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Geoffrey Berg's *The Six Ways of Atheism*

Book Review by Jeff Stueber

Throughout history there have always been people who wish to disprove the existence of a deity, and Geoffrey Berg is a recent contributor to this quest. Berg, a graduate of England's Cambridge University, claims to have "absolutely" disproved "the existence of God, logically and simply." His book, *The Six Ways of Atheism: New Logical Disproofs of the Existence of God* (so named to contrast with "The Five Ways" of St. Thomas Aquinas, who attempted to prove the existence of God using five different arguments — five ways), was published in 2009.¹ In it Berg presents six "new or improved" arguments to disprove the existence of God by simple logical means "that practically everybody can understand."

1. Publisher unknown. Summaries of Berg's six logical arguments against the existence of God are published on a website dedicated to the book and its contents at <http://www.the-six-ways-of-atheism.com> (accessed September 30, 2010). All citations from this book will have page numbers noted in the text.

One might expect that something so grandiose as an attempt to disprove God's existence would require more than a mere 175 page self-published paperback — especially since Christ's resurrection and the creation of the universe lurk in the background to upset the atheist's apple cart. It is important to note that Berg's arguments are all merely philosophical; neither scientific nor historical arguments are featured. So, after being promised an intellectual buffet at the beginning of this book, we are left still hungry with barely anything to eat.

The author calls his first offering the "aggregate of qualities argument," using statistics to undermine the very possibility of God's existence — not only the Christian God, but the existence of any god at all. Berg writes:

So there are so many possible versions of religion that by the sheer laws of chance nobody can have any sensible hope of believing in the correct type of religion and the correct version of God even if God were to exist. Such is — and should be — the power of numbers and arithmetic to produce a valid argument. The sheer logic of statistics properly applied can indeed amount to an overwhelming and valid argument that throws light upon what may otherwise be a very confused situation. In essence the aggregate of qualities argument works to throw light on the likelihood or otherwise of God existing by using an arithmetical, statistical analysis of the topic. [pp. 27-28]

Atheists, of course, do not take such an argument seriously because they believe that life originated spontaneously — despite the overwhelming odds against it happening all by itself. I, a creationist, am a person of numerous characteristics whose existence is very unlikely. Yet here I am! This must mean that the existence of very unlikely things is possible.

However, Berg begins his argument in the wrong place. The traditional Christian position is that God is not an aggregate of parts which are assembled in such a way that we can calculate the probability of his existence. And if one begins in the wrong place, one is bound to end up in the wrong place as well.

Next Berg claims that we cannot, in principle, even understand or comprehend God. His analogy

to explain this argument is the jigsaw puzzle of the whole earth. If we did not have a complete picture of the earth, we would not be able to assemble the picture. Given our mortality, we would not be able to recognize immortality because we could never be sure that any given being was actually immortal. Berg summarizes: "The comprehension, mortality, and power gulf between us and a potential God is so great that we humans lack, inevitably lack, the means to identify God even if God exists" [p. 52].

If we apply this same argument to evolution, we run into precisely the same difficulty. Evolution can just as easily be portrayed as a jigsaw puzzle which cannot be comprehended because nobody can exist throughout the entire life of earth's history to see the earth's evolution. We can, following Berg's own example, only comprehend a small piece of the cosmic evolutionary puzzle. So if one cannot comprehend God by viewing only a small piece of the puzzle, then, by the same logic, neither can one comprehend or believe in evolution. Scientific disciplines, let alone theological disciplines, never depend on anyone's ability to comprehend every facet of anything, for to do so would mire us in constant agnosticism.

The argument from evil also rears its ugly head. In this his fourth argument Berg says:

God, being by definition supremely good and omnipotent and our creator, would if he existed have created the best possible world. Yet we can be sure ... that the world taken as a whole throughout the ages is not the best possible world. Therefore it is logically shown that God cannot actually exist. Therefore as God cannot exist within the parameters of Logic, God cannot and does not exist at all. [pp. 82-83]

So this man who claims that we cannot in principle understand nor comprehend God now claims that he knows for sure that God would not create the best world. This is a horrible internal contradiction.

His last two chapters are his most developed, where his concern is a "potential" god who has the characteristic of omniscience. Berg's logic is this: Such a god could not conceivably know that he (or she, or it) is immortal because he is the only being that is god (by definition). Since our only knowledge comes from association with others, the only experience that a god could have about immortality would come from other immortal beings, and god would by definition be the only god like that; therefore such a god would not be omniscient. Therefore, no omniscient god can really exist because no god could really be omniscient.

Suppose that a god who has for many years been leading us to believe that he is immortal has in fact been lying to us about his being immortal. Does this somehow prove that god does not exist? It only means that either we, or perhaps even he, have been deceived. It does nothing to rule out god's existence. Neither is it logical to suppose that we can only have knowledge about ourselves from studying others. Were that true, then we never could have any knowledge about anything. In that case, all people are lacking internal knowledge about themselves and none of them can be trusted.

Omnipotence, says Berg, means that an almighty god is able to do anything and everything; yet to attribute omnipotence to a god would be as absurd as the god creating an object which he himself cannot lift, or creating a square circle.

Our Christian position is that God can do whatever he wills, but that he will only do that which is consistent with his character. Whether or not God can create square circles may be a matter for theologians with too much time on their hands to debate, but in no way provides a logical argument against the very existence of God.

To conclude, most of Berg's arguments are philosophical, internally contradictory, and without either logical or theological merit. This shows that not all intellectuals with fancy academic pedigrees are truly the most intellectual!

Other reviewers who like Berg's book have nothing really intellectual to say about it in their online reviews. For instance, consider this pre-scholarly review:

The reason atheists write books and discuss the existence of gods is because the idea of supernatural beings is nonsense and faith heads go around trying to conform the world to their personal idea of what they think their god wants and claim that not believing in their lies will cause torment. If religion relegated itself to private discussions, then we'd have nothing to discuss. We don't want anyone to come around and claim that an invisible, never before seen, or proved, being doesn't agree with our life choices and therefore we are evil and will be forced to live according to these claimed rules.²

2. The comment posted June 17, 2009 9:02 A.M. by a man from Miami, Florida, who calls himself "Rice klowN" at <http://www.opposingviews.com/comments/sad--5> (accessed September 30, 2010).

So — the only reason that people invent religious tenets is to force others to conform to their wishes? That hardly suffices to explain the vast variety of religious beliefs held by people around the world throughout the ages! This is another example of atheists who write their critiques of religion without really understanding the religious. They would be better off seeking to understand rather than throwing rubber bullets. *LSI*

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