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What I Really Believe

Recently I asked Larry Moran of Sandwalk: what do you, as a New Atheist, really believe? To focus the discussion I asked eight fundamental philosophical questions. The insistent New Atheist claim has been that belief in the supernatural in any form- traditional Christian belief seems to rile them the most- is nonsense and has been shown to be such by modern science. New Atheists claim the mantle of logic and reason, as against irrationality and superstition of theists.

Dr. Moran replied to my questions, courteously, and as I have promised I will answer the questions in the same spirit. For clarity, I will give the original question, then Dr. Moran's answer, and then mine.

A little background on my perspective: I am a Roman Catholic. I converted from agnosticism to Catholicism about 6 years ago. My answers to the eight questions will draw on traditional Catholic teaching. Much about existence and God can be understood by reason, by philosophical reflection and by contemplation of nature, although some truths can only be discovered by revelation through Scripture. The fullest understanding is a harmony of both. Although my answers are from a Catholic perspective, I believe that many of them are in substantial agreement with those of my Protestant, Jewish, and Islamic friends. It's worth noting that the original forms of many of these answers were proposed by Aristotle, who was a pagan.

The philosophical views that I summarize have been held by most educated men for a couple of millennia. After Aristotle, this philosophical tradition was further developed in the High Middle Ages by Aquinas, Averroes, Maimonides and many others. Today it is the kernel of the New Essentialism school of philosophy of nature. This philosophy represents the foundation of Western thought.

Over the past couple of centuries these explanations have largely been forgotten by atheists and by scientists with a dogmatic materialistic view of nature, as classical philosophy did not prove congenial to a mechanistic atheist view of the world. It's an impoverished view; most New Atheists don't even understand the questions that the classical explanations have addressed. Unsurprisingly, the classical explanations have never been successfully refuted.

I am very much a theological and philosophical amateur. In my brief summary of my beliefs, I will do little justice to these remarkable insights.

1) Why is there anything?

Dr. Moran: I don't know and I don't really care. I'm quite happy to think that something has always existed but I'm not troubled by the fact that our space-time may just be an accident.

My answer: God created the universe as a free act of creation. God is Spirit and is not created; The Thomist paradigm of essence (what a thing is) and existence (that a thing is) can be applied by analogy to God: God's essence is existence. His existence is necessary. To ask 'what caused God' is nonsensical; God is the ground of existence.

2) What caused the Universe?

Dr. Moran: I don't know. In fact, I'm not even sure what you mean by "cause." I'm told by experts in the field of cosmology that there's no need to invoke a supernatural being to explain the origin of the universe but if you want to believe in a deist god then that's all right by me.

My answer: The most succinct form of the cosmological argument (it has many variants) is: 1) Whatever begins to exist has a cause 2) The universe began to exist 3) The universe has a cause. A *super*-natural cause is necessary for the creation of nature ex-nihilo. 'Nature created itself' is nonsense- it's a contradiction. From nothing comes nothing. What can we know about the Cause? Another version of the Cosmological Argument: Aristotle's Prime Mover argument (Aquinas' First Way) observes that all change in nature is a transition from potency to act. An infinite regress of potency to act is not possible in an essential series. The origin of change must be Pure Act. (The terms may be unfamiliar to the reader; I have discussed Aquinas' First Way in much more detail [here](#)). This Pure Act is uncaused, beginningless, changeless, immaterial, timeless, spaceless, and unimaginably powerful (by the the doctrine of the convertibility of transcendentals). As Aquinas observed, this is God.

God caused the universe, in a free act of creation.

3) Why is there regularity (Law) in nature?

Dr. Moran: I don't know. That's not my field.

My answer: Causes in nature are often directed to regular effects. Stones fall to earth, not to the sky; struck matches cause fire, not ice; etc. Regular effects in nature are teleology (final causes; vide *infra*). Teleology is the goal-directedness of nature. Teleology in inanimate nature is often described as Laws of nature, and often can be described mathematically (Newton's Laws, Maxwell's Equations, etc).

Aquinas, in his Fifth Way, observes that teleology in nature often involves the act of inanimate objects directed to an end. But whatever lacks intelligence can only be directed to an end by intelligence- 'This all men call God'. The Laws of nature- as manifest in final causes- are part of God's creation, and have their origin in Him.

4) Of the Four Causes in nature proposed by Aristotle (material, formal, efficient, and final), which of them are real? Do final causes exist?

Dr. Moran: That's two questions! I don't know the answer to the first one because I've never studied Aristotle. From the sound of the question, I haven't missed anything. As for the second question, I can't answer because I don't know what you mean by "final cause."

My answer: All four causes are real, and all are necessary to describe nature. The material cause is the stuff or matter of which the thing is made (e.g. the rubber in a rubber ball). The formal cause is the intelligible principle by which something can be understood (e.g. a rubber ball is soft, elastic, round, bouncy, etc). Material and formal causes of course refer to matter and form of classical metaphysics. Efficient cause is that by which something comes into being (the efficient cause of a rubber ball would be the guy in the factory who made the ball). Final cause is the end, goal or purpose of a thing (the final cause of a rubber ball is to provide a bouncy toy). Biological things have four causes as well. The material cause of the heart is muscle tissue, etc. The efficient cause of the heart is the embryological process by which it develops in the embryo. The formal cause is its organization into ventricles, atria, valves, etc. The final cause is to pump blood. Even inanimate objects have four causes, although often an inanimate final cause is the same as the formal cause. Final cause is fundamental to the other three causes (Aquinas: "the cause of causes"), because final cause determines material and formal cause and final cause makes efficient cause intelligible. Every efficient cause is directed to some end state, in the sense that 'cause' necessarily implies 'effect'.

Why do I belabor the four causes and particularly final causes in discussion of atheism? Final causes entail the potency/act distinction of hylemorphism ('matter-form'), which is the classical understanding of nature. Hylemorphism necessarily entails a Prime Mover/First Cause/Necessary Being, as demonstrated in Aquinas' First, Second, and Third Ways. Final cause is the basis for Aquinas' Fifth Way. The metaphysics of the four causes entails a very specific theism, which was one of the reasons that the four causes were truncated to two or three by enlightenment philosophers, who didn't like the theistic implications of classical philosophy. Formal and final causes were never proven wrong; they were stipulated as unnecessary, and over generations were forgotten. It was a profound mistake that has plagued science since; confusion about evolution and about the mind-body relationship and much of the 'strangeness' of quantum mechanics to modern sensibilities is largely a consequence of abandonment of classical metaphysics. Moderns generally don't understand any of this, and accept merely material and truncated efficient causes as adequate to describe nature. They are mistaken.

5) Why do we have subjective experience, and not merely objective existence?

Dr. Moran: Subjective experience seems to be what you perceive in your mind. I presume that's an epiphenomenon but it's a very pleasant one.

My answer: living things have a soul, which bears the same relationship to the body that form bears to matter. Plants have a vegetative soul, which mediates growth, reproduction, nourishment, etc. Animals have a sensitive soul, which mediates sensation, locomotion, memory etc, in addition to the powers of the vegetative soul. Humans have a rational soul, which has will, intellect, reason, etc, in addition to the properties of the sensitive/vegetative soul. Furthermore, humans have spirits, which are created in God's image. We are subjects and not just objects because of the powers of our rational souls and the fact that we are spiritual creatures.

So why do I ask about subjective experience in a list of questions about atheism? Nearly all New Atheists are materialists, and not only deny God but deny non-material reality. However, there are no material explanations for the subjective experience that characterizes the mind. In the materialistic paradigm, matter and its associated material and efficient causes cannot give rise to subjective first-person

experience. Nothing in materialism predicts or explains the emergence of 'I' from 'it'.

6) Why is the human mind intentional, in the technical philosophical sense of aboutness, which is the referral to something besides itself? How can mental states be about something?

Dr. Moran: What? What?

My answer: Intentionality is the ability of a mental state to refer to something other than itself. Intentionality is a hallmark of mental acts. It is the central issue in philosophy of the mind. Accepting that a mental state (e.g. imagining an apple) is instantiated in a brain state (e.g. an electrochemical gradient), how is it that an electrochemical gradient can be *about* an apple? The electrochemical gradient isn't an apple, it doesn't look like an apple, it's not connected to an apple, etc. In the materialist paradigm, an electrochemical gradient can't be *about* anything. It just is.

Classical theism offers an elegant solution to the problem of intentionality. In fact, the solution was so obvious to classical philosophers that intentionality wasn't even recognized as a problem until classical understandings of the soul were abandoned several centuries ago. In classical philosophy, the mind, which is an aspect of the soul, is a form, and can grasp the form of an object. When I am thinking of an apple, the form of an apple exists in the apple and in my mind at the same time. The form is defined as the intelligible principle of the apple, and when I think of the apple the intelligible principle of the apple is in my mind. Intentionality is easily explained; my thought that is instantiated in my brain state refers to an apple because the form of the apple is grasped by- is actually taken into- my mind. The mind is also a form- Aristotle called it the "form of forms", in that it could contain the form of another substance without becoming that other substance. The power of the mind (a form) to contain within itself the form of the thing perceived is the origin of the word "information". We retain the language of hylemorphism, although we have largely forgotten the deep insights on which our language is based. Intentionality is no problem from the classical hylemorphic understanding of nature and of man. It is inexplicable by materialism. Materialism, which acknowledges only material and efficient causes, founders on intentionality. I discuss intentionality in more detail [here](#).

7) Does Moral Law exist in itself, or is it an artifact of nature (natural selection, etc.)

Dr. Moran: I don't think there's any such thing as "Moral Law."

My answer: Moral Law is objective, not merely subjective. Moral Law is "written in the heart" of men, and each of us feels an obligation to comply with it. We have differences in our intellects and wills, and thus differences in the extent to which we comply with the Moral Law. We are also spiritual beings, and we can choose good or evil. Moral Law is the manifestation of Divine Law, and compliance with the Moral Law represents a telos (final cause or purpose) of man's life.

The assertion that Moral Law is subjective or is a byproduct of evolution is incoherent at best, and has horrendous implications for mankind. As I noted above, materialism fails miserably to account for subjectivity, intentionality, and mental acts, so it fails as well to account for morality. Furthermore, if Moral Law doesn't exist independently to men, then it is the moral law of the strongest of men that will rule. The widespread understanding that Moral Law is objective, is God's Will, and applies to all men-to kings and paupers equally- has been the greatest check on tyranny in the West.

8) Why is there evil?

Dr. Moran: All animals exhibit a range of behaviors. Sometimes those behaviors

are clearly beneficial to themselves, or the group, and sometimes they aren't. There's no rule that says every animal always has to act perfectly all the time. Some humans, for example, would restrict a woman's right to choose and would discriminate against gays and lesbians. I wish those people weren't evil but their behavior isn't a big surprise to me.

Evil is the privation of good. It exists because we are a fallen race in a fallen world. Some aspects of human evil seem easily explicable to me: evil actions by men are the result of God's grant of human freedom. To choose good, we have the option of choosing evil. Natural evil (disease, natural disasters) is more problematic for me. The traditional theodicy that natural evil provides opportunity for courage and faith makes sense to me, although there are still aspects of natural evil (children with cancer, etc) that I find very hard to understand. I note that atheism and materialism offer no solutions at all. If mankind evolved by natural selection, we wouldn't even perceive the death of unrelated others as evil. It would be a real win- more offspring for me! Theodicy is difficult for some kinds of evil. However, atheism is even less satisfactory. It offers no explanation as to why we even call harm to unrelated others 'evil'.

That's what I believe. Note that these beliefs are entirely compatible with modern science; in fact, classical philosophy and classical theism is the source for modern science, which only originated in civilizations that embraced this classical view of the world. Some enlightenment philosophers moved away from some aspects of classical philosophy (e.g. final causes), but classical philosophy and classical theism remain the foundation of Western Civilization and of modern science.

My question remains open to New Atheists in the blogosphere: what do you believe? New Atheism has distinguished itself by what it denies. But it needs to be judged as well on what it affirms, and on how much insight it provides. The insight provided by an assertion may be measured by how much ignorance it demands. Is New Atheism really an intellectual advance, a more effective application of reason and logic to man's important questions? Or is it a step back, a loss of insight? My hope is that a comparison of the positive beliefs of New Atheists and the positive beliefs of traditional Christians will help readers to better understand both sides of the debate.

P.Z. Myers and others also answered the eight questions, and I'll review and critique them when I can.

Posted by Michael Egnor on October 25, 2010 1:47 PM | [Permalink](#)

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