

GOD EXISTS:

A DEBATE ABOUT THEISM

Two Statements: Atheist and Theist

(1)

Consistent Theism is Socially Undesirable

Paul Cliteur¹

(2)

A Matter of the Heart More than of Reason

Willem Ouweneel²

(1)

Paul Cliteur

The Atheist Position

1 Paul Cliteur, In debate with Christian Willem Ouweneel. Transl. Jan H. Boer. Original title: "*Consistent Theisme is social gezien onwenselijk.*" *Beweging*, 2/2005, p. 26. This statement is cobbled together by Nelleke de Ridder-Sneep from various writings by Paul Cliteur. *Beweging* is a progenitor of the magazine *Sophie*, both of them being publications of the *Stichting voor Reformatorische Wijsbegeerte* (Institute for Reformational Philosophy), an important centre for the contemporary development of a Kuyperian worldview.

2 Willem Ouweneel, In debate with Atheist Paul Cliteur. Transl. Jan H. Boer. Original title: *Meer een zaak van het hart dan van de rede.*" *Beweging*, 2/2005, p. 27.

I do not believe in the existence of God. Roughly speaking, my worldview is that of a club comprising the likes of Epicurus-Lucretius-Russell-Sartre-Camus-Schopenhauer, though fully aware of their differences. I believe that I was born out of my parents and that I did not exist prior to conception. I started my existence via conception, after which I obtained consciousness and spiritual life. Upon my demise, I disappear with all that. In the meantime, I get an opportunity to do a number of things, like authoring this kind of writing, teaching students and arranging my life with my wife and neighbours in a meaningful way.

Atheism, in my opinion, is nothing but *a-theism*: a denial of theism, by which I understand belief in the existence of one personal God. An atheist is someone who cannot endorse the central claims of theism. It is best to restrict the use of the concept of “atheist” to a context of a *conscious* and *intellectual* attitude. An atheist is someone who understands the claims of a theist, but who is not convinced by them because of his objections.

I myself became an atheist at about age twenty. The books of the free thinker and humanist Anton Constandse and of Arthur Schopenhauer were very influential in my “coming out.” I knew nothing about God and could not understand what my one single Christian friend talked about after he’d gone to church. I just shrugged my shoulders at the whole question. That, however, changed because of Schopenhauer and Constandse: a dull and unconscious feeling as in “this world is not created” developed into something more articulated. Since then, I have always with great interest tried to understand the arguments that the theists advanced about the existence of God. With me, the doubts and questions weighed more heavily. Thus I did not become a theist, but an atheist.

I think that atheism is a reasonable position to adopt: it is based on good arguments. These arguments can be divided into intellectual and moral ones.

Most atheists base themselves on intellectual reasons. They object to the theistic position because it is internally contradictory. They have questions about the intellectual consistency of the theistic worldview. They have questions such as if God is good and omnipotent, how can He tolerate so much evil in the world? If God has created the world, who then created God? If God is the Creator of everything, is not everything then determined? What room is there for human freedom?

My own atheism has more to do with the moral side of the story. The problem with the theistic concept of God is that it can stimulate a kind of mindless discipline or subordination to their holy scripture to make it seem real. The theistic system can have dangerous undesirable social consequences. An example of this is Mohammed B., who is dissatisfied with the Dutch legal punishment for blasphemy. According to the Holy Scripture this should attract capital punishment in place of three months imprisonment as prescribed in Dutch law. From the point of view of consistent theism he is right, but such a consistent theism is of course undesirable from the social point of view.

(2)

A Matter of the Heart More than of Reason

Willem Ouweneel

The philosopher Pascal once said that there is enough light for those who want to see. There are enough arguments for the existence of God, but you do have to be willing to see them. Seeing them is more a matter of the heart, including the will, than of reason. But even though faith in God is based more on an existential choice rather than rational, that does not change the fact that theists have full access to rational arguments. Hume and Kant may have demonstrated that the traditional proofs for God do not have a logical or enforcing power, the theistic arguments keep spurring us on according to Hans Kung. That holds true for the various (classic) arguments offered in the past.

It holds for the *cosmological* argument that nothing comes from nothing: If the universe had a beginning, that must ultimately be based on something or someone who transcends the universe. Theists call Him "God."

It holds equally for the *teleological* argument: The universe demonstrates design, something that is unthinkable without a "Designer." Theists call Him "God."

And then there's the *moral* argument: Human behavior points to an invisible behind-the-scenes moral law that transcends the human and refers unmistakably to a Moral Legislator. Theists call Him "God."

In the current situation, through the Intelligent Design Movement, in so far as it is firmly based on its mathematic-physics foundation, the teleological argument has gained strength in its power to convince.³ Even the famous English debater, Antony Fox, forsook his atheism in favour of theism.

³Please note that this movement takes various forms. Ouweneel refers here not to everything claimed by that movement but only in so far as it has that firm foundation.

Besides rational arguments, experiential arguments also often make a deep impression: Faith in God is demonstrated in many well founded stories of conversions, liberations and healing with a tremendous power of renewal in the lives of people. Only by denigrating this power can atheists manage to psychologize the effects of these processes away. Besides, their appeal to psychological mechanisms like projection and cognitive dissonance turns against atheists themselves.

The appeal to “the” science that allegedly makes the existence of God doubtful is similarly misplaced. The only scientists that can make such claims are those who do not know the difference between natural science and naturalism, which is the faith that only the empirically verifiable exists. With the growing scientific theoretical insight that scholarship/science is not a neutral, objective, free-from-assumptions kind of enterprise but is always rooted in preconceptions that are at their deepest level existential in character, not to say “religious,” ample new space has been created for religious assumptions in the sciences. To put it even stronger, it would appear that the atheistic and naturalistic hegemony over the sciences has had its time.

This is not to say that theists have no problems such as, e.g., the problem of suffering and of theodicy, i.e., the justification of God in connection with suffering. Such issues also raise many questions among theists. Theists are theists not because they have clear answers to all issues, but because faith in God is so much more acceptable to them than atheism, in spite of these problems. At its deepest, the issue is not at all to find a solution to all intellectual questions and problems. Genuine theists believe in God because they are convinced they have had and continue to have an existential experience of Him in and through the Person of Jesus Christ.
