

THE TABLE BRIEFING: THE NEW ATHEISM AND THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

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THE 9/11 TERRORIST ATTACKS ON NEW YORK and Washington, DC, instigated many changes—not only in American foreign policy, but also in the overall tone of international conversations about religion. Almost immediately, outspoken atheist authors like Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett, and the late Christopher Hitchens gained popularity among critics of all religions, focusing their angst on both Islam and Christianity. In public lectures and debates, however, the New Atheist conversations often turned to emotionally charged attacks on the Judeo-Christian conception of an omnipotent, omnibenevolent God in view of the evil and suffering present in the world.

Indeed, one need only turn on the television, access a news app, or drive past local flag poles—which so often seem to fly the American flag at half-mast—to be reminded of a fallen world filled with evil and suffering. What do Christians need to know in order to better engage a skeptical culture, especially amidst continued assertions that the existence of evil disproves the existence of God?

In a podcast called “Challenges to the Existence of God,” Darrell Bock, Glenn Kreider, and Doug Blount discuss objections popularized by the New Atheism, concerning the problem of evil. The following is adapted from their conversation. It defines the New Atheism and highlights three key points from the conversation.

WHAT IS THE NEW ATHEISM?

“The New Atheism” refers to the beliefs of naturalists with an affinity for the views of Friedrich Nietzsche who often espouse ideas popularized by atheist authors like Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett, and Christopher Hitchens. These atheists hold that God does not exist and that this is a realization worthy of celebration. Blount characterizes the New Atheism as a movement

that continues in the spirit of Nietzsche, while confidently focusing its objections to religion on Christianity:

Blount: Prior to Nietzsche, the atheist attitude was typically one of regret. The view was “Well, there isn’t God and that’s unfortunate. [It] would be nice if there were.” What you have with Nietzsche is a view according to which God’s non-existence is actually a good thing, something in fact to be celebrated. . . . I think you also have a level of vitriol and anger and criticism from the New Atheist directed toward people of faith—particularly Christians—that has seldom been seen in the past.

NATURALISM AND MORALITY

Amidst condemnations of religion in general, the New Atheism has primarily targeted the Christian conception of an omnipotent, omnibenevolent God. One of the main challenges to the existence of God is the problem of evil and suffering in the world. Bock voices how the New Atheist version of this classic objection tends to carry a note of sarcasm when directed towards a Christian:

Bock: If God has created this kind of world with this kind of mess . . . God is responsible for that. . . . Surely he could have done a better job. . . . We wouldn’t give him a passing grade on this. And for you to believe that kind of God exists who fails so badly at this—that really is inexcusable.

Bock then follows with a challenge to the atheist position that seems to undercut the objection as soon as it is expressed. That is, on a naturalistic worldview, there is no basis for objective moral values and duties. Indeed, if everything is ultimately reducible to physical processes, it seems difficult to build a moral foundation that does not end up in subjectivism. He captures the force of this with a rhetorical question:

Bock: If there is no basis for morality, if everything is a [feature] of natural processes in a material world, then where is the case for the theodicy argument that the New Atheist makes?

Blount: To the extent that you deny there is a God, you’re not entitled to the very notion of evil that is typically brought to bear in the argument from evil against God.

Furthermore, this presents the atheist position with yet another challenge: The Problem of Good. That is, the challenge of finding a sufficient moral grounding for the notion of goodness.

Blount: Atheists want to claim that theists have a problem of evil, but it seems to me that atheists have a problem of good as well as evil, and this is yet another area where the New Atheists part company with Nietzsche, and frankly, I think Nietzsche sees things more clearly than they do.

Nietzsche very clearly understands that if you have no God, you have no basis for objective morality. Now Nietzsche's willing to bite that bullet. He's willing to give up objective morality and that's why he writes a book called *Beyond Good and Evil*. For him, the concept of goodness is just as vacuous as the concept of evil. So Nietzsche's quite clear, there's strength and there's weakness.

Bock: So if there's no God, there's no good.

Blount: Yes. There is no good. And it strikes me that Nietzsche is right about this.

WHY DOES GOD ALLOW EVIL?

Despite these challenges to the atheist position, one question remains troubling for many believers: Why does God allow evil? Blount, Bock, and Kreider turn their conversation to this topic, noting the role of human finiteness in reaching a biblical conclusion on God's purposes for allowing suffering.

Blount: It's important first of all to think carefully, of course, about what the Scriptures have to say about God's reasons for allowing evil. To be frank here, it seems what the Scriptures basically say is that God has chosen not to tell us. It strikes me that this is in fact one of, if not *the* fundamental point in the book of Job.

Job, in the midst of incredible suffering cries out, "God, why?" and God's response is basically to remind Job, "Hey, you're not me. I'm me. You're not, and who are you to think that you would understand if I explained?" Now, I don't think that's as harsh as it might initially sound because I think underlying that divine response is an invitation to Job to trust God. "Job, you want to understand. I could tell you but you wouldn't understand—so trust me."

And I think it's clear from chapter 42 and the way the book ends that Job gets that point. He says in the end, "I spoke of things too wonderful for me to know." I think it's important to acknowledge up front as Christians, if the question on the table is why in fact does God allow evil? The truth is we don't know. God has chosen not to tell us

So the question is this, from the fact that we can't see what God's reason for allowing evil is, does it follow that we should conclude He doesn't have one? As far as I know, the reasons that an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good Being might have for allowing evil are not things I necessarily ought to expect to be able to see.

Bock: Because my field of vision is much thinner.

Blount: Absolutely. And so just on the face of it, the mere fact that I can't figure out why God allows some of the things to happen that He does, or maybe most of the things that happen that He does, is not warrant for the conclusion that He's got no such reasons, or even worse that there is no such God. And I think that's a point worth making up front.

Kreider: I would also want to say there, Doug, and you would agree, that many Christians have not helped our case by in fact speaking for God or, even more troubling, attributing to God that which is not good, attributing to God the cause of evil. . . . We have to be very clear that evil does exist and that evil is somehow part of God's plan for reasons we don't understand—He hasn't told us. But God was never the cause of evil and making that statement clearly in a world where sometimes, for whatever reason, people are saying the opposite, is incredibly important. . . .

I like the way Calvin put it when he said that we can know that what happens is part of God's plan for His world, but *why* He did such and such, we don't know. . . . If God is good and evil exists, then God will one day do something about evil, and we have an eschatological hope that evil and all of its effects will one day be removed. So there is a redemptive work of God, and He is acting redemptively in a fallen world.

EVIL, SUFFERING, AND RELIGION

Still, some followers of the New Atheism tend to lump all religions together, without distinguishing the Christian perspective from other voices in the religious community. How can a Christian respond to the charge that extremist groups have violated human rights and liberties based on religious motivations? Kreider and Bock caution against allowing a false dichotomy that downplays the uniqueness of the Christian faith.

Kreider: Another constant theme in these guys is the degree to which religion has been used to remove freedom—has been used to oppress, and has been used to destroy. I think there's a

real sense that Nietzsche is a good place to start the description of New Atheism. But 9/11 set this trajectory in a whole new path. And over and over again, Harris and Hitchens and Dawkins—I think Dennett does too—keep coming back to what we saw on 9/11. . . . That's not Christianity. That's not the God we worship and serve. But that really is a major factor that's driving their thinking.

Bock: So part of what I'm hearing you say . . . is that when we allow the discussion to be about religion in general, we lose the ability to particularize about the differences between faiths as we talk about theism versus atheism. And that actually is a very important part of this conversation, to not lose the differentiation that exists within theism on some of these themes.

Kreider: Yes, we don't want to have the conversation in a way that it's atheists against all religions. Christianity is not just one of many religions.

Beyond this, however, it seems that the atheist who raises this challenge must ignore the corresponding self-referential implication. Blount follows up on this point by highlighting the fact that atheism is not exempt from charges of having caused harm. A survey of the twentieth century demonstrates that totalitarian regimes have perpetuated unspeakable evils not only in the name of, but utterly consistent with, a naturalistic worldview. Indeed, the human heart is capable of great evil, but this is especially pronounced in the historical record of institutionalized atheism.

Blount: A point worth making as well is this one: Is it true that horrible things have been done in the name of religion? Of course it is. And is it true that there are some horrible things that have been done in the name of Christ? Absolutely. But let's not pretend there haven't been horrible things done in the name of atheism. If what we're concerned about is the potential wickedness and the potential horror of totalitarian regimes, let's not pretend that religiously minded people have a corner on the market.

Bock: One of the quotes I read last night . . . goes something like "Man has killed his thousands, but religion has killed tens of thousands." . . . [But] I look at the record of the last century, and I look at the wars that were generated, not for religious reasons but for other reasons: For nationalistic reasons, for racist reasons—just put a whole other set of categories in there

. . . The example that popped into my mind was the Holocaust.

The Holocaust was a product in which religion—if I can say it this way—was the victim. It took it on the chin in the Holocaust. Because someone was a particular race and held a particular religion, the goal was to wipe them off the face of the earth. And that wasn't religiously motivated; that was motivated by something else. If we're going to rank the most horrific things that have happened in our recent memory, certainly the Holocaust makes 9/11 pale in comparison . . . "Religion has killed thousands, but humanity at its worst has killed tens of thousands."

Kreider: And most of these folks would agree with us on that and would repudiate very similarly. So it's a place where in the midst of a vitriolic attack, in the midst of great conflict to say, "We're on the same page here." None of us wants to be a defender of the misuse of religion—any religion—and so we do have some common ground here in which we can stand.

Perhaps this common ground may allow space for a conversation on the nature and origin of morality, as well as the universal outcry against all kinds of injustice and oppression. In the end, God can have morally justified reasons for allowing evil, even if those reasons remain unknown to finite humans. Furthermore, the atheist alternative provides no basis for objective moral values and duties. Moreover, it leaves one with a second problem: The Problem of Good.

Despite vigorous assertions from followers of the New Atheism, evil does not disprove God. Christians can persevere through all kinds of trials, holding fast to the words of Jesus: "I have told you these things so that in me you may have peace. In the world you have trouble and suffering, but take courage—I have conquered the world" (John 16:33, NET).

To view the complete series or download transcripts of "The New Atheism" and other Table Podcasts on a variety of theological, ethical, and apologetic topics, visit <http://www.dts.edu/thetable>.

Suggested podcasts:

- How to Function as a Christian in a Shifting Culture
- Applying Biblical Ethics to Hot-Button Issues
- Historical Adam and the Ancient Near East



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