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How Not To Be An Atheist: A Neoclassical Response to the New Atheism

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Abstract— The New Atheism is representative of a series of best selling post-9/11 books written by philosopher Sam Harris, biologist Richard Dawkins, philosopher Daniel Dennett, journalist Christopher Hitchens, and physicist Victor Stenger. These writings underscore the intellectual and moral shortcomings of religion, especially religion centered on worship of God. More aggressive than their predecessors, most of the “New Atheists” are not satisfied with disbelief in God. They claim that a commitment to science, reason, and morality is inconsistent with theism. Using as my point of departure the neoclassical philosophy of the logician-philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, the priest-palaeontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, and the philosopher-ornithologist Charles Hartshorne, I argue that the New Atheism is intellectually anaemic, interesting though it is as political activism. The New Atheists criticize a caricature of faith, offer inferior versions of old arguments, commit the creationists’ mistake of construing theism as a scientific hypothesis, and ignore sophisticated forms of belief in God.

Keywords— New Atheism, Neoclassical Philosophy, Process Theism, Shared Creativity, Whitehead, Hartshorne, Teilhard de Chardin, Victor Stenger, Metaphysical Claims, Scientism.

The voice on the other end was Sergeant Reed of Homicide.

“You still looking for God?”

“Yeah.”

“An all-power [sic] Being? Great Oneness, Creator of the Universe? First Cause of All Things?”

“That’s right.”

“Somebody with that description just showed up at the morgue. You better get down here right away.”

It was Him all right, and from the looks of Him it was a professional job.

— Woody Allen (1978) *Getting Even* p. 108

According to the *Times of London*, atheism was one of the biggest news stories of 2006. Daniel Dennett’s *Breaking the Spell* and Richard Dawkins’ *The God Delusion* helped to make it so. Sam Harris’s *Letter to a Christian Nation*, which was a follow up to his earlier book, *The End of Faith*, also topped the lists. Atheist bestsellers like Victor J. Stenger’s *God: the Failed Hypothesis* and Christopher Hitchens’ *god is not Great* (the eye catching lower case “g” is intentional) were to follow. These authors are the vanguard of what is being called the New Atheism or neo-atheism.

Each author, in one way or another, calls for an end to faith in the name of reason. The common thread connecting them is the belief that the deliverances of science and more generally an adherence to the methods of science are inimical to theism. Like the detective in Woody Allen’s parody who finds God in the morgue, murdered by a disgruntled scientist, so the sleuths of the New Atheism have concluded that God does not exist, and it is the success of reason and science that have finally put the ancient myth to rest.

Predictably, replies to the New Atheism are legion (e.g. Dawkins and Collins 2006; Plantinga 2007; McGrath 2007; Viney 2007b; Bowman 2007; McBain 2007; Bellah 2008; Aikman 2008). Dawkins keeps track of responses to his work on his website. Citing the line by W. B. Yeats—"But was there ever dog that praised his fleas?"—Dawkins and Dawkinsians refer to the responders themselves as *fleas*. It is a humorous, if demeaning, image; but perhaps the "fleas" should not protest, especially if they are philosophers. Socrates called himself a gadfly. He believed that his fellow Athenians had grown morally lazy and he was to be a public servant whose divinely appointed purpose was to remind them of the value of seeking virtue. The New Atheists pride themselves on their devotion to science, but if they have grown intellectually lazy, then we *fleas*—divinely appointed or otherwise—can encourage them to do better. In light of what I will say about the New Atheism, "fleas" could be read as an acronym: **F**allacies in the **L**ogic and **E**ristic of **A**theistic **S**cientism.

Since atheism is not new one may ask what exactly is new about the New Atheism. The consistent message of the *fleas* is that, as far as intellectual substance is concerned, the New Atheism is a parade of old arguments. After all, the New Atheists have not improved on the critiques of the Bible sprinkled throughout Voltaire's *Philosophical Dictionary* and in the second part of Paine's *The Age of Reason*. The New Atheists' skepticism about theistic arguments and their arguments against God's existence are mostly inferior versions of what one finds in Hume's *Dialogues*. The New Atheists' social comments on religion make many of the same points that were made more memorably by Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. Finally, they share Bertrand Russell's jaded view of religion, while adding examples to his list of the ills visited upon humanity by bad religion (1957, 24-47). On the other hand, Hitchens can be thanked for editing a new anthology of atheist and proto-atheist writings, from ancient times to the present, including excerpts from the New Atheists' works (2007b).

Despite the New Atheists' lack of originality, their popularity indicates that their frustrations strike a responsive chord. There is, to be sure, a new political climate: for example, the profound influence of the Christian right in government, medicine, and education. The New Atheists take

special delight in tilting at creationist windmills. On *this* issue, however, the New Atheists are allies with both Catholicism and most mainline Protestant denominations for they too have disavowed creationism and intelligent design as legitimate science. The horror of religiously inspired terrorism clearly casts a long shadow, as the subtitle of Harris's first book makes clear: *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason*. Terrorism apparently triggered Dawkins' anti-religious ire as well. He ended one of his public addresses by explaining that the events of September 11, 2001 had changed him. "Let's stop being so damned respectful," he fumed (Dawkins 2002). The specter of terrorism in the name of religion may be one reason why the New Atheists are not affected by angst over the death of God such as one finds in Dostoyevsky and Sartre. Nor is there any evidence of nostalgia for God such as one finds in Camus's later work. On the contrary, they are happy to be rid of the being that Dawkins characterizes as a "cruel ogre" (2006, 250).

One cannot help but admire—or at least be amazed by—the moral energy, evangelistic zeal, and audacious self-promotion of the New Atheists. Dawkins' explicit purpose is to invite fellow atheists to be as militant as he is. He advocates "atheist pride" based upon the supposed fact that atheism "nearly always indicates a healthy independence of mind..." (2006, 3). To be more precise, it is not simply a "healthy independence of mind" in which Dawkins takes pride; the source of a specifically *atheist* pride is in using one's intellectual powers to resist faith in *any sort of deity*. Dawkins argues that anyone who disbelieves in a god—Zeus, for example—is an atheist with respect to that god. For this reason, he remarks with devilish wit that he and his fellow neo-atheists simply disbelieve in one less god than traditional monotheists (2006, 53). Dawkins clearly intends his critique not to be concept-specific. He writes, "I am not attacking any particular version of God or gods. I am attacking God, all gods, anything and everything supernatural, wherever and whenever they have been or will be invented" (2006, 36). The tip-off that Dawkins' critique is more concept-specific than he realizes is in his use of the word "supernatural." The concept of God in terms of which he and other neo-atheists are most concerned to define disbelief is the *supernatural* creator who exists over against the natural, space-time, universe and who is disclosed in revelation, miraculously intervening in the natural world from

time to time (Dawkins 2006, 31; cf. Hitchens 2007a, 11-12, 41).

The idea of God as a supernatural creator is the most popular form of theism, but it is demonstrably not the only form worthy of consideration. More than forty years ago, Schubert Ogden put the point this way:

Among the most significant intellectual achievements of the twentieth century has been the creation at last of a neoclassical alternative to the metaphysics and philosophical theology of our classical tradition. Especially through the work of Alfred North Whitehead and, in the area usually designated “natural theology,” of Charles Hartshorne, the ancient problems of philosophy have received a new, thoroughly modern treatment, which in its scope and depth easily rivals the so-called *philosophia perennis* (1965, 56).

Hartshorne began using the expression “neoclassical” in his seventh book (1962), but the alternative to which Ogden refers is also called “process theism” and “process-relational theism” because of its emphasis on becoming, temporal flux, sociality, relativity, and evolution as metaphysically basic (Loomer 1971; Loomer 1987; Viney 2004). Arguably, the French scientist-priest Pierre Teilhard de Chardin belongs alongside Whitehead and Hartshorne as a co-founder of neoclassical theism (Viney 2006a); but his work has often been misunderstood by failing to take into account the fact that he felt obliged to work “underground” to express his metaphysical views (Viney 2006b).

Two of the New Atheists whose works I have cited are scientists (Dawkins and Stenger), but all of them revere science as the most reliable avenue to what is rationally acceptable in the way of belief. The founders of process metaphysics were themselves well schooled in the canons of science. Whitehead first became famous for his groundbreaking work in mathematics, logic, and the philosophy of science. Similarly, Teilhard was known throughout his life primarily as a major contributor to our knowledge of the evolutionary origins of humans (Aczel 2007). Finally, although Hartshorne is best remembered for his work in philosophical theology, his first book straddled the fields of psychology and philosophy (Hartshorne 1934) and he had a secondary expertise in ornithology (Hartshorne 1973). Hartshorne also

had a life-long interest in the relations of philosophy, religion, and science as evidenced by his published and unpublished responses to scientists he admired who had expressed an opinion on the theistic question—Carl Sagan, E. O. Wilson, and Stephen Weinberg (Hartshorne 1991, 1994; see also Sagan 1992 and Hartshorne 1995). Since the time of Whitehead, Teilhard, and Hartshorne, a cadre of philosophers and theologians has defended process theism as superior to atheism and to supernaturalism. Despite being a minority voice, neoclassical thinkers have been influential. As one might expect, given the grounding in science of neoclassicism’s founders, process thinkers have brought fresh perspectives to the problem of the interrelations of science and religion (e.g. Barbour 1990; Griffin 2000). In addition, process-relational thinking was largely responsible for dissolving the previous consensus within the philosophy of religion that an entirely absolute deity should be considered normative for theology (e.g. Hartshorne 1948). More importantly, neoclassical theism expanded the live options (in William James’s sense) for thinking about God and about God’s relation to the world beyond simplistic divisions like traditional theism, pantheism, deism, or atheism (e.g. Hartshorne and Reese 2000). Finally, it is worth noting that neoclassical thinkers have highlighted the advantages of a process hermeneutic for Scripture (e.g. Ford 1978; Gnuse 2000; Cobb and Lull 2005) and they have been at the forefront of discussions that concern the interface of theology with ecology (e.g. Cobb 1995), economics (e.g. Daly and Cobb 1994), and social justice (e.g. Pittenger 1976; Davaney 1981; Cobb 1982; Dombrowski 1988). To those energized by neoclassical perspectives, Hitchens’ declaration that religion spoke “its last intelligible or noble or inspiring words a long time ago . . .” (2007a, 7) rings hollow.

Since process theists remain a minority (more so in philosophy than in theology), it is possible to ignore their arguments without being accused of being ignorant, *even if one is*, or of arguing from false alternatives, *even if that is what one is doing*. However, the New Atheists’ attitude to alternatives to supernaturalism is a blanket dismissal of them as *unworthy of attention*. Stenger refers to “highly abstracted concepts of a god” developed by sophisticated theologians that would be unrecognizable to typical believers (2007, 112). Harris is more strident, stating that “religious

moderation [of which process theism is an example] is the product of secular *knowledge* and scriptural *ignorance*—it has no bona fides, in religious terms, to put it on a par with fundamentalism” (2004, 21). Unhappily, it is typical of the New Atheist polemic to expect fundamentalism to contain the best that religion can offer. In any event, those who accept neoclassical theism often began their religious journeys as “typical believers” (whatever that might mean), but they view their spiritual growth not as a loss of genuine faith but as a discovery (or a recovery) of it. Moreover, it would be fatuous to suppose they are ignorant of Scripture. Thus, neo-atheists should be encouraged to keep their minds open—a quality they admire in themselves—about alternative forms of theism. If they persist in ignoring the neoclassical alternative, perhaps they could refrain from belittling religious moderation. They could follow the example of A. J. Ayer, the chief spokesperson for logical positivism. After dabbling in Whitehead’s *Process and Reality*, Ayer reports that he found it “obscure” but that he had “enough respect for Whitehead to think there was probably more to it than [he] understood” (1977, 275).

The New Atheists are either unaware of or unconcerned with neoclassical theism. In either case, they have not done their philosophical or theological homework. They can be credited with rehearsing the case against fundamentalism, but the intellectual poverty of fundamentalism will not be news to most philosophers and theologians, least of all to those in the neoclassical tradition. On the contrary, the New Atheists should learn that fundamentalism and the biblical literalism with which it is associated are aberrations from the normative streams of Christian theology (Viney 2007a). The arguments of the New Atheists are a textbook example of the fallacy of arguing from a non-exhaustive disjunction, where one of the missing alternatives is a form of theism that is *at least* as metaphysically compelling, scientifically sophisticated, and theologically literate as any yet conceived. In my view, others have argued convincingly that the New Atheist case against the historically dominant and most sophisticated forms of supernaturalism is a dismal failure (cf. Crean 2007 and D’Souza 2007). My concern, however, is with what I see as New Atheism’s failure vis-à-vis neoclassical theism. (For those coming closest to the critique I espouse see: Ward 2006; Haught 2008; Cobb 2008).

A mainstay of the New Atheism is the incompatibility of faith and reason. The view of Sam Harris provides an interesting case study. He says that faith, in its ordinary scriptural sense, is “belief in, and life orientation toward, certain historical and metaphysical propositions” (2004, 65). He also maintains that persons are not free to believe something for which they have no evidence (2004, 62, 71). In the case of faith, however, Harris claims that the evidence is always insufficient. “The truth,” he assures his readers, “is that religious faith is simply *unjustified* belief in matters of ultimate concern.” He continues, “Faith is what credulity becomes when it finally achieves escape velocity from the constraints of terrestrial discourse—constraints like reasonableness, internal coherence, civility, and candor” (2004, 65). Thus, for Harris, faith is a type of belief whose evidence is woefully inadequate. Religious people are not generally delusional, he concedes, but their beliefs are. Accordingly, he suggests that “it is difficult to imagine a set of beliefs more suggestive of mental illness than those that lie at the heart of many of our religious traditions” (2004, 72).

What are we to make of such claims? Neoclassical thinkers certainly address matters relevant to faith in what Harris identifies as the “ordinary scriptural sense,” for they talk about historical and metaphysical propositions that are matters of ultimate concern; but they do not just talk about them, they *argue their case* and they are fully cognizant of the methods and deliverances of science, which Harris also champions (2004, 73-77). Harris is aware of theologians—he mentions Paul Tillich—who argue their case and thus deny, at least in practice, a strict dichotomy between faith and reason. Harris finesses this inconvenient fact with what might be called an argument from italics. He identifies those who “*really* believe” (2004, 13, 22, note the italics) in God as those who hold nonnegotiable ethical views and who are willing to die, to kill others, and to send others to be killed in the name of metaphysical absurdities. He claims that liberals and moderates in theology “don’t know what it is like to *really* believe in God” (2006, 83, again, note the italics). Apparently, in Harris’s universe, you cannot *really* believe in God unless you are a fanatic or willing to be one. What of those who are not willing to be fanatics because they believe in a God of unlimited love and forgiveness who demands the same of us? By Harris’s italics argument, they do not *really* believe

in God. Clearly, the definitional dog is here chasing its tail.

The element of truth in Harris's discussion is that faith indeed involves, in the words of John Haught, "a commitment of one's whole being to God" (Haught 2008, 5). One of the problems, however, with Harris's view is that it fails to account for the specific content of faith. For example, from a New Testament standpoint, the particular content of faith is the revelation of God as a being of unlimited love—in the pithy phrase of the first epistle of John: "God is love" (I Jn. 4:7). This statement serves at once as the metaphysical and ethical ground of Christian faith. The consistent message of Jesus is that one is to love God with one's entire being: heart, mind, soul, and strength, and to love one's neighbor as oneself (Mk. 12:29-31; Mt. 22:37-40; Lk. 10:25-28; cf. Jn. 13:34-35). Paul is in line with this thinking in his great hymn to love, which is a favorite at weddings. Paul ends with these words, "And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love" (I Cor. 13:13). Appealing to Harris's penchant for arguing from italics, we can ask: what would it mean to *really* believe in the God of love? At the very least, *really* believing in such a God is wildly inconsistent with the fanatical and violent behavior of religious extremists.

One may go further. The loving orientation towards life that Jesus advocates—apart from which a life of Christian faith is inconceivable—arguably includes the use of reason as an indispensable element. The first of the great commandments is that one is to love God with everything one is, *including one's mind*. If "mind" denotes our capacity to reason, to seek truth, to form theories, and indeed to engage in science, then the life of the mind is integral to the life of faith. Of course, neoclassical philosophy, precisely because it is philosophy, is not sectarian. Teilhard, it is true, was a Christian, but his metaphysical speculations are not derived from doctrinal statements. In any event, neither Whitehead nor Hartshorne were Christians and neither set out to build a Christian philosophy, although elements of Christian thinking are evident in their work. For example, Hartshorne always endeavored to keep love as the focus of his philosophy. He wrote to Edgar Sheffield Brightman in 1934 that he intended to show that all concepts in his metaphysics get their meaning from "*deus est caritas*" (Auxier and Davies 2001, 14). In the *Library of Living Philosophers* volume dedicated to him, Hartshorne

said that the basic clue in all of his thinking was love (Hahn 1991, 634). A few pages later, he explained that his "ultimate intuitive clue in philosophy is that 'God is love' and that the idea of God is definable as that of the being worthy to be loved with all one's heart, mind, soul, and entire being" (Hahn 1991, 700).

Harris's *petitio* against reasoned faith notwithstanding, the New Atheists insist that science puts the lie to what I am calling the particular content of faith. Even if God is characterized as unfailing love, this still entails that there is a being that is so characterized, in short that God exists. The New Atheists, however, agree with Hitchens when he says that "the metaphysical claims of religion are false" (2007a, 63). Dawkins and Harris agree that belief in God is delusional (Harris 2004, 72; Dawkins 2006, 5). Dawkins titles one of his chapters, "Why there almost certainly is no God." Stenger too says that "we can be pretty sure" that no such being as God exists (2007, 18). The New Atheists seem in basic agreement with Dawkins that theism is *best considered* as a scientific hypothesis (2006, 2, 50). Thus, Stenger's book is devoted almost entirely to a search for gaps in our scientific account of the world that might be filled by the explanation, "God did it." Finding no feasible candidates, Stenger announces the conclusion in the title of his book: *God, the Failed Hypothesis: How Science Shows That God Does Not Exist*. The New Atheists are not saying that everything is presently explained by science, but they are saying that (a) scientific explanations are the only explanations that count as legitimate explanations, and that (b) the God hypothesis fails as a scientific explanation. Anything God might have explained (e.g. an organism's fitness to its environment) is better explained in other ways (e.g. descent with modification and natural selection), so the explanatory value of God is nil. God is otiose.

There can be no doubt that some philosophers and theologians have used concepts of God to propose answers to questions raised in science. Not surprisingly, these are the favored targets of the New Atheists. Stenger, for example, canvasses the standard replies to the evolution-deniers and the proponents of intelligent design (ID), beginning with William Paley's watch-maker analogy and ending with Michael Behe's concept of irreducible complexity (Stenger 2007, 47-75). In this, he is preceded by Dawkins (2006, 119-134) and by

Hitchens (2007a, 73-96). Of course, equally convincing rebuttals of scientific creationism and ID, written by theists (Pennock 1999; Miller 1999; Lamoureux 1999), have been available for many years. For the most part, the New Atheists grudgingly applaud these efforts, but they are puzzled why their theistic allies do not take the next step and deny that God exists. Stenger puts the challenge best. He outlines what he calls “the generic argument” concerning God’s existence. The crux of the argument is that one assumes a concept of God for which “objective evidence” (Stenger means “scientific evidence”) can be found; if the evidence confirms God’s existence then one should conclude that God *may* exist; if the evidence disconfirms God’s existence, then one should conclude “beyond a reasonable doubt” that God as defined in the original hypothesis does not exist (2007, 43). Stenger concedes that he is crossing the admittedly fuzzy line where absence of evidence becomes evidence of absence (2007, 18). In general, the failure of an argument for X is not the same as an argument for not-X. If, however, one has reason to believe that the relevant evidence has been exhausted, the negative conclusion may be drawn. If you do not see a blue whale in your bathtub, it is usually taken as sufficient evidence that there is not one there to be seen. Stenger believes that, in the case of God’s existence, the relevant evidence has been exhausted; thus, his confidence that “we can be pretty sure” that God does not exist.

We may agree with the New Atheists that God’s existence fails as a scientific hypothesis. However, if the existence of God is *not* best considered as a scientific hypothesis or if scientific explanations are not the only legitimate explanations, then we *cannot* be pretty sure that God does not exist. It is well to remember that relatively few philosophers have framed the question of God’s existence in terms amenable to scientific testing or investigation. Plato’s arguments for the demiurge and the world-soul—which process thinkers often interpret as two aspects of a single deity (Hartshorne and Reese 2000, 38-57; Eslick 1982; Dombrowski 2005)—are not intended to be scientific. Aristotle’s unmoved mover is not a product of scientific reasoning. Medieval thinkers who are well-known for their theistic arguments (e.g. Augustine, Anselm of Canterbury, Aquinas, and Duns Scotus) were doing metaphysics, not science. The same is true of the modern philosophers who developed theistic arguments:

Descartes, Spinoza, Berkeley, Clarke, and Leibniz. It is true that some English thinkers (we have already mentioned Paley) began to construe the teleological argument in more scientific terms, but this represents a departure from the dominant tradition. Contemporary philosophers who argue for God’s existence are still prone to treat the questions to which “God exists” might be the answer as, in the words of Richard Swinburne, “too big” for science (2004, 160, 172). Neoclassical thinkers are, *in this sense*, in the mainstream of philosophy, for they too argue that God’s existence is *not* best considered as a scientific hypothesis. The case for (or against) God’s existence is a job for metaphysicians, not scientists.

Why have philosophers in general, and neoclassical thinkers in particular, viewed God’s existence as a problem for metaphysics rather than science? The simplest answer is because the work of science presupposes a world of phenomena (literally, appearances) to explain but does not explain why there should be a world at all. Metaphysics is the discipline that addresses this and other questions about the fundamental nature of existence. Hence, it is common to characterize metaphysics as the inquiry into the nature of being *qua* being. I prefer to define metaphysics as *the inquiry into the nature of existence and its ultimate explanations*. The problem of God is metaphysical since, if such a thing exists, then it would count as an ultimate explanation of the universe. It is arguably part of the meaning of “God”—the concept used by the aforementioned philosophers—that the universe requires that God exists but that God does not require the existence of anything in the universe. In other words, nothing whose existence is produced by particular objects or processes within the universe is God. It follows that any argument for the existence of God that depends upon the premise that everything has a cause is self-defeating, for it entails that God’s existence is caused. William Lane Craig’s (1980) schematizations of cosmological arguments from Plato to Leibniz demonstrate that none of these philosophers argued for God’s existence from the premise that everything has a cause. This is not so surprising since these thinkers didn’t enter the philosophical pantheon by making sophomoric errors. For this reason, it is disappointing for Daniel Dennett to repeat Bertrand Russell’s mistake of treating this self-defeating argument as though it were taken seriously by great theists (Dennett 2006, 242; Russell 1997). If one is a theist, then one

should claim that at least one thing is without a cause, namely, God's existence.

Neoclassical philosophy makes a number of contributions to this discussion, but the most basic is its fundamental hypothesis that every real being, from the lowliest creature to the greatest, is a *creative process* that appropriates data from its past actual world into a relatively novel synthesis; the new entity thereby becomes a fresh datum for subsequent creative processes. In Whitehead's words, "the many become one, and are increased by one" (1978, 21). The metaphysical hypothesis of process thought is that beneath *no* enduring object—rocks, plants, animals, etc. (Whitehead calls them *societies*)—is there an unchanging subject of change; rather there is a sequence of momentary processes (Whitehead calls them *actual entities*), each of which actively grasps its predecessors and is actively grasped by its successors (Whitehead calls this "grasping" *prehension*). Such is the rhythm of the universe that every act of becoming is *in part created* (by its past) and *in part creator* (of what is in the future). What occurs at the ever dynamic interstices where future potential becomes past actuality is the *self-creativity* of every actual entity, each one adding its contribution—great or small, good or bad—to the creative advance.

The concept of reality as a *growing whole* dovetails nicely with common experience and with the deliverances of science. The world-weary says, "There is nothing new under the sun" (Eccl. 1:9), but why take this lament uncritically as the final metaphysical truth? Astronomy teaches that the sun itself was once new, and what occurs "under the sun" is an ever shifting mosaic of the new emerging from the old. The layers of fossils in the earth tell the story of the successive appearance of plant and animal species, each continuous with but different from its ancestors. At the level of culture, there are novel forms of art, music, literature, architecture, technology, and governments—new cultural forms appear not from nothing, but neither are they nothing like the old. To be sure, there can be long periods of relative stasis where very little changes or where changes are so insignificant that they make no appreciable difference in things. But matter itself, at every level open to our inspection, is a far cry from the clockwork mechanism imagined by early scientists. Modern science makes us ever more aware that the universe is buzzing with activity—from the

indeterminacies of quantum reality to the groping of evolution.

Neoclassical thinkers agree on this processive view of nature; but not all follow Whitehead, Teilhard, and Hartshorne in being theists (e.g. Ferré 2001; Crosby 2002). Nevertheless, there is agreement that the concept of a universe in process has important implications for the idea of God. Let me highlight three of them: First, whereas traditional theists placed God beyond time, change, and contingency, process theists emphasize that God necessarily affects and is affected by processes in the universe. The traditional idea of God as *pure act* means, among other things, that God acts upon others but is never acted upon by another. In process thought, God, like every other real being, acts *and* is acted upon. As Hartshorne was fond of saying (expanding on Abraham Heschel's theology), God is not the unmoved mover; God is the most *and best* moved mover (Hartshorne 1997, 6, 39; Heschel, 24; Viney 2006c). Second, in contrast to traditional theism that understood God alone as having the power of creation, neoclassical philosophy posits a protean creativity that is pluralized into as many acts of becoming as fill the universe. Neoclassical metaphysics is a philosophy of *shared creativity*, which is to say, shared power. Perfect or divine power is not the power to unilaterally determine what happens; rather, it is a uniquely excellent influence over all other entities that retain some power of their own. Third, on the traditional view, the temporal world is the creation of God; therefore, God is eternal, not temporal. In neoclassical metaphysics, the creation of the temporal world is an on-going and open-ended process, shared by God and the creatures. Because the process of universe-creation is never complete, there can be no eternal perspective of a completed universe such as traditional theism imagined God to possess. Omniscience is then the knowledge of what has been (the past), what is occurring (the present), and what must be and what may or may not be (the future)—divine knowledge of the future includes knowledge of the degree to which it is open or closed.

Despite this reasoning, process theists are commonly said to believe in a God that is limited in knowledge and power (cf. George 2003, 8; Layman 2007, 107; Steele 2008, 8). This is, however, a red herring. The *pons asinorum* of debates concerning neoclassical theism is that concepts of God are correlative with concepts of the things to which

God is said to be or not to be in relation. To claim that God knows the future *as present* requires that the future be the sort of thing that can *be present* from a certain perspective. If the future is not the sort of thing that can *be present* from a certain perspective, then God cannot know it *as present*. Neoclassicism affirms that the future is a field of possibility of *what will be* and *what may be only*, to borrow a phrase from Charles Dickens (1967, 128). If this is correct, then it is this mixture of necessity and possibility that would be the object of divine knowing. Neoclassical philosophers make an analogous argument with respect to divine power. To claim, with traditional theism, that God can *unilaterally* bring about any state of affairs requires that all states of affairs are such that a single being can bring them about. If some states of affairs are such that a single being cannot bring them about, then not even God can *unilaterally* bring about just any state of affairs. Teilhard asked in 1953, "And who then will finally give evolution *its* God?" (1969, 288). Arguably, it is the philosophers and theologians of the neoclassical tradition.

The dual nature of God—moved and mover—is one reason that neoclassical theism is also known as *dipolar theism*. Hartshorne's way of expressing dipolarity is to draw a three-fold distinction of logical type among existence (*that* a thing is), essence (*what* a thing is), and actuality (*the particular state in which* a thing is). Suppose a person is listening to a bird sing (like Hartshorne researching birdsong). In order to have this *actual* experience he must have a certain *essence* that includes the cognitive capacity to listen and, of

course, he must *exist*. The distinction between actuality and essence-existence is a distinction of logical type because it corresponds to the distinction between the concrete and the abstract. One can infer that the man exists and that he has certain cognitive capacities from the fact that he is listening to the bird; however, from the fact that he exists and that he has certain cognitive capacities, it does not follow that he is listening to the bird. The same triad—and the same correspondence of the concrete and the abstract—applies to God: the *actual* hearing of the bird singing (and of knowing the man as hearing the bird), the *essential* cognitive capacity, which in deity is omniscience, and God's *existence*. Thus, as a person's identity as an enduring individual may be embodied in different experiences, so God's character as the perfection of love, knowledge, and power may be embodied in different concrete ways.

Although the triad of actuality / essence / existence applies in both the divine and creaturely cases, the *modalities* associated with each need not be the same. In both the human and divine cases, the experience is *contingent* (meaning, it can not be); for example, the man could have been asleep or the bird might have been silent. On the other hand, the man's cognitive capacity is contingent whereas God's is necessary (meaning, it cannot not be). Likewise, the man's existence is contingent and God's is necessary (Figure 1).

Because Hartshorne maintained that existence and essence in God are necessary, he often

	Creatures	God	
Actuality	Man listening to bird singing (contingent)	God knowing the man as listening to the bird (contingent)	} Concrete
Essence	Human nature as including various cognitive capacities (contingent)	God as knowing whatever is knowable, i.e. as omniscient (necessary)	
Existence	The man existing (contingent)	God existing (necessary)	} Abstract

Figure 1: Actuality / Essence / Existence (Viney 2007c, 347).

abbreviated the three-fold distinction as *existence and actuality*. David Tracy refers to this distinction as “Hartshorne’s discovery,” for it provides, for the first time in the history of philosophy, a plausible account of how to combine belief in God as a necessary being with belief that God has contingent properties (1985, 259). (For reasons too technical for this presentation, the “discovery” cannot be attributed to Whitehead—see Griffin 2001, 152).

We are now positioned to understand why neoclassical theism is not a version of supernaturalism. Traditional theism is a supernaturalism in at least two senses. First, it posits a two-tiered metaphysic: the creator (God) and the created order (the creatures). The basis of this distinction is that God alone has the power to create, to bring something from nothing (i.e. from no pre-existing material—*creatio ex nihilo*). A created being can make something from something else, but no creature can make something from nothing. In neoclassical metaphysics, *all* creativity, including God’s, requires antecedent “material” from which to create and *no actual entity*, not even a creaturely one, is wholly uncreative. Process theism makes principled distinctions between the divine and the non-divine, but it does not do so based on the nature of creativity. Hence, it is not in this sense a version of supernaturalism.

Traditional theism is a version of supernaturalism in another way: it posits a two layered cosmos in which supernatural beings are essentially non-material (e.g. angels) and natural beings are essentially embodied (e.g. gorillas); There are differences about which side of the material / non-material divide human persons fall. Christians from Augustine to Aquinas held that human persons are essentially embodied (hence, the need for the resurrection of the body for an after-life); but some, like Descartes, held that human persons can exist apart from the body (a view more consonant with doctrines of the immortality of the soul and of reincarnation). Process theists follow Whitehead in objecting to this “bifurcation of nature” into the material and the non-material. On the one hand, this means that there is no such thing as a pure spirit. Even God, although without physical location, is material. Hartshorne preferred the metaphor that the world is God’s body. On the other hand, no actual entity is devoid of what in ourselves we call experience. This does not mean

that all things are conscious, for there can be, as Leibniz held, many kinds of experience, but process thought has a richer idea of the physical world than is usual. In Teilhard’s metaphor, “*Coextensive with their Without [the physical] there is a Within [the psychic] of Things*” (1955, 53).

The existence of a cosmic order naturally presents itself as a problem in any metaphysic, like neoclassicism, that takes the dynamic processes of nature as basic. How is it possible for the multitude of centers of activity scattered across the cosmos to add up to an ordered whole? The question is *not* how some forms of order within the universe arise from other forms of order. For example, it is the job of evolutionary science, not of metaphysics, to explain how humans evolved from their proto-human ancestors. The metaphysical question, on the other hand, is about order on a cosmic scale. Hartshorne stresses the distinction between order *within* a universe of partly self-determining entities, such as process metaphysics imagines, and the order *of* such a universe. Localized forms of order are incapable of explaining cosmic order precisely because they presuppose it. To speak of a form of order that is *localized* is already to posit a larger domain in which location is possible—in a word, one imagines an ordered whole. For example, there must have been a time when atoms of hydrogen and oxygen fused for the first time. At that point, water molecules, with all of their possibilities for specialized forms of aquatic life, were born. This event was possible only because there was already a more inclusive order in terms of which atoms could exist. If cosmic order is to be explained it must be explained by an ordering power that is *not within* the universe.

Hartshorne’s answer to the problem of cosmic order, and the answer favored by most process theists, is that God’s unique role is to continually bring order to the welter of non-divine beings scattered throughout the universe. Hartshorne notes that there must be a difference *in principle* between the scope of divine creativity and the scope of any non-divine creativity. It is true that on neoclassical principles, all individuals, divine and non-divine, interact with other individuals. Non-divine individuals, however, are localized beings that interact with *some but not all* other individuals. For example, it is impossible to interact with individuals that died before you were born or that will be born after you die. This limitation does not apply to God who, on the account of both

traditional theism and neoclassical theism, was never born and will never die. If, in addition to having necessary existence, God is all-inclusive and thus omnipresent, then God's influence would be cosmic in scope. By interacting with *all others*, God and God alone would be in the position to guarantee order on a cosmic scale (Hartshorne 1967, 37-40). Because process metaphysics posits that no real being is merely acted upon, there is no question of the cosmic order being deterministic. This would simply reintroduce one of the most troubling aspects of traditional theism, and process thinkers are at pains to escape its antinomies (Viney 2006c, 17-20). Thus, the argument is not that the self-ordering activity of actual entities is in need of explanation. The argument, rather, is that the idea of *cosmic order* is not explicable in terms of that activity, unless by an individual whose influence is cosmic in scope.

Whitehead held that God should be the "chief exemplification" of metaphysical principles, not an exception to them that is invoked to save their collapse (Whitehead 1978, 343). One advantage of Hartshorne's solution to the problem of cosmic order is that it meets these requirements. The relevant principles of process metaphysics that are exemplified in God vis-à-vis the problem of cosmic order are (1) all individuals act and are acted upon, and (2) all individuals are partially self-creative. God, as the cosmic ordering power, is not an exception to these principles but is their eminent embodiment. I mentioned above that Hartshorne thinks of the world as God's body. For Hartshorne, divine self-formation makes of the world an integrated whole. For him, "The world as an integrated individual is not a 'world' as this term is normally and properly used, but 'God.' God, the World Soul, is the *individual integrity* of "the world," which otherwise is just the myriad of creatures (1984, 59). Hartshorne's mention of the World Soul is an allusion to Plato's theology, the best insights of which Hartshorne viewed himself as incorporating into his own philosophical theology. By using Plato in this way, Hartshorne departed from Whitehead (Viney 2004, section 4). In any event, the context in which the neoclassical God acts is manifestly not the "oppressively confined and *local*" one of which Hitchens complains (2007a, 129).

How does Hartshorne's view, as we have explained it thus far, stand up to the New Atheist critique? After all, some New Atheists believe that they have

a philosophical trump up their sleeve that shows, in Dawkins' words, "why there almost certainly is no God." The philosophical argument, which is borrowed from David Hume, is a version of the "who designed the designer?" or the "who caused God?" retorts. In Hitchens' hyperbole, "the postulate of a designer or creator only raises the unanswerable question of who designed the designer or created the creator" (2007a, 71). According to Dawkins, any being that could bring about the complex order of nature would be at least as complex as the order that it is invoked to explain. Trying to explain one example of complex order by another, equally complex order, "is more than a restatement of the problem, it is grotesque amplification of it" (2006, 144). Put somewhat differently, God, as the most complex being, would be more improbable than the entities that God is invoked to explain (2006, 147). God's existence "is going to need a mammoth explanation in its own right" (2006, 149). Dawkins continues that "To suggest that the original prime mover was complicated enough to indulge in intelligent design, to say nothing of mind-reading millions of humans simultaneously, is tantamount to dealing yourself a perfect hand at bridge (2006, 155). In a discussion of Dawkins' original presentation of this argument in *The Blind Watchmaker* (1986, 141), Dennett called it "an un rebuttable refutation, as devastating today as when Philo used it to trounce Cleanthes in Hume's *Dialogues* two centuries earlier" (1995, 155).

Is this "un rebuttable refutation" really un rebuttable? Traditional theists have their own rebutter (e.g. Crean 2007, 10-19), but our concern here is with neoclassical theism. Recall that the question Hartshorne asks is how there can be order on a cosmic scale. We have already noted that the answer to this question leaves untouched the varieties of localized order in the universe. Yet, it is localized forms of order that most concern Dawkins. He says that natural selection is "the process which, as far as we know, is the only process ultimately capable of generating complexity out of simplicity" (2006, 150-151). Natural selection, however, presupposes the existence of entities (usually organisms) interacting with their environment and reacting to its pressures. In other words, natural selection presupposes an ordered universe. The God of process theism has no location within the universe and thus its complexity is not to be conceived as a localized form of order. As Hartshorne argues, God

as all-inclusive has no external environment, only an internal one (Hartshorne 1984, 134-135). God's internal environment is nothing other than all of the creatures that make up the universe at any given stage of its existence. As we have seen, the creatures, by interacting with God, contribute to the divine actuality (which is complex), but they cannot be the primordial explanation of the fact that God has actual states (which is to say, the fact that God exists). They cannot explain God's existence since they presuppose it—more precisely, they presuppose a universe already made (or in process terms, already making itself) before they are born. Finally, we have also seen that positing God as the cosmic ordering power is not an arbitrary addition to neoclassical metaphysics but a natural requirement flowing from its basic principles.

So what about Hitchens' "unanswerable question" of who designed the designer, or what created the creator? We should begin by asking whether this question even makes sense. For example, the question "What is north of the north pole?" is grammatically correct, but it is geometrical nonsense. Because of the nature of a globe, all points on the sphere beyond the north pole are south of it. Or again, the question, "What came before the first moment of time?" is grammatically correct, but it is metaphysical nonsense since "first moment" implies that nothing occurred "before" it—a point not lost on St. Augustine (*Confessions*, bk. XI, chs. 12 and 13). In traditional theology, the question, "Who created the creator?" is analogous. It is grammatically unproblematic, but it is metaphysical nonsense. To be sure, the question makes sense if one assumes that everything has a cause. Dennett's misrepresentation of the cosmological argument notwithstanding, no theist of note accepts that premise. "God exists" and "everything has a cause" are contraries; they cannot both be true. In the context of Hartshorne's metaphysics, the question "Who designed the designer?" should be rephrased: Who or what made the order of the cosmic ordering power? This question is not nonsensical, but it is subtly ambiguous. Is God alone responsible for the basic outlines of the cosmic order? Hartshorne answers yes. Is God alone responsible for every way in which order is brought from disorder? Hartshorne answers no, since the creatures always retain some power to act and not merely to be acted upon.

If the New Atheists' Humean argument is unsuccessful against neoclassical theism, one may

still ask whether Hartshorne's question about cosmic order can be answered by science. For example, in response to ID proponents, Stenger argues that complex systems—both living and nonliving—emerge from simpler ones by "a purely natural process called *self-organization*" (2007, 61). In the majority of plant species, for example, leaves grow on stems in a way that, when viewed from above, presents a double spiral pattern twisting in opposite directions, as in a sunflower. This unusual patterning seems to be driven by purely physical, but non-biological, mechanisms (Stenger 2007, 62-64). Stenger's thesis is interesting, in part, because it contradicts Dawkins' claim that natural selection is the only known process that can generate complexity from simplicity. That, however, is a scientific issue. The metaphysical question remains: whence cosmic order? The appeal to self-ordering systems is unavailing as a solution to this problem. The emergence of complex order from simple order within the universe presupposes the very cosmic order that Hartshorne's metaphysical hypothesis endeavors to explain.

Happily, Stenger does not use the idea of a localized self-ordering system to answer the problem of cosmic order. He relies instead upon current cosmology. He recounts the results of modern astrophysics according to which the galaxies are moving away from each other at speeds approximately proportional to their distances—in a word, the universe is expanding. The second law of thermodynamics predicts that as the universe expands, its total entropy increases. Because the total *possible* entropy increases faster than the total *actual* entropy, there is room for immense localized order. When the curves for possible and actual entropy are traced backwards in time, they converge "to the smallest possible region of space that can be operationally defined, a *Planck sphere*" (Stenger 2007, 119). At this time, the universe had as much entropy as an object of that size could have; this is in contrast to the present state of the universe which has less actual entropy than an object of its size could have. Stenger says that at the initial moment of maximal entropy "the disorder [of the universe] was complete and no structure could have been present." He goes on to characterize this as "a state of chaos" (2007, 121).

Stenger is usually careful to couch scientific results in terms of what can and cannot be measured by

current instruments or what is and is not allowed by current theories. We have just seen, for example, that when speaking of a Planck sphere as “the smallest possible region of space,” he adds “that can operationally be defined.” Likewise, he says that “the earliest definable moment” is *the Planck time* (2007, 119)—Stenger would have been even more precise had he written “definable by current physics.” Later, he says,

Basically, by definition time is counted off as an integral number of units where one unit equals the Planck time. We can get away with treating time as a continuous variable in our mathematical physics, such as we do when we use calculus, because the units are so small compared to anything we measure in practice. We essentially extrapolate our equations through the Planck intervals within which time is unmeasurable and thus indefinable (2007, 120-121).

Again, greater precision demands that “indefinable” be changed to “indefinable by current physics.” No mere philosophical fussiness requires these clarifications. Stenger says that in physics, “time is simply the count of ticks on a clock” (2007, 123). Granted that judgments in physics are tied to what can be measured, it would be intellectually reckless to conclude that time is nothing more than what physics can measure. The question remains whether or not the unmeasurable “intervals” that Stenger mentions exist. Or again, one should not conclude that time really is continuous simply because “we can get away with” treating it as such for the purposes of doing physics.

What holds for Stenger’s explanations of time holds *mutatis mutandis* for his explanations of the disorder of the universe at the earliest measurable time. The “disorder” or “chaos” that Stenger identifies within the Planck sphere should not be described as “complete” but as “complete *as known to physics*.” All that Stenger is justified in saying is the latter, not the former. To put the point somewhat differently, there is no meaningful difference between “complete disorder” or “complete chaos” and non-being. On the other hand, “complete disorder *as known to physics*” does contrast with non-being since there may be a deeper order beneath the order detectable by physics. It seems clear, at any rate, that Stenger does not identify the disorder or chaos of the initial Planck sphere with non-being. Stenger is skeptical

that the big bang represents an absolute beginning (2007, 125) and he speculates that our universe “‘tunneled’ through the chaos at the Planck time from a prior universe that existed for all previous time” (2007, 126). Presumably, our universe could not “tunnel through” something that did not exist. “Tunneling through” is a metaphor, but it presumably describes some *ordered relation*. If there is indeed an ordered relation between our side and the far side (so to speak) of the big bang singularity, then Hartshorne’s problem of cosmic order resurfaces. By as much as Stenger’s scientific reconstruction of the cosmic past falls short of a metaphysical account, so does it fail to answer the question that Hartshorne raises about cosmic order.

The twentieth century founders of process philosophy and those who continue their project engage in metaphysics. The New Atheists are wary of metaphysical claims, and so they press scientific explanations as far as they can go. Neoclassical philosophers should have no objection to this. After all, the founders of neoclassicism, as we have seen, were friends and practitioners of science. Neoclassical philosophers add, however, that it is equally important to be wary of the claim that science alone is the arbiter of what we can reasonably judge to be true or false. This is *scientism*. Of course, scientism is not itself a deliverance of science or of scientific investigation but a thesis about the competencies of science. It follows that scientism, by the very standards it sets up for judging what is true and false (i.e. scientific ones) cannot be judged as true or false. It is, at best, a proposal for thinking about science, a proposal that neoclassical thinkers reject. Moreover, because scientism is not a product of science, denying scientism *in no way* commits one to any sort of backward thinking about science. (An interesting question to explore that goes beyond the scope of this paper is the extent to which the denial of scientism can save one from backward thinking about both science and metaphysics).

One of the glories of science is that its methods often lead reasonable people to agreement on difficult empirical questions. Metaphysics does not have this advantage. Its methods are more controversial, its theories are more removed from empirical disconfirmation, and its practitioners are in continual disagreement. To be sure, it is *logically rigorous* in the minimal senses that contrary views cannot be true and that it employs rational

methods of inquiry. As it is practiced by neoclassical philosophers it is also attentive to the deliverances of science in the minimal sense that it strives to be supportive of them. On the other hand, it is *epistemically messy* in the sense that equally informed reasonable people can come to contrary conclusions. This is reason enough to agree with Whitehead when he says that, in philosophy, “the merest hint of dogmatic certainty as to finality of statement is an exhibition of folly” (Whitehead 1978, xiv). Whitehead’s warning is not, however, a counsel of despair. Despite the difficulty of metaphysics and the apparently intractable disagreements that characterize competing viewpoints, its questions are legitimate, its problems are genuine, and its speculations deserve serious response.

Whitehead’s call to intellectual humility is a reminder that theologians and religious people informed by process thought (not alone Whitehead’s) are neither anti-scientific nor rabid zealots. On the contrary, they have a very good track record of promoting scientific curiosity, responsible moral thinking, and high ideals about economic development, ecological management, and social justice. Neoclassical thinkers agree with Whitehead’s assessment of progressive religion that “Religion will not regain its old power until it can face change in the same spirit as does science. Its principles may be eternal, but the expression of those principles requires continual development” (1925, 270). Whitehead himself was a role-model of this attitude in his adventurous approach to religion (Viney 2005). The same is true of Teilhard and of Hartshorne. The God they envisioned—different versions of the God of process thought—is a very long way from what Haught described as “the one-planet deity of our terrestrial religions” (2003, 161).

There are many facets of the New Atheists’ attack on religion that go beyond the scope of this paper, but which cry out for response from a neoclassical perspective. Perhaps I have already said enough to suggest how neoclassical thinkers would respond to some of these attacks. For example, Whitehead was no less critical than the New Atheists of the crimes done in the name of religion (1996, 37-38). But he would have recognized Hitchens’ claim that “religion poisons everything” for the histrionics that it is. Of course, it is also self-referentially curious since Hitchens is inadvertently making a case against himself. If religion poisons *everything*,

then it also poisons Hitchens’ claim, and the arguments he makes for his claim, that religion poisons everything. Hitchens’ clumsy animadversions aside, Whitehead tried to tap religion’s finer insights—those that build great culture and those that ennoble the human spirit. We have seen that process thought construes divine power, for example, in very different terms than the dominant tradition in theology conceived it. God’s power, Whitehead said, is the worship that God inspires, and religions that emphasize this are the ones that should command our respect. For him, “The worship of God is not a rule of safety—it is an adventure of the spirit, a flight after the unattainable” (1925, 276). Whitehead could as well have been reading Paul when he said that; Paul attributes these words to Jesus that are not in the Gospels: “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (II Cor. 12:9). The New Atheists criticize religions grounded in brute strength and the threat of punishment. How different than these are religions grounded in love! What *do* they look like? What *will* they look like? In 1934, Teilhard wrote of such religion stating, “Someday, after having mastered space [l’*éther*], the winds, the tides, gravitation, we will capture for God the energies of love—And then, for a second time in the history of the World, we [l’*Homme*] will have discovered Fire” (1973, 92).

My rather modest aim here has been to take these neoclassical perspectives on God and religion seriously and to invite the New Atheists to do the same. At the very least, I hope that in sketching a major contemporary theistic alternative that is overlooked by the New Atheists I have given some sense of its sophistication, its intellectual power, and its nobility.

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