

Atheism's Best Arguments? (Part 1): David Bentley Hart

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Transcript - Long

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

David, you believe in God and argue for God's existence. Part of that is attacking those who would deny God's existence, atheists. So, when you hear atheistic arguments, what are your reactions to them?

David Bentley Hart:

It depends on how good they are. In recent years, we've seen a little cottage industry spring up in marketing very bad arguments for atheism, so, then my reaction is ill-concealed scorn, right?

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Let's just differentiate. Let's start with the bad arguments. What are some of those?

David Bentley Hart:

I mean, the sort of arguments you would find in Richard Dawkins in which he clearly misunderstands claims about ontological contingency and thinks you can conjure them away by having this efficiently comprehensive cosmology, or when he says something like, evolution answers the question of existence, that's actually something he says. I mean, you realize there that you're dealing with category errors so profound that they verge on the infinite. So, those are bad arguments. And in general, my list of fine atheist philosophers in the 20th Century is a small one. Mackey would probably be it, really. Sobel, in the English-speaking world. I think there was a greater age of atheism in the 19th Century. Profounder arguments, simply because they were based on a deeper knowledge of what they were attacking. Nietzsche. Nietzsche understood Christianity. Not every aspect of it. I mean, he had a distinctly Protestant view of it generally. But his attacks were an attack directly on the ethos and the self-understanding of Christianity.

On the whole though, I think the only really solvent atheist argument isn't one from modal logic or from any of the sort of questions that are typically classified in philosophy of religion as being about the existence of God. I think it's the argument from evil. You know, that's the one that I don't think can be – should be internally incoherent. That, you know, we exist in a world of monstrous evil and monstrous suffering, and the theist traditions, as one, tell us that behind all this is a God of infinite justice, mercy, love, and intellect. And there seems to be such an implausible contrast between experience and that claim that if nothing else, even if logically that doesn't do away with the notion of an absolute, it certainly seems to do away, or could do away potentially, with vast regions of the typical theistic picture of God.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

And in that, the argument from evil, which is the atheistic argument, it would be both naturalistic evil, which is non-sin, if you will, be it earthquakes –

David Bentley Hart:

But when a child dies of cancer.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Right. Or if you go back further, animal suffering during hundreds of billions of years of evolution, it was a continuous pain and suffering for animals. So, you have to deal with both of those. And so, how do you deal with that?

David Bentley Hart:

Generally, I try to avoid it.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

That shows it's a good argument if you try to avoid it.

David Bentley Hart:

Well, you see, as I say, it succeeds not at the level of the logic of ontology, but it definitely succeeds at the level of devotion and moral theology. All traditions, all of them, start from the assumption that there's something broken, something has gone wrong in creation and its relation to God that has either a moral or spiritual root. I mean, I've no patience for fundamentalists, so, obviously I don't believe that 6,000 years ago there was a specific transgression involving a snake. But I do believe that that and the other legends of the fall, which were sort of a universal human type of story, do touch upon a sense that the reality we experience, in all of its dimensions, even in those that in terms of cosmic history preceded the human, have to do with an original alienation from God, the nature of which is impossible to understand except in light of its negation, which would be reconciliation with God. But it's not an argument I ever try to slight or pass on. It is the one argument I never pretend can be swept away or defeated. And it's the one for which I hold the greatest respect, and the one that I find intermittently convincing myself.