improbable to be taken seriously by a rational, scientifically-minded person (cf. *ibid.*, p. 138). But this, it should be emphasized, can be asserted only by misrepresenting God as a being that has to abide by the rules of the natural world. Furthermore, this argument does not suffice to establish the validity of Dawkins' position, because "the *possibility* of revelation [being true] implies the *possible meaninglessness* of philosophy" (Strauss 2006, p. 175; emphasizes original).

### **The natural history of religion**

This being established, we need to find out why religion is such a ubiquitous human feature if it is false. Dawkins, believing that natural selection "explains the whole of life" (Dawkins 2006, p. 141), of course goes for an evolutionary explanation. The standard evolutionary explanation would be that religion offers some kind of evolutionary advantage to its practitioners. Dawkins admits that religion, even if false, may be a powerful consolatory force, and in this respect he compares it with a placebo; he also dismisses the possibility of religion being adaptive at the group level. Instead, he chooses to explain religion as a byproduct of another, adaptive mechanism, a process analogous to moths flying into a candle and burning. Originally, Dawkins explains, this mechanism evolved for lights at optical infinity (i.e. stars) that can serve as orientation tools; but with the arrival of artificial lights such as candles this system can misfire, propelling the moth on an "elegant logarithmic spiral into the candle" (*ibid.*, p. 201).

Dawkins is not sure what exactly is the origin of religion, but the one thing he is sure of is that it has no inherent evolutionary purpose: it is only a useless byproduct (cf. *ibid.*, p. 203). How he can know this without knowing the true origin of religion remains a mystery. Finally, to emphasize how easily people can believe in something patently absurd and useless, Dawkins tells us about cargo cults, Melanesian religions

of recent origin consisting of imitating the white man in an effort to get the goods he gets, or “cargo” (ibid., pp. 234-40).

**“If there is no God, why be good?”**

The final religious claim that is yet to be refuted is that religion is the source of morality. Dawkins finds its roots in our evolutionary past, most importantly in the mechanisms of kin selection and reciprocal altruism. The common morality, which urges us to behave fairly and peacefully to everyone, is according to Dawkins a byproduct of the above-mentioned evolutionary mechanisms, now applied to all people we interact with. Furthermore, Dawkins (2006, p. 255) quotes approvingly Marc Hauser that “Driving our moral judgments is a universal moral grammar”, which is interpreted to work in terms of hedonistic morality (as much pleasure and as little pain as possible), with an added Kantian respect for the dignity of human beings. These terms, especially hedonism, Dawkins accepts as his own, and in these terms he criticizes religion as being the cause of “bad societal health”, i.e. general suffering in a given society (ibid., pp. 262-3).

In Chapter Seven Dawkins recounts the many moral precepts of both the Old and New Testaments, which are nowadays nigh-universally condemned, and concludes that even for religious people, the Bible is not the source of their morality. Few of our contemporaries would approve of Lot offering his daughters to a rape-thirsty crowd, or of the New Testament doctrine of original sin, just as Russell disapproved of the doctrine of hell (Russell 2004, p. 13). As he says, “we pick and choose which bits of scripture to believe, which bits to write off as symbols or allegories” (Dawkins 2006, p. 269). And finally, he cites John Hartung, who argues that “love thy neighbour”, for the modern man the most admirable of biblical commandments, was originally intended to apply to Jews only: “The Bible is a blueprint of in-group morality, complete with instructions for genocide, enslavement of out-groups, and world domination” (ibid., p. 293).

Having ruled out religion as the source of our specific moral sentiments, Dawkins turns to a vision of moral progress to explain it. As he writes (ibid., p. 298),

Most people pay lip service to the same broad liberal consensus of ethical principles. The majority of us don't cause needless suffering; we believe in free speech even if we disagree

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with what is being said; we pay our taxes; we don't cheat, don't kill, don't commit incest, don't do things to others that we would not wish done to us.

To make the point that our moral understanding progresses, Dawkins (*ibid.*, pp. 298-99) quotes a randomly chosen list of “New Ten Commandments”, which despite being written by no great thinker is much more agreeable to the modern sensibilities than the original Ten Commandments, the first three of which are concerned solely with the obedience to Deity and thus not conducive to human well-being in any way. Dawkins himself would include a commandment to “enjoy your own sex life (so long as it damages nobody else) and leave others to enjoy theirs in private whatever their inclinations, which are none of your business” (*ibid.*, p. 300), another typical hedonistic judgment (see the next chapter of this Thesis).

Furthermore, these changes in our moral understanding translate to changes in the real world: Dawkins mentions the abolition of slavery, the equality of women including their suffrage (and by proxy, democracy as such) as proofs that “we have almost all moved on, and in a big way, since biblical times” (*ibid.*, p. 300). In this view, then, “we” are moving towards a happy and comfortable life for everyone regardless of sex, race or creed, and this progress would be much faster and fruitful were it not for those who cling to their holy books and base their morality upon them, even though they end up causing suffering as a consequence. As for the causes of this progress, Dawkins remains silent; he considers it an empirical fact that simply *is*, regardless of what its causes may be (“For my purposes it is enough that, as a matter of observed fact, [the moral *Zeitgeist*] does move, and it is not driven by religion” [*ibid.*, p. 308]).

Here Dawkins subscribes to the standard liberal argument of progress, which “should above all result in the intellectual and moral perfection of humanity. The line [of the argument] moved between two points: from religious fanaticism to intellectual liberty, from dogma to criticism, from superstition to enlightenment, from darkness to light” (Schmitt 2007, p. 73). What distinguishes him from the liberals is his willingness to fight religion even at the price of encroaching upon the private sphere (see Chapter 6 of this Thesis).

As a final note of Chapter Seven Dawkins addresses the accusations that atheism causes evil, such as it is alleged to be in the case of Stalin. Dawkins' response

is that “individual atheists may do evil things but they don’t do evil things in the name of atheism” (Dawkins 2006, p. 315), and asking “why would anyone go to war [or commit some other evil] for the sake of an *absence* of belief?” (ibid., p. 316; emphasis original). This, however, betrays his weak understanding of Marxism-Leninism, which was an expressly atheistic ideology and committed many of its crimes with the express purpose of combating religion (cf. Smolec et al. 2006), which it considered a dangerous and wasteful atavism, a position that easily compares to Dawkins’ own, as we shall see. Furthermore, as this Thesis is trying to show, atheism means more than just an absence of belief, but includes positive beliefs on which the rejection of religious belief is founded – and thus it is entirely conceivable that there may be crimes committed even in the name of atheism. More on this subject in Chapter 6.

### **The evils of religion**

Dawkins has two main accusations against religion: its subversion of science and the suffering (moral evil) it causes. As for the former, the subversion can be direct, as it is the case with the “intelligent design” supporters fighting to get their theory in the school curricula, or indirect, in that religion teaching children that “unquestioning faith is a virtue” (Dawkins 2006, p. 323). By “faith” Dawkins understands “belief without evidence” (ibid., p. 232), and thus a mode of life which does not require modern science. Since this basic characteristic is true of both “moderate” and “fundamentalist” religion, Dawkins treats them both as parts of the same problem and refuses to make a significant distinction between them: all religion is equally irrationality incarnate. “The take-home message is that we should blame religion itself, not religious *extremism*” (ibid., p. 345; emphasis original). This he contrasts with the inquisitive, scientific, rational worldview, of which evolutionism is a paragon case. “There is grandeur in this view of life”, as Darwin famously wrote (quoted ibid., p. 32), and Dawkins shares this conviction wholeheartedly. In short, Dawkins thinks religion impoverishes people’s lives of much that is beautiful and valuable.

The moral grievances are more numerous. As noted above, religion fosters the “in-group morality” and so divides people into arbitrary groups and promotes violence against those of other groups. Religion is the chief cause behind the persecution of homosexuals and denying abortion to women and euthanasia to the terminally sick, in

each case directly increasing the amount of suffering in the world. Of these transgressions especially the fundamentalists are guilty, and Dawkins uses the phrase “The American Taliban” to describe them and to underline their similarity to the Afghan Taliban, a group widely derided in the West.

Furthermore, religion fosters unquestioning obedience to authority and moral absolutism (and therefore disregards “Bentham’s question, ‘Can they *suffer*?’” [ibid., p. 355; emphasis original], of which Dawkins himself approves as a test of moral right and wrong). This again easily leads to violence and suffering in many cases such as the former Yugoslavia or Northern Ireland, which Dawkins believes to be religious, as opposed to ethnic or political, conflicts (cf. ibid., p. 43). And again, moderate faith is as much to be blamed as the fundamentalists.

But most importantly, religion abuses children, and the now-prominent sexual abuse is but a tip of the iceberg. Dawkins speaks strongly against children being “branded” by the religion of their parents, and is even “persuaded that the phrase ‘child abuse’ is no exaggeration when used to describe what teachers and priests are doing to children whom they encourage to believe in something like the punishment of unshriven mortal sins in an eternal hell” (ibid., p. 358). The reason for this is that belief in Hell and related dogmas causes the children great emotional anguish, thus making this a more radical version of Russell’s (2004, p. 13) contention that no person “who is really profoundly humane can believe in everlasting punishment”. In this light, Dawkins (2006, p. 287) describes atonement, “the central doctrine of Christianity, as vicious, sadomasochistic, and repellent”. Dawkins also advocates teaching comparative religion (ibid., p. 382) and Bible as a book of literature (i.e. fiction), so that “we can give up belief in God while not losing touch with a treasured heritage” (ibid., p. 387), and of course so that the children won’t be led astray. Reflecting on these views, John Gray (2008) writes that he “cannot help being reminded of the evangelical Christian who assured me that children reared in a chaste environment would grow up without illicit sexual impulses.”

### **Imagine no religion**

In his final chapter Dawkins admits that getting rid of religion may leave a “gap” in our minds. Religion used to fulfill the functions of explaining the world, supplying us with a moral teaching, consoling us in times of grief, and inspiring our

imagination. In the first two functions, he writes, it has been completely replaced – in the former by science, in the latter by the forces of moral progress. Dawkins admits that religion can console us, but this consolation comes at the price of deluding ourselves, and in any case it can be achieved by other, nonreligious means. In Russell's (2004, p. 19) words, "a good world needs knowledge, kindness, and courage; it does not need ... a fettering of the free intelligence by the words uttered long ago by ignorant men". To the issue of inspiration Dawkins devotes the finale of his book, where he extols the power of science to show us just how amazing the natural world is, and how little of it we understand. But science can also help us push back the limits of our minds (which are due to them being evolved organs) and to inspire us by understanding the wonders of nature. Concluding the book he writes that "we may eventually discover that there are no limits" (Dawkins 2006, p. 420).

The world Dawkins would like to live in is, first and foremost, secular. This for him means a world in which public decisions would be made on the basis of a rational cost-benefit analysis and without any religious interference, and religion itself would be reduced to an entirely private matter available only to consenting adults. People would then live according to the liberal moral values, thinking rationally with their minds unbiased by religious indoctrination. Science would indeed become the main source of human inspiration (Dawkins imagines Beethoven writing the *Mesozoic Symphony* [ibid., p. 111]). Furthermore, this would be a world of peace: "If children were taught to question and think through their beliefs, instead of being taught the superior virtue of faith without question, it is a good bet that there would be no suicide bombers" (ibid., p. 348). Or, as d'Holbach wrote (2007, §182), "Every man, who reasons, soon becomes an unbeliever", and thus a peaceful and socially beneficial man.

The cases of non-religious violence would be mitigated by technocratic social policy (guided by science, which can most reliably tell us how to live) aimed at improving societal health and by educating people in the "broad liberal consensus of ethical principles" (Dawkins 2006, p. 298), i.e. hedonistic utilitarianism. Here one is reminded of Bertrand Russell's exhortation to "conquer the world by intelligence" (2004, p. 18), which alone can make the world a better place for all. In Dawkins' own words: "our life is as meaningful, as full and wonderful as we choose to make it" (2006, p. 404). Although he at times seems to respect the choice for finding meaning

in religion, it is difficult to see how this would square with his commitment to rational education which should result in the rejection of religion.

### **The political project**

Yet the present world is very different from this rosy picture, and it takes action to change it. Dawkins realizes this and makes it clear from the outset that *The God Delusion* is an intensely political book. It strives to convert: “If this book works as I intend, religious readers who open it will be atheists when they put it down” (Dawkins 2006, p. 28). Dawkins believes that many of the faithful do not really believe in what their religion teaches them, but have simply been let down by the education system and don’t realize being an atheist is a valid option, and that one “can be an atheist who is happy, balanced, moral, and intellectually fulfilled” (ibid., p. 23). He even promises “liberated” lives (ibid., p. 22) to the would-be atheists. Furthermore, it seeks to organize atheists, both by raising their awareness on how many there actually are (since many of them are “closeted” and “desperately need encouragement to come out” [ibid., p. 18]) and by dispelling their objections against political activism (which is the purpose of the *Preface to the paperback edition*).

The method of the atheist struggle shall be uncompromising. Above all, religion cannot be reasoned with. It is as dangerous as it is irrational, and all attempts to appease it will fail as the attempts to appease Hitler failed. Those atheists who do not share Dawkins’ aggressive spirit are aptly labeled “the Neville Chamberlain school of evolutionists” (ibid., p. 90; speaking of those scientists who refuse to take his side against the creationists). These people fail to “grasp the real nature of the conflict. It’s not just about evolution versus creationism. To scientists like Dawkins and Wilson, the *real* war is between rationalism and superstition”, as Dawkins’ quotation of Jerry Coyne (ibid., p. 92; emphasis original) tells us. Religion must be opposed, or it will destroy science, reason and the liberal moral *Zeitgeist*. To this end, it must be stripped of the “undeserved respect” it has usurped for itself – the taboo on criticizing religion he perceives – and be forcefully criticized whenever the occasion arises.

The book also speaks about the goals for which atheists should be fighting – curbing malicious religious influence on science (such as the Intelligent Design movement), curbing religious influence on politics (as it manifests e.g. in denying the

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rights of sexual minorities), and in limiting the power religion wields over the tender minds of children, with the ultimate goal of preventing its spread to the next generation by ridiculing the believers' irrationality and denying the right of religious parents to raise their children religiously. In short, the goal of this atheism is simple: combating and eventually eradicating religion in its entirety as a prerequisite for a life of ease and prosperity for all people of good will and reason.



## **5. The Worldview of Enlightenment Atheism**

In the previous chapters we could see that the argumentation of atheists tends to follow a very similar course. Now we are in a position to explain why this is so, and what this tells us about the shared beliefs underlying the atheistic argumentation.

### **Structure of the atheistic argument**

The previous chapters of this Thesis tried to convey an impression of a far-reaching likeness within the atheistic argument in its entirety: not just in the particular claims the atheists make, but also in the general structure of their argument. This structure can be summarized as follows: first the rationality of religious belief in general, and the truth of specific (usually Christian) theological claims is refuted. Special emphasis is placed on refuting the claim that Christianity is the source of morality. Once religion has been shown to be false, an alternative, naturalistic explanation of it is offered. The next step of involves a thorough description of the many evils and dangers of which religion is the source (thus showing that religion is in fact immoral), including it being an erroneous, and therefore fundamentally wrong approach to life. With all this in place, we are presented with a sketch of a better world free of religion, and given an outline of the recipe to make this world come true.

### **Metaphysics**

Atheistic metaphysics is based in mechanistic materialism, which is the basis of the modern dichotomy of the natural and the supernatural (cf. Israel 2001, p. 17). For Aristotle, whose philosophy was the “received view” of 17<sup>th</sup> century Europe, matter and form, or the physical and the spiritual, could not be separated from each other and formed a unity. Furthermore, he explained phenomena in terms of four causes: formal, material, efficient and final cause. Mechanistic materialism radically challenges this understanding. As Taylor (2007, p. 595) writes, the “mechanistic” part means that “we eschew meanings and teleology in our explanations; we only allow for efficient causation”. “Materialism” here means that all that exists is matter, and therefore all effects stem solely from material causes. Mechanistic materialism thus excludes the necessity of considering any other causes in one’s explanations. For this

materialism, “natural” is what can be explained on these terms, while “supernatural” its opposite: that which requires extra-natural (i.e. extra-material) forces to come about. It follows that such extra-natural forces cannot exist under this materialism.

This materialism is directly asserted by Baron d’Holbach: it includes the claims that matter is all that exists and that it is self-sufficient (cf. d’Holbach 2007, §§40-41), and that “every thing is subject to fixed laws” (ibid., §43). Thus, all that exists is matter, which interacts with itself causally and the causal chain is never broken. D’Holbach articulates also other metaphysical principles that are, tacitly or directly, asserted by the later atheists, such as the belief that human perception is limited to the material world, or that humans are fully natural beings, or the denial of human freedom of will on the grounds of its inconsistency with the deterministic universe. These ideas also serve the atheists to refute the existence of God on the basis of its inconsistency with them, instead of showing that belief in God would lead to a contradiction all by itself.

### **Disproving religion**

Demonstrating the falsity of religion lies at the heart of the atheistic project; whatever grievances one may have against (any and every) religion would become insubstantial if the said religion were true. Thus the atheistic critique of religion is premised upon the falsity of religion, and therefore this needs to be demonstrated. This demonstration takes the form of disproving the existence of God as the most basic premise of the religious understanding of the world, and subsequently by disproving the claims of miracles, i.e. divine disturbances of the natural order, on the basis of their inconsistency with the course of nature.

Dawkins goes so far as to explicitly claim that the existence of God can by scientific methods be ruled out beyond reasonable doubt (cf. Dawkins 2006, p. 77). This is a misnomer for three reasons. First, all scientific knowledge is provisional and likely will be replaced by a different account with more predictive power later on: scientific laws are “admittedly open to future revision” (Strauss 1981, p. 8). From this follows that current scientific theories cannot be relied on to tell us the final truth about the world, or the (non-) existence of God. Second, science explicitly refuses to talk about God or miracles. This is however not an argument against their existence, but simply a mark of the boundaries of science: the principle of methodological

naturalism, uncontroversial among the scientists, forces science to stay silent on all that is not natural, as God and miracles are. Third and most importantly, showing that God's existence is improbable does not suffice, because as Strauss (2006, p. 175; emphasizes original) writes, "the [mere] *possibility* of revelation [being true] implies the *possible meaninglessness* of philosophy". To make his case against religion, the atheist needs to rule out its veracity altogether. We may conclude that it is conceptually impossible for science to meaningfully address the existence of God.

The other two atheists do not make such far-reaching claims on behalf of science. Instead they build upon their mechanistic understanding of the universe and use it to disprove the claims religion makes about the natural world, and thus to prove its falsity. This is in principle a good strategy, because religion does indeed make claims about the physical world and these claims are its integral parts - the crucial example here is the resurrection of Jesus. If it could be shown that Jesus could not have risen from the dead, Christianity would be discredited beyond repair.

The problem with this strategy is its insufficient scope, as it is based on simply asserting the truth of materialism. But to say that all that naturally exists is matter, as Baron d'Holbach explicitly did, is not enough for two reasons. First, experience cannot show (as d'Holbach tried to do by demonstrating that immaterial God is impossible [cf. 2007, §22]) that "God as an omnipotent being does not exist", because experience, the only guide to the world we have according to d'Holbach, "cannot show more than that the conclusion from the world ... to an omnipotent creator is not valid" (Strauss 1981, p. 7). Second, resurrection is not a natural process, but a miracle – an inherently improbable act of God's grace (cf. Strauss 1981, p. 7: "the improbable character of biblical belief is admitted and even proclaimed by the biblical faith itself"). Thus to prove the falsity of religion means to prove the impossibility of miracles, which cannot be done by simply asserting the truth of materialism.

The most influential modern critique of miracles is Spinoza's, who argues that miracles are known to us only from hearsay, were reported by "people without any scientific training and attitude" (Strauss 2006, p. 152), and were relayed to us by unreliable media. The conclusion is that "the belief in [miracles] essentially belongs to a pre-scientific, or mythical, mind" (ibid.) and that it is high time that men stop believing these obsolete fairy-tales. A version of this argument can be found in

d'Holbach (2007, §130) and Dawkins (2006, p. 116). But this argument shows merely that miracles are improbable, which as we have seen is fully acknowledged by theology. Yet even the most improbable thing is possible for the omnipotent God, who cannot be refuted, for “if God is incomprehensible and not yet unknown, and this is implied in the idea of God’s omnipotence, it is impossible to speak about God without making contradictory statements about him” (Strauss 1981, p. 7).

A real refutation of miracles and thus of the truth of religion would require such a knowledge of God’s character that would preclude the possibility of him acting miraculously. Spinoza tried to accomplish this by coming to a “clear, distinct idea of God as the fully intelligible cause of all things” (Strauss 2006, p. 154) and by showing that performing miracles would be against God’s own nature. Miracles are here understood as breaches of the laws of nature, a notion derived from mechanistic materialism.

For Spinoza (2007, p. 83), “the universal laws of nature are simply God’s decrees and follow from the necessity and perfection of the divine nature”. These laws are perfect and immutable because they are issued by a perfect God. Therefore, a miracle as a violation of the laws of nature “would also necessarily contradict ... [the] nature of God” (ibid.), because a change in divine decrees would imply their imperfection and thus God’s imperfection. Believing in miracles would therefore mean believing that “God acts contrary to his own nature”, from which “nothing is more absurd” (ibid.). The events that are popularly believed to be miraculous have in fact purely natural causes, which are merely not understood as such by the people.

Yet Spinoza failed at his ambitious goal. His idea of God depends on it being the basis of a “clear and distinct idea of the whole”, but his account of the whole is unable to accomplish this, as it “arbitrarily excludes those *aspects* of the whole which can’t be understood clearly, distinctly” (Strauss 2006, p. 154; emphasis original). For example, that God could suspend his own decrees having planned it this way from the beginning implies no imperfection, because the overall plan is the highest divine decree. As Strauss further notes, Spinoza’s philosophy is “the most comprehensive, or the most ambitious, program of what *modern science* could possibly be” (ibid., pp. 154-5; emphasis original).

The failure of Spinoza's refutation of miracles thus sets down important limits for the atheistic project, and none of the atheists examined in this Thesis were able to offer a better refutation of miracles. Modern science with its commitment to methodological naturalism does not even come close to these limits. We see that atheistic materialism, even when supported by the power of modern science, cannot demonstrate the falsity of revealed religion's truth-claims, or does so only at the price of ignoring miracles, which lie at the heart of religious belief. It can claim to demonstrate the falsity of religion only because it is already premised upon its falsity, and so this "proof" has a circular character. Such a refutation is insufficient for anyone of intellectual honesty.

### **Naturalistic explanation of religion**

The atheists, convinced of having ruled out every possibility of religion being true, then proceed to explain religion as a purely natural phenomenon. The common form of doing this is, in Leo Strauss' terminology, reducing the revelation which the Abrahamic religions claim to be their origin to myth. Thus the atheists assert the fundamental equality of a widely believed religion, usually Christianity, with those religions that are universally rejected (such as the Ancient Greek religion). According to Strauss (2006, p. 164), revelation is characterized by (1) one omnipotent God and his voluntary actions and (2) its dealing with unique events which form a history, these events being related to actual historical events of which we know independently. On the other hand, myth is characterized by (1) many gods, who however are controlled by fate and (2) recurrent, cyclical phenomena without a clear relation to actual historical events (ibid). These crucial differences are overlooked by the atheists, the basis for this being their conviction of having shown religion's falsity. Dawkins (2006, p. 123) argues that even the New Testament is a work of fiction, Russell (2004, p. 12) doubts whether Jesus existed at all, and d'Holbach (2007, §12) says religion employs "silly stories" that are "more pleasing to vulgar minds than true histories".

The account of religion as a myth is complemented by an explanation of how the myth was (likely) created and why it persists until the present day. D'Holbach (2007, §120) claims religion is a product of the primitive and ignorant man. Russell (2004, p. 18) claims, much in the same vein, that God is "a conception derived from ancient Oriental despotisms". Dawkins (2006, p. 203) believes religion is a useless

evolutionary byproduct of some other, actually useful, adaptation. But regardless of the actual explanation, religion always turns out to be an atavism of the barbaric past. A corollary of this view of religion is the idea that in that barbaric past it may have even served a useful purpose – explaining the world – but failed to do so satisfactorily and has been replaced by science.

This account of religion begs the question of why does religion still persist, despite it being unnecessary and even harmful in the more enlightened present day. D’Holbach (2007, §169) believes it is perpetuated by the priests and kings to keep the multitudes ignorant and so to preserve the unjust rule of the few over the many. Russell (2004, p. 18) believes this is due to human fearfulness. Dawkins seems to suggest it is being perpetuated solely by the reactionary forces that defy the moral *Zeitgeist* he so passionately speaks about. Again we see an agreement: religion exists nowadays only because it appeals to the worse and more stupid parts of human nature and is instrumental in oppressing the masses and stopping moral progress. It is worth noting that in his review of scientific approaches to religion by atheistic authors, Rodney Stark (1999, p. 50) found a similar tendency:

Whether religion is attributed to outright psycho-pathology, to groundless fears, or merely to faulty reasoning and misperceptions, the claim that religion is irrational still dominates the psychology of religion.

### **Hedonistic ethics and its critique of religion**

So far we have seen how the atheists explain the falsity of religion and the reasons why it persists despite this falsity. One of the most significant religious claims is that it is the source of morality, and this too needs to be refuted. The atheists invariably claim humans are moral by nature, and this morality is for all three of them a kind of hedonism: the doctrine that all men ever want is happiness that consists of “a smooth, uninterrupted feeling of pleasure, serenity, and satisfaction filling one’s days” (Israel 2010, p. 193; cf. d’Holbach 2007, §171). According to this doctrine, all people are by nature equally inclined to seek pleasure and avoid pain in one way or another, and the best society would be one that will allow greatest happiness of the greatest number. If we sidestep the atheistic struggle against religion for the time being, we see that politically they subscribe to a permissive liberalism with maximum personal freedom and no prohibitions on actions that do not cause suffering to others.

However, as long as they argue for the good of the entire society (as d'Holbach [2007, §83] does very pronouncedly, and Dawkins [2006, pp. 262-3] implicitly), this does not offer any basis for the individual rights that are essential to liberalism in the proper sense of the word.

This kind of morality is clearly incompatible with religious morality as it is taught to the faithful, as well to many actions of the believers that cause suffering in the name of some higher end. The atheists realize this, and firm believers in hedonism as they are, they criticize religious morality on these grounds. The first major objection is that religious morality is unnatural in that it does not respect the fundamentally hedonistic human nature. Thus it denies men the enjoyment of legitimate (i.e. harmless) pleasures and forces them to live in much greater misery than the objective socio-economic circumstances of their life necessitate (cf. d'Holbach 2007, §161; Russell 2004, pp. 16-17; Dawkins 2006, p. 263).

The second objection is that many actions the faithful commit in the name of their religion result in greater suffering. The favorite examples include religious wars, Inquisition, and for Dawkins also Islamic terrorism, a highly timely issue. D'Holbach (2007, §158) denounces the bloodshed prompted by religious disagreements, Russell (2004, p. 16) thinks violence increases in direct proportion to religious faith, Dawkins adds more modern problems, such as religious oppositions to the homosexual lifestyle and abortions, to which his permissive liberalism does not object (cf. Chapter Eight of *The God Delusion*). In this way the atheists can claim that not only religion is not the source of morality, but actually it is a great source of immoral behavior and actions.

Forceful as these criticisms may seem, they suffer from the fact that no argument is offered to justify the hedonistic principle underlying them – it is only asserted. Thus we deal with a far-reaching anthropological statement that all men ever want is reducible to the attainment of pleasure and the avoidance of pain. Yet this is by no means self-evident, and since no argument is offered in their favor, we are left with a choice to take it or leave it. This alone is an important objection to the truth-claims of this hedonism, not to speak of the more practical problems this will pose, as we shall see in the next chapter.

### **The plan of action**

We now know that religion is not only false, but immoral and dangerous and that the world would be a much better place without it. Religion cannot be reasoned with, and therefore must be fought without a compromise even if peacefully. Eventually it will be sent to the trash heap of history where it has belonged for some time. After that fateful event little more will prevent the coming of the tolerant liberal world the atheists believe we would have were it not for the corrupting influence of religion. But for this, action is needed.

The fact that religion is irrational and makes its adherents irrational as well implies it cannot be reasoned with and must be weeded out. D'Holbach (2007, §179) advocates political atheism as unquestionably better than the rule of the religious (which does not mean strictly theocracy, but any religious ruler in general), and Russell (2004, p. 18) thinks science should become the guide of men instead of religion. Dawkins, who is most outspoken in this respect, calls for political mobilization of atheists with the goal of driving religion out of the public space, both by denying the worth of the religious mode of thought (the opposite being the “undeserved respect” against which he rallies) and by actively opposing the religious positions on contemporary issues. But the ultimate goal is to destroy religion altogether, to make it a matter of the barbaric past that spawned it. Dawkins aims to do this by taking away the parents' right to raise children in their religion (the criminality of this action is implied in characterizing it as “child abuse”), thinking this will cut religion away from the roots of ignorance and conformity to authority that nourish it, and without which it would not survive. No atheist goes in his plans beyond this point; from that we may conclude that they do not think there are obstacles to the ideal world greater and more menacing than religion.

### **The atheistic worldview in a nutshell**

We can summarize the worldview of Enlightenment atheism in these points:

1. Mechanistic materialism which supposedly disproves religion
2. Religion understood as an irrational atavism
3. The continuing persistence of religion attributed to human folly and hunger for power



4. Hedonistic ethics which supposedly shows religion is immoral
5. Irrational religion is to be replaced by rational science as the guiding principle of human life
6. The reason why the atheists are writing their books is to (tell us how to) accomplish #5.

As Taylor (2007, p. 562) explains the logic of this narrative,

The crucial idea is that the scientific-epistemic part of it is completely self-supporting. That's something the rational mind will be led to believe independent of any moral convictions. The moral attributions to one side or the other come when you are trying to explain why some people accept and others resist these truths.

Its main shortcomings are two. First, the fact that its basic premises – materialism, hedonism and the belief that reason (for Russell and Dawkins embodied in modern science) is *the* path to the good life – are simply asserted and left undemonstrated; the rest of their philosophy consists simply in working out the implications of these premises. No argument is offered as to why the atheists' account of nature and man is superior to the theological account – one needs to accept their undemonstrated premises beforehand in order to accept this account. If belief without evidence is faith (cf. Dawkins 2006, p. 232), our decision in this respect becomes – paradoxically – a matter of faith, and the atheists may justly be considered faithful, the very thing they so vigorously combat.

Second, the atheists' refutation of religion is based not in a serious engagement with the religious thought and showing their inner contradictions, but in the inconsistency of the religious ideas with the atheists' own worldview. For example, d'Holbach judges the idea of God not on the terms of the (any) system it belongs in, but on the basis of its accordance with his own ideas about nature and limits of human knowledge. God as an immaterial being is rejected because d'Holbach is a strict materialist, and theological ideas of knowledge of God are rejected because they are incompatible with his empiricism.

In the end, this points to the dogmatism with which the atheists cling to their metaphysical and ethical beliefs, and which makes them unwilling to engage the religious tradition on its own terms. And since philosophy requires that “the beginning of all things must be made manifest, or *demonstrated*, on the *basis* of what all men

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can see always in broad daylight or through *ascent* from the visible things”, as Leo Strauss writes (2006, p. 145; emphases original), we are justified in concluding that this is bad philosophy, definitely not better than the religious way of thought it so loudly criticizes. Most crucially, it does not offer the inquisitive reader sufficient grounds for the rejection of religion: it fails to achieve its goal.

## **6. The Politics of Enlightenment Atheism**

We saw that the refutation of religion on the grounds of its irrationality – more specifically, its self-contradictory character – lies at the heart of the atheistic project. However, a careful reading reveals that the same is true of the universal features of the atheistic worldview that I outlined in the previous chapter. This chapter will examine the most prominent of these contradictions and try to understand Enlightenment atheism in light of this realization.

### **Atheistic contradictions**

As we have seen, all three atheists considered in this Thesis understand the world in terms of mechanistic materialism, according to which all phenomena result exclusively from material causes and the chain of causality is never broken. Even when the latter point is not stated directly, we may infer it from their disbelief in miracles: if it was conceivable that every now and then something happens without a natural cause – i.e. contrary to the laws of nature – they wouldn't have any reason to claim that “miracles” are nothing more than illusions or tricks of the mind. The atheistic denial of miracles is a consequence of the deterministic character of their metaphysics.

Such an account of physical reality, simple and compelling as it may be, does not leave any room for human freedom. In order that humans be able to make their own choices, and thus be able to reject religion after being presented with the atheists' arguments showing its falsity and pernicious character, or be able to make moral choices at all, they need to be autonomous (literally “self-legislating”, i.e. in an important way exempt from the physical laws) beings. But this is precisely what determinism denies: if the chain of causality runs unbroken from the very beginning of the universe, then also all human actions and thoughts are determined in advance, and nothing can be done to change this – since all one could possibly do to change another's mind would be merely a consequence of his own predetermination. The universe simply runs its course and human pretensions to change this are futile. Yet while it is possible to believe in a fully deterministic universe, this would require an attitude of stoic acceptance of whatever comes along on part of the determinist, and

no such attitude is exhibited by the atheists. They passionately strive for far-reaching social changes and expect rational people to be persuaded by their arguments – an attitude that requires a belief in free will to be sensible.<sup>3</sup>

There is an even deeper problem with determinism. If even human thoughts are predetermined by other causes, then also the belief in determinism itself has been predetermined. Thus the determinist would have to admit that his belief in determinism is not the result of a rational argument, but a consequence of unknown causes. Thus, while believing in determinism, the determinist admits this belief to be a result of a mechanical process, as opposed to a conscious and rational search for truth. Moreover, truth is generally conceived of as being demonstrable to everyone, but according to determinism, one believes whatever he is determined to believe. A rational demonstration – a prerequisite of calling a statement true (cf. Strauss 2006, p. 145 [emphasis original]: philosophy requires that truth “must be made manifest, or *demonstrated*”) – thus becomes impossible. If the truth of determinism is not demonstrable, one is not allowed to call it “truth” at all. This shows the paradoxical and potentially self-contradictory character of determinism: in affirming the truth of determinism one simultaneously denies that such a truth-claim can be made at all.

The second basic feature of the atheistic worldview is the belief that all people ever strive for is pleasure. From this they argue that the best society would be one that allows for greatest possible pleasure the greatest number – which is the root of their argument for permissive liberalism. The flaw of this doctrine is that it offers no way of differentiating between the acceptable and the harmful pleasures; thus if someone derives pleasure from rape or murder, these pleasures are morally just as acceptable as the pleasure of playing chess with a friend. The atheists find this prospect repulsive, of course, and they sincerely support the prosecution of violent crime, justifying it by saying that harming others is immoral.

Yet from the perspective of the hedonistic rapist, this makes no difference: he just needs to be clever enough to avoid punishment. The atheists do not offer an

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<sup>3</sup> In his book *Freedom Evolves* (2003), Daniel Dennett tries to establish a compatibilist approach to the question of free will. However, there is a strong possibility that he nevertheless extinguishes free will from anything but the most personal level. Cf. what Kenan Malik (2003) writes about the example of the baseball player in his review of the book: Dennett seems to claim that we have freedom because our desires make us resist outside circumstances. Yet this does not really establish human freedom. For Spinoza, a fellow determinist, "appetite, or desire, is the very 'essence' of man, and everyone is *determined* by it and in the same way" (Israel 2006, p. 667; emphasis added).

argument as to why harming others actually is immoral, or why one should value the good of society more than his own good when these two conflict. Morality is thus reduced to arbitrariness according to the principle “might is right”, and rape becomes wrong not because of its rationally demonstrable wrongness, but merely because those opposed to rape are powerful enough to enforce this sentiment of theirs. The atheists are apparently content with calling “moral” whatever the people decide is moral. This however begs the question of why they think religion immoral, given that most people are and have always been religious.

What these two cases show us is that if religion is irrational because it is self-contradictory (as asserted e.g. by d’Holbach [2007, §110; emphasis original]: “Theology might justly be defined the *science of contradictions*”), then the atheistic worldview might justly be considered just as irrational. Thus atheistic beliefs are, by their own standard, no better than the religious beliefs which they so vigorously denounce and oppose. It is clear that the origin of the atheistic hostility to religion has to be looked for not in the just wrath of the rational man, but elsewhere. Given the atheists’ concern with religious influence on the public life, it seems natural to look for it in the domain of politics.

### **Permissive liberalism revisited**

In the previous chapter I noted two opposing tendencies the atheists display in their political ideas: on the one hand we see the permissive liberalism that allows everyone to indulge in whatever pleasures he pleases as long as he doesn’t harm others, on the other hand their immense aggression against religion, culminating in Dawkins’ opinion that raising children religiously should be considered child abuse (and therefore presumably outlawed). Yet the right of parents to educate their children as they see fit is a hallmark of liberalism, and the solution offered by Dawkins (and implicitly by the others) is so radical that it trumps even the Communist attempts to root religion out of society, which have always been limited to the public sphere. Such an invasion to the private sphere can in no way be squared with the liberalism to which the atheists ostensibly subscribe: they do not subscribe to the basic liberal principle that “every encroachment, every threat to individual freedom and private property and free competition is called repression and is *eo ipso* something evil” (Schmitt 2007, p. 71).

This contradiction follows from the fact that the atheists' commitment to science is stronger than their commitment to permissive liberalism, and if these two values come into a perceived conflict, the atheists will uphold science at the expense of liberalism. We see that their commitment to liberalism is not genuine – that they don't believe a society guided by liberal principles to be the best society without qualification – but that they see liberalism as a mere tool for advancing their influence. They affirm liberal principles as long as there aren't any drawbacks in it, or when they can use them to attack religion. But science is vastly more important to them, both in itself and by the virtue of the power it gives to men. To this power also belongs the knowledge (since knowledge *is* power) of what the greatest pleasure is, and thus the knowledge of what the best life is.

From this we may conclude that the best society for the atheists is not a liberal one, but a technocratically controlled society, which only outwardly bears the marks of permissive liberalism, but would not tolerate any dissent against the scientific, "rational" rule – which by definition would be considered "irrational" (d'Holbach [2007, §182] thinks religion is "contrary to every principle of good sense", and Dawkins [2006, p. 323] compares the belief in young-Earth creationism to believing that two plus two equals five). This can be seen also in the atheists' opposition to what they see as ideological politics, with them proposing that policy should be guided by scientifically established facts and a rational cost-benefit analysis aimed at increasing human welfare (cf. *ibid.*, pp. 329-31). Were this process brought to its consummation, the power of science would be used to control the society, with results similar to those described in Huxley's novel *Brave New World*.

### **Enlightenment atheism and its enemy**

We see that despite the atheists' claims to rationality, their theories fall short of their own standard. This, however, leaves their fierce opposition to religion in all its forms seemingly groundless. We may find a hint in the way atheists attack religion, namely similarly to the liberal attack on politics. As Carl Schmitt (2007, p. 66) writes, the liberals

easily refute political phenomena and truths in the name of some autonomous discipline as amoral, uneconomical, unscientific and above all declare this - and this is politically relevant - a devilry worthy of being combated.

The atheists too refute the claims of religion in the name of the autonomous disciplines of science and morality (not particularly well, as we have seen), and do declare it “a devilry worth of being combated”. This according to Schmitt means that religion is their *enemy*.

As Schmitt (*ibid.*, p. 27) understands this term, the enemy “intends to negate his opponent’s way of life and therefore must be repulsed or fought in order to preserve one’s own form of existence”. And indeed, the rhetoric of religion being the “enemy” is present in all three atheists examined in this Thesis: for d’Holbach, priests are “the enemies of human reason” (cf. Israel 2011, p. 809); for Russell (2004, p. 17), Christianity and its churches are “the principal enemy of moral progress in the world”; and Dawkins (2006, p. 92; emphasis original) sees “the *real* war” between rationalism and superstition.

Here we enter the domain of the political, which is present anywhere one distinguishes between public friends and enemies. It is true that religion is strongly opposed to the hedonistic lifestyle the atheists extol, and presumably also practice, since it considers such a life sinful. The atheists, then, fight fire with fire: they understand religion as posing mortal danger to them and recognize it as their enemy which must be destroyed. This explains why they strive so much to propagate their views among the general public, and would not be satisfied with academic debates: their philosophy is a tool to be employed in the political struggle against religion.

The atheists are not concerned with the standard political notions of nation-states or ideological politics; instead their political commitment rests upon politicizing the very notion of religiosity, something that in itself (i.e. as long as it does not encroach upon personal freedoms) is unproblematic for the liberal understanding of society upon which the atheistic social ideals nominally rest. In this way Enlightenment atheism is akin to Marxism: as Marx did integrate “the many bourgeois parties on earth into a single order, on the one hand, and likewise the proletariat, on the other” and thus created “a mighty friend-enemy grouping” (Schmitt 2007, p. 74), so the atheists united men of reason (with themselves as their leaders) against the forces of unreason, to which all religion equally belongs. In d’Holbach’s (2007, §191) words, “all men of good sense should unite their efforts to combat error, seek truth, and especially to put to flight the [religious] prejudices”.

The final question this Thesis will address is where the atheistic struggle against religion would ultimately lead and what the consequences of the tensions between it and the liberal social order would be. Schmitt (2007., p. 23; quoting Jacob Burckhardt) believes such a social struggle is democratic in the sense of asking for “state control of the individual”, whereby it “blurs the boundaries between state and society”. As a result of this interpenetration of state and society, “heretofore ostensibly neutral domains – religion, culture, education, the economy – then cease to be neutral in the sense that they do not pertain to state and to politics” (ibid., p. 25). It is easy to see how this would be true of the atheistic struggle especially with regards to religion and education. What results is called “total state” by Schmitt, in which “everything is at least potentially political” (ibid., p. 22). Yet in such a state, even the constitutionally guaranteed freedoms would become a subject of constant political struggle. If liberal freedoms – that is, freedoms from interference from the state – can be abolished with regards to childrearing, there is no reason why they would be upheld in other situations when their abolition would be deemed necessary to further the enlightening of mankind.

The atheists, provided they had enough power to make manifest their vision of the world, would have to choose whether they wish to preserve the free society at least in the form in which it exists now, or would destroy it in order to destroy their enemy, religion. The exposition of their beliefs this Thesis has offered leaves little doubts they would choose the latter.



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## Resumé

Táto bakalárska práca sa venuje fenoménu ateizmu z filozofickej perspektívy. Jej základnou otázkou je, čo ateistom umožňuje popierať náboženský svetonázor, ktorý historicky formuje nazeranie na svet drvivej väčšiny ľudstva, čiže: čomu ateisti veria? Vychádza z predpokladu, že takýto radikálny odklon od bežného pohľadu na svet musí vychádzať z istých presvedčení, ktoré nemusia byť artikulované, ale napriek tomu tvoria základ tohto odklonu. Tieto základné presvedčenia ateistov odkrýva s pomocou interpretácie niekoľkých slávnych diel, ktoré ateisti spísali ako vyjadrenie svojho pohľadu na svet a zdôvodnenie svojej opozície voči náboženstvu.

Táto práca sa zaoberá výhradne moderným ateizmom. Nepopiera, že ľudia, ktorí boli nazývaní ateistami, žili aj v skorších dobách, ale vtedy sa jednalo len o okrajové fenomény. Ateizmus je ako významná politická a spoločenská sila prítomný výhradne v modernej dobe. Táto práca sa obmedzuje na ateizmus osvietenскеj tradície, ktorý je starší a zároveň v súčasnosti omnoho vplyvnejší ako iné druhy ateizmu (napr. marxistický alebo Nietzscheho).

Cieľom práce je na základe interpretácie vybraných diel osvietenského ateizmu preukázať, že tento ateizmus je viac ako púhe odmietanie viery v Boha a náboženskej tradície: že osvietenský ateizmus tvorí úplný a svojbytný svetonázor, ktorý má čo povedať aj v oblastiach etiky či politiky. Zároveň chce ukázať, že tento svetonázor je historicky konzistentný, teda že jeho základné body boli sformulované už v 18. storočí a odvtedy sa zmenili len minimálne.

Kapitoly 2 až 4 sú interpretačné: venujem sa v nich analýze knihy *Zdravý rozum* od baróna d'Holbacha, prednášky *Prečo nie som kresťanom* od Bertranda Russella, a knihy *Boží blud* od Richarda Dawkinsa. Ich cieľom je vyložiť čitateľovi vnútornú logiku týchto diel a domyslieť ju do dôsledkov, ku ktorým vedú, ako aj poukázať na (nielen) argumentačné podobnosti medzi nimi. Okrem toho sa v týchto kapitolách nachádzajú aj náznaky kritiky ateistických argumentov, ktorá bude dôkladne rozpracovaná v neskorších kapitolách.

Jadro práce tvoria záverečné dve kapitoly. V prvej z nich sumarizujem tézy, pod ktoré sa podpisujú všetci traja mnou analyzovaní ateisti, a týmto spôsobom

syntetizujem základné presvedčenia, ktoré tvoria kostru ateistického svetonázoru. Následne pristupujem ku kritike tohto svetonázoru. Jeho dve hlavné premisy – mechanistický materializmus, ktorý podľa ateistov popisuje fungovanie celého vesmíru a hedonizmus ako základ ich etického myslenia – sa ukázali byť argumentačne nepodložené. Čitateľ ateistických textov je tak postavený pred voľbu: ber, alebo nechaj tak. Tento prístup je však v princípe identický s vierou, ktorú ateisti veľmi hlasno odsudzujú ako neschopnosť používať rozum. Ich kritika viery v Boha taktiež stojí na hlinených nohách, keďže ateisti nedokážu presvedčivo dokázať jej iracionalitu.

V poslednej kapitole pokračujem v kritike ateizmu. Ukazujem, že premisy materializmu a hedonizmu sú tak, ako sú použité v ateistických dielach, vnútorne protirečivé, a teda že osvietenský ateizmus je iracionálny podľa tých istých kritérií, na základe ktorých vyhlasuje za protirečivú náboženskú vieru. Ateistické nepriateľstvo k náboženstvu teda zjavne nemá filozofické opodstatnenie, a preto jeho pôvod hľadám v politickej rovine.

Poukazujem na konflikt medzi slobodou užívať si akékoľvek mysliteľné rozkoše, ktorú ateisti nemajú problém nikomu priznať, a ich útokmi na náboženstvo, ktoré vrcholia Dawkinsovým vyhlásením, že náboženská výchova detí by mala byť považovaná za zneužívanie detí. Prvý z týchto postojov vychádza z liberálneho konceptu súkromnej sféry, druhý ho popiera. Toto ukazuje, že ateistická podpora liberálneho spoločenského zriadenia nie je bezpodmienečná, ale môže byť suspendovaná v mene vyšších cieľov, akým je napríklad boj s náboženstvom, ktoré považujú za stelesnenie iracionality.

Náboženstvo je teda pre ateistov podľa terminológie Carla Schmitta *nepriateľom*: entitou, ktorá ohrozuje ich spôsob života a ktorá musí byť zničená, aby mohol ateizmus byť zachovaný. K dosiahnutiu tohto cieľa sa však nezdráhajú narušiť základ liberálnej spoločnosti: rozdelenie na verejnú a súkromnú sféru. Tento prístup by v konečnom dôsledku viedol k rozpadu liberálneho systému osobných slobôd a nastoleniu totálneho štátu, v ktorom je všetko predmetom politického boja.