

Defending Theism as if Science Mattered: Against Both McGinn and Feser

Steve Fuller
University of Warwick

Analytic philosophers at their best can almost make "ignorance is strength" appear to capture a virtue. Colin McGinn may not know much about theology, but he knows what he believes, and that is very helpful in the case of "atheism," a term that on its face connotes a defiance of religious authority but not much else very clearly. After all, some self-avowed "atheists" might not know whether God exists but are certain that priests do not speak for this possible entity. Enlightenment religious attitudes, including several strands of dissenting Christianity, as well as agnosticism, all fall comfortably under this category. However, McGinn is not simply declaring his independence from clerical dogma but outright denying the existence of God, as he would deny the existence of any other entity that fell below the requisite standard of reason and evidence.

It is too bad that McGinn did not articulate the epistemic standard below which belief in God falls. Instead he gave us a phenomenology common to the experience of disbelief and a set of entities (Santa Claus, Greek gods, ghosts, goblins, etc.) that equally failed to meet the grade. It is difficult to know what to make of this set because the entities differ so much in terms of how people came to believe in them and then came not to. All that these entities seem to have in common is that some ideal epistemic agent (*aka* Colin McGinn) would not believe in them.

Here one might ask three questions of whatever standard on which McGinn might be basing his belief in God's non-existence:

- (1) Is McGinn's atheism consistent with his normal epistemic standards? In particular, does he hold belief in God's existence to the same standard as, say, belief in one of the more peculiar but putatively universal

entities or forces propounded in contemporary physics, evidence for which comes from multiple indirect sources, including compatibility with other presumptively true theories?

My suspicion is that McGinn probably holds belief in God to a higher standard than that, perhaps because of what he takes to be the "unconditional" nature with which belief in God is held by believers, or perhaps what he takes to be the much greater stakes involved in holding a belief in God.

- (2) Has McGinn taken into account other beliefs that he holds that presuppose the existence of God, specifically, the monotheistic deity of the Abrahamic tradition that appears to be his main target for disbelief? Can he continue to hold those beliefs on a rational basis if he does not believe in God?

The specific belief I have in mind is in the ultimate efficacy and significance of scientific inquiry. From a strictly Darwinian standpoint, the enormous value and resources that humanity has placed in a physics-driven agenda to obtain knowledge of reality far beyond the scale and scope required for our reproductive survival is very puzzling, not to mention increasingly risky, as the fruits of that knowledge are applied to the life-world (e.g. nuclear energy).

The assumption throughout has been that the more we know about everything, the greater advantage we shall have in the cosmos. Again from a Darwinian standpoint, this assumption is far from self-evident, not least in terms of "the cosmos" as our natural frame of reference. However, it is reasonable to think humanity might be up to the task, at least as a collective project, if

each of us possesses an intelligence very much like that behind the presumed cosmic order. But if such a belief, that we are created "in the image and likeness of God," is dismissed (because the deity in question is deemed not to exist), then it is not at all clear why we should continue to hold science in such high esteem. Of course, the bits of science most directly connected to technologies whose material benefits to *Homo sapiens* can be demonstrated in the short-to-medium term are salvageable in a post-theological, Darwinized world, that is, if they do not create more problems than they solve (which is what many Darwin-inspired ecologists fear). But to be fair to McGinn, he has form in refusing to defer to science as the final epistemic arbiter in matters of mind. Indeed, he may be the most explicit of the "new mystesian" philosophers who deem consciousness, by virtue of its first-person character, to be beyond the reach of natural science.

(3) Is McGinn's disbelief in God reversible in light of some evidence or reasoning that might be presented in the future?

Given the ease with which McGinn transitions from denying God's existence to proposing a serviceable discursive context for fictional entities such as God, I suspect not. Indeed, he seems more concerned with explaining what he means by his denial of God's existence than with justifying the denial itself. Thus, his atheism does not emerge from the elimination of God as one of several alternative hypotheses for the character and/or extent of order in nature, as one might expect of a devotee of Bayesian statistical inference, Peircean abduction or Putnamian inference to the best explanation. Perhaps McGinn's curious dogmatism reflects his not thinking that anything of value to him might hang on the existence of one intelligible, universal God. And if McGinn holds the epistemically diminished view of science that I attributed to him above, such a stance would make sense. Rather like David Hume, McGinn might be happy to see *both* science and theology suffer an epistemic demotion insofar as they attempt to transcend what is generalizable from experience. However, the question remains whether McGinn's inability to recognize

evidence for the distinctive workings of divine agency means that his beliefs do not presuppose that there are such workings. After all, if McGinn is already motivated not to believe in God, beyond what the evidence alone suggests, he may easily overlook his own cognitive dependency on theism.

To his credit, McGinn recognizes that contemporary atheism relates to Abrahamic monotheism much as the latter historically related to the various polytheisms it supplanted. But the lessons run deeper than he thinks. In particular, the Abrahamic religions promised to bring an empowering sense of focus to the disparate beliefs of the polytheists they converted and/or conquered. This was originally most explicit in the case of Islam, part of whose mission was to draw all human knowledge into a theologically coherent package that could be used to spread the Word. The practice was, of course, adopted by the Christians starting in the 12th century, and then carried forward into the modern post-Newtonian projects to unify the sciences, which have been increasingly justified without recourse to the Christian theological overlay that, say, Edward Feser continues to import from Thomas Aquinas.

The vehemence with which the "New Atheists" oppose the Abrahamic faiths speaks to the animus of this lineage: A completely godless world is nowadays held to provide greater focus and power for humanity than a god-filled one. Yet, such a claim must sound strange to those familiar with thinkers from the past who might have been reasonably called "atheists", namely, Epicureans and sceptics. Their general message was that human sanity lay in abandoning godlike delusions of knowledge and control (Fuller 2010: chap. 6). Yet, many of the key explanatory concepts of the natural sciences to which New Atheists such as Richard Dawkins routinely appeal are themselves secular descendants of historic attempts at fathoming divine agency. Ironically, it may be all too easy for Dawkins to find God a superfluous concept because the operation of natural selection on genetic information captures exactly the sense of organic adaptation that a natural theologian such as William Paley would have attributed to God's handiwork (Fuller 2008: chaps. 4-5).

Indeed, contrary to some of the stereotyping of today's intelligent design theory (usually by its opponents but sometimes by its friends), Paley did not believe that God's plan could be simply read off the morphology of organisms. Indeed, he was an early supporter of fellow cleric Thomas Malthus, whose controversial population views appeared to operationalize the idea of each individual's life as a divine trial, the prototype of Darwin's theory of natural selection (Fuller 2010: chap. 7; Fuller 2011: chap. 4). Thus, while Dawkins (like Darwin before him) may not find Paley's rather heartless deity a fit object of worship, Paley himself would have no problem seeing the outworking of the divine plan in modern evolutionary theory.

This point speaks to whether McGinn can so easily escape the legacy of theism without drastically altering human epistemic aspirations. So called "New Atheists" retain the high epistemic ambitions of the old natural theologians, whereas the refusal to entertain any such ambitions was the therapy administered by the more skeptical atheists of antiquity, the modern legacy of which passes through Hume. These older style sceptics are properly called "post-theistic" in that they have truly "got over" God in the way one might get over a destructive personal relationship. Unlike Dawkins, they do not then proceed to replace the old object of desire with something having almost exactly the same properties. McGinn's discourse equivocates between the ancient and contemporary forms of atheism in a way that places his "post-theistic" credentials in doubt.

Nevertheless, as my critique of McGinn equally suggests, I do not buy into Feser's self-serving, question-begging construct, "classical theism," or his corresponding charge that McGinn is "pre-theistic." My guess is that in keeping with a certain strand of Catholic sophistry, Feser wants to banish the very idea of atheism as conceptually incoherent, and that self-avowed "atheists" are simply people who have yet to master the classical theist's way of making sense of God. I doubt that McGinn would take seriously such a high-handed attempt at metaphysically pre-empting atheism.

However, Feser's distinctive rhetorical strategy

points to the theological concerns that make him want to ring-fence God from serious epistemic contestation. He basically wants to rule out of the discussion those who would argue that divine qualities differ from human ones only by degree and not kind. Such a person, I include myself, holds that God is an infinite being, but the dimensions along which God is infinite are the same ones in virtue of which humans prove finite. In that respect, if you scale up all of our virtues indefinitely and imagine them contained within one being, then you have God, just like the best possible version of the triangles you see in nature and textbooks is the triangular form itself. Of course, in the latter case (to recall Feser's opening examples), this would not be Plato's or Aristotle's way of seeing things (Euclid himself may be a different matter) but it would be familiar from defenders of a nominalist approach to universals and an univocal approach to predication, starting with the high mediaevals Duns Scotus and Ockham and leading to Hobbes and Mill in the modern period. Indeed, it is the theological tradition whose bloody-minded literalness in envisaging God as the cleverest mechanic working with the most tools in the largest possible shop that animated the imaginations behind the 17th century Scientific Revolution.

Feser demonizes the nominalist tradition as "anthropomorphic" and "personalist" in its conception of God, as if that were a kind of intellectual corruption, if not blasphemy, or some otherwise settled sacred truth. But truth be told, at stake here is a matter of how one interprets the contents and processes of one's own mind. While Feser is undoubtedly correct that an idealized triangle differs significantly from actual ones, including those drawn to represent the ideal, the key point is not the difference but the similarity. In effect, the ideal triangle serves as a goal or standard, against which actual triangles may be judged, so as to result in measures of distance and, by implication, progress towards realizing the ideal. It follows that actual triangles are not imperfect versions of some pre-existent ideal but works in progress towards reaching a vividly imagined ideal. The ideal triangle



exists for us more as a hypothesis than an indubitable *a priori* concept, let alone a metaphysical foundation.

While Feser, in good Thomist fashion, can logically accommodate a version of scientific inquiry within what he calls "classical theism," it is by no means clear that he is in any better position than McGinn to motivate its actual historical development, integral to which has been the ambition to "enter the mind of God," even when the scientists (e.g. Steven Weinberg, Stephen Hawking) officially profess a disbelief in God. The most theologically striking feature of this development, of course, is the epistemic efficacy of merely acting as if there were a "mind of God" to fathom. Such efficacy exceeds the edification and entertainment values that McGinn ascribes to a fictionalist endorsement of the deity, while also taking more literally than Feser the prospect of second-guessing a hypothesized deity's *modus operandi*. Indeed, on Feser's view, science

appears doomed to dwell in a shadow universe vis-à-vis the protected ontological zone reserved for theology. While this neatly tracks the modern political separation of state and church, it undermines any strong reading of the New Testament doctrine of *logos*, whereby through language humans partake of the deity's creative potential. Without such an interpretation, which is arguably more concerned with the Bible's literalness than its truth, Christians would not have been emboldened to make the great leap into the modern scientific world-view (Fuller 2010: chap. 5).

References

Fuller, Steve. (2008). *Dissent over Descent: Intelligent Design's Challenge to Darwinism*. Cambridge UK: Icon.

Fuller, Steve. (2010). *Science: The Art of Living*. Durham UK and Montreal CA: Acumen and McGill-Queens University Press.

Fuller, Steve. (2011). *Humanity 2.0: The Past, Present and Future of What It Means to Be Human*. London: Palgrave Macmillan