How to be an Atheist

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Might I begin with the personal remark that in the course of preparing this lecture for Blackfriars in Oxford, I was quite unable to prevent thoughts of Herbert McCabe's absence here today from occupying my mind. You must forgive me if, though he is absent physically, you are able to identify his presence intellectually within the few thoughts I offer you today; for the inclination to give some expression to the conjunction of influences which some thirty years of debate with Herbert have visited upon me personally became, in the circumstances, irresistible. Back in the early nineteen-eighties Nicholas Lash and I published in quick succession monographs on the subject of Marxism and its relation to Christian theology[1]. We agreed on much of a theological nature, disagreed sharply on how to read Marx, so Herbert, then in his second stint as editor of *New Blackfriars*, invited us each to review the work of the other, Nicholas first, me to follow. With characteristically wicked wit, Herbert entitled my reply to Nicholas' review 'Turner Responds to Lash'. Well, today I mark my indebtedness to Herbert by means of a lecture which I am happy to concede is, in a manner, a response to Herbert's 'lash', and in some spirit of emulation, could I achieve it, of that fierce clarity and energy of thought which so characterised what Eamon Duffy called 'his mighty soul'. For unfashionably—as theological fashion appears to have it today—I have decided to attempt an *intelligible* lecture, a lecture about a theological disagreement, but one clear enough, I hope, and containing a sufficient quantity of discernable and plain asseveration, that you will be able to disagree with it, if you think you should, or even conceivably to agree with it, if you think you can. For like Herbert I follow Thomas Aquinas in thinking of theology, if indeed as rooted in a *sacra doctrina*, nonetheless as also *argumentativa*.

But because theology thrives on argument, I thought I would talk to you on the subject of how to be an atheist, at some risk of being thought patronising—since I am not one myself. Of course I have an interest in there being an argument about the existence of God, for I am an academic, and have a subject to represent within the University and wider, and while no genuine interest would be served by picking a fight without intrinsic reason, subjects such as ours get some credit for their

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existence and cost when it is obvious to that community that they have an academic agenda of agreed significance, and that they engage in vigorous and settleable arguments over issues of general concern. Now, as to whether there is an argument to be had about the existence of God, opinion differs. There are those who wish to pick a fight with us over the question of whether there is or is not a God; but there are others who think that there is no fight worth picking, believing that the question doesn't matter because the answer, one way or the other, has consequences for no one but theologians. J.L. Austin, the Oxford philosopher of somewhat pedantic disposition, once rhetorically asked himself at the end of an especially trivialising paper on the subject of 'excuses', whether anyone could regard what he had claimed to demonstrate to be of any importance. To which he replied that importance was not important, only truth[2]. Well, I think so too. All the same, importance is important to those who dispose of University funding, and my colleagues' jobs are at stake in the matter of having worthwhile issues to contest within the Cambridge Divinity Faculty's division of academic labours. So, I have an interest of a vested sort in keeping the issue going of whether God exists, and of whether it matters to anyone else but us what the answer is.

As to those for whom the question does not matter, believing that nothing hangs on whether there is or is not a God, it is true that for very large sectors of the populations of Western countries, life is lived broadly in a mental and emotional condition of indifference to the question. And it is also true that, even among some intellectual elites, for many of whom it is fashionable to *allow* theism as an option within a generalised permissiveness of thought, the license granted to theism can seem to amount to no more than a higher form of this more generalised and popular indifferentism. But such mentalities represent a different kind of challenge to the theologian than that posed by the orthodox and plain atheist and I shall come to the question of this 'higher indifferentism' later in this lecture. In the meantime, let us consider the matter of the good old-fashioned militant atheists, who flatter the theologian at least to the extent of seeing in the question of God a battleground of last resort, a final contest about the world, and about all that is in it, and about us.

Theologians, after all, are as easily seduced by the flattery of 'importance' as are any other academics, and there are some of our company who yearn for the good old days—perhaps they survived until the late nineteenth century—when it was still agreed that everything depended on whether or not there is a God, when it was still relatively clear what it was to think the existence of God, hence, what was to

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count as atheism was to the same extent unproblematical. In those good old days atheists knew what they were denying. For as Thomas Aquinas used to say, following Aristotle, *eadem est scientia oppositorum*[3]—affirmations and their corresponding negations are one and the same knowledge, hence clarity about the affirmation permitted a clear-minded denial. In the mid-nineteenth century, the German philosopher, Ludwig Feuerbach, was one such atheist: everything, he thought, that the theologian says about God is true; it is just that none of what the theologians say is a truth about God, all are truths about the human 'species-being', as he put it, and so in their theological form they are alienated truths. You have only to reverse subject and predicate, he says, turn God, the subject for theology, into the 'divine' as predicate of the human, and the alienated truths of theology become truths repossessed in humanism; thus, paradoxically, do you realise all the truth of theology in its abolition as atheism. Well, now, there is some flattery to the theologian, for in Feuerbach everything depends on the logically complete, and overtly theological, disjunction: either God or man, but not both. Indeed, so craven did he think Feuerbach's flattery of the theological to be that Karl Marx wished a plague to be visited on the disjunction itself, that is to say on the houses both of the theologian's God and on Feuerbach's humanist atheism, equally complicit did he think them to be in a theological view of the world. Feuerbach, Marx said, can no more get his humanism going without the negation of God than the theologian can get his theism going without the negation of man[4]. Thus Marx. The twentieth century Protestant theologian, Karl Barth, went even further than Marx in the exact specification of Feuerbach's theological parasiticalness, taking unseemly pleasure in the thought that, in the end, Feuerbach is his own atheist familiar, belonging, Barth says, 'as legitimately as anyone, to the profession of modern Protestant theology'[5]: in truth, *eadem est scientia oppositorum.*

So it is possible to sympathise with those theologians who long for an energetic form of denial to grapple with, for it would reassure them in their hopes for a territory of contestation which has some sort of intellectual ultimacy about it: for note, our subject's interests are served not on condition that God exists, but on the less exacting condition that there is a decent argument to be had as to *whether* God exists. Alas, today, vigorous atheist opposition is hard to find, and I wish to help out; first, with the suggestion—just to clear some ground—that Marx might be right, that in much argument on the subject the complicity between theist and atheist, their common interest in the territory contested, is just too cosy, too mutually parasitical, too like the staged

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contest of a modern wrestling match. There might be some sort of entertainment in the antics, but there is no real edge to the competition.

And by way of illustrating this suspicion, let me risk a generalisation from the particular form of opposition between Barthian theism and Feuerbachian atheism, whose character consists, as I think of it, as that between an object and its image in a mirror: all the connections of thought are identical, but their relations are, as it were, horizontally reversed from left to right. The generalisation is that, historically, most philosophical, principled, not merely casual atheisms have in this way been mirror-images of a theism; that they are recognisable from one another, because atheisms fall roughly into the same categories as the theisms they deny; that they are about as interesting as one another; and that since narrowly Catholic or Methodist or Anglican atheisms are no more absorbing than narrowly Catholic, Methodist or Anglican theisms, neither offers much by way of a stimulus for the theologian.

And one reason for this atheistical failure of interest is its failure of theological radicalness: such atheists are but what are called 'negative' theologians, but attenuated ones. In a sense which I hope to clarify in a moment, they give shorter measure than good theologians do in the extent of what they deny. It is indeed extraordinary how theologically conservative some atheists are, and one might even speculate that atheists of this species have an interest in resisting such renewals of Christian faith and practice as would require the renewal of their rejection of it. I suppose it must be upsetting for atheists when the target of their rejection moves; for insofar as a moving Christian target does upset the atheist, it reveals, depressingly, the parasitical character of the rejection. So a static atheism can have no wish for a moving theism.

Of course the contrary proposition is equally plausible. There have always been Christian theisms which are parasitical upon forms of atheism, for they formulate a doctrine of God primarily in response to a certain kind of grounds for atheistic denial. In our time, the ill-named 'creationists' seem to offer a mere *reaction*, trapped as they are into having to deny the very possibility of an evolutionary world, simply because they mistakenly suppose an evolutionary world could be occupied only by atheists. Naturally, if you think you have to find a place for God somewhere in the universe, then you are going to have to expel a usurping occupant somewhere from it; and since our parasitical theist and atheist agree that evolutionary biology, or historical evidence, or cosmology, occupy the space where, were there a God, God ought to be, they are, as Nicholas Lash has so often pointed out,

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playing the *same* game, though alas for the theist, on rules of the atheist's devising. Hence, the theists play it on the undemanding condition that they play on the losing team.

It seems to me that that sort of argument between theist and atheist is entirely profitless to either side, about as pointless as being bothered to argue with Richard Dawkins. But since today my purpose is to encourage the atheists to engage in some more cogent and comprehensive levels of denying than that, I shall limit my comment to saying that thus far they lag well behind even the *theologically* necessary levels of negation, which is why their atheisms are generally lacking in theological interest. So, I repeat: such atheists are, as it were, but theologians in an arrested condition of denial: in the sense in which atheists of this sort say God 'does not exist', the atheist has merely arrived at the theological starting point: theologians of the classical traditions, an Augustine, a Thomas Aquinas or a Meister Eckhart, simply agree about the disposing of idolatries, and then proceed with the proper business of doing theology.

And here is the sort of negative thing they then go on to do, at any rate in the medieval traditions in which I specialise. Thomas Aquinas tells us that he thinks he can give rational proofs of the existence of God, and gives us five ways of doing so[6]. You will be pleased to hear that I have no intention of inflicting upon you any detail of those proofs, or even just now of discussing the matter of whether there could in principle be any such thing as a valid proof of the existence of God, though I will offer a few thoughts on the subject later. I ask you merely to note two things of a general sort about how Thomas Aquinas conceives of them. The first is that Thomas maintains that those proofs are not meant to tell you anything much about God at all, for rather they tell you something about the world, namely that it is *created.* Of course, what shows it to be created shows that we need to speak of its Creator. But, as I shall explain shortly, we could not properly know what it is that we are speaking of when we speak of God, for the creator of every manner and kind of thing cannot itself be a kind of thing, or an instance of anything. Hence, the two things we need to say about Thomas' 'proofs' of the existence of God are, first, that they are meant to show God to exist, and second, that they are meant to show we are bound to have lost most of our grip on the meaning of 'exists' as thus predicated of God.

And it is this second point which he explains immediately after he has presented his arguments for God's existence. He tells us that in any other discipline than theology, once you have shown that you have a subject-matter for it, the next thing you do is to ask about its nature and

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scope. In the previous discussion, then, he thinks that he has established the existence of something for theology to be about, namely God. So you might suppose, he says, that the next task is to give some account of what God is—as he puts it, you are likely to suppose that you need to establish the manner of God's existence, what sort of thing God is. But, alas for the vanity of theological ambitions, he insists on disappointing us. Here is how he puts it:

> Once you know whether something exists, it remains to consider how it exists, so that we may know of it what it is. But since we cannot know of God what he is, but [only] what he is not, we cannot inquire into the how of God ['s existence], but only into how he is not. So, the next thing to do is to consider this 'how God is not'...[7]

Now I know that this will probably sound all rather too downbeat and unpromising of much for theology to do, since it appears to offer nothing in prospect for theology than the endless pursuit of a thought ever-vanishing into a trail of denials. But things could be worse, and for Thomas they are: the problem is not at all that theology has to battle against ordinary plain ignorance of what God is—as one might be ignorant of physics or biology—or by promethean effort of mind must seek to overcome the difficulties of knowing about a subject so distant from our ordinary experience. Rather, he says, the problem is the opposite: the real challenge for the theologian is not our ignorance of what God is, but rather that presented by those who think that they know what God is, for this is just idolatry. And that problem is presented to us equally by those theists who know all too well what they are affirming when they say 'God exists' and by those atheists—the mirror-image of the first—who know all too well what they are denying when they say 'God does not exist'. For both the affirmer and the denier are complicit in a sort of cosy and mutually reassuring idolatrous domesticity: in short, they keep each other in a job.

Thomas, however, will have none of this. Life is tougher both for the theist and for the atheist. God, Thomas, says, is not any kind of thing. So you are but doing the theologian's day-job if you merely say, 'there is no such thing as God'—you might as well proclaim your atheist manifesto by denying Santa Claus (a matter I will come to a bit later). Thomas put it this way, in a sort of thought-experiment. Suppose you were to count up all the things in the world on some lunatic project of counting, all the things that there are, have been and will be, and suppose they come to the number *n*. Then I say, 'Hold on, I am a theist and there is one being you haven't yet counted, and that is the being who created them all, God'; would I be right to say that now the sum

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total of things is $n+1$? Emphatically no. God could not be both the creator of all things visible and invisible and one of things created, an additional something, not even a *unique* additional something: for there cannot be a kind of thing such that logically there can only be one of them[8]. Of course, the final autograph of Beethoven's C sharp minor quartet is unique, there cannot be more than one of them, but that is simply a tautology, for its being described as 'final' attaches a uniqueness designator to it, and does not describe it as a 'kind'; but it is still countable as one in the series of Beethoven's final autographs. Whereas, as Thomas says, although the word 'God' is not the proper name of an individual, but a word we *use* in the way in which we use descriptions, still we have no proper *concept* which answers to it. Having no proper concept of God, we possess no account of the kind of thing God is; hence, we have no way of identifying God as an *instance* of any kind. After all, this follows because of what, if indeed you have proved God to exist, you have proved the existence of. What shows God to exist equally shows God's unknowability. And of course I do not expect you to believe all that: after all, I am here trying to encourage the atheist, not the theist, to have a decent go at denying God. All I am saying to the atheist is that she had better sharpen up a bit on her denials, for on the score so far, Thomas is well ahead.

That said, now for some words of encouragement for the atheist, for, poor bewildered chap, having abandoned a merely parasitical anti-fundamentalism, he must by now be feeling quite at a loss to know how to set about denying God. First, though, a warning about some unhelpful advice which you might get from your philosophical friends if the point has not already occurred to you for yourselves. You might be tempted at this stage impatiently to protest: 'if you, the theist, won't affirm anything at all, and in effect you have not, then why do I, the atheist, need to do any denying, because you theologians have already done all the denying there is to be done? Does not your so-called 'negative theology' amount to little more than a strategy of evasion which kills God off by a death of a thousand qualifications? You say 'God exists', but you add: 'in no knowable sense'; is 'one', but you qualify: 'not as countable in a series'; is 'good', but not, you say, 'on any scale of goodness', not even on the top of one. Might not your negative theologian just as well be an atheist as affirm so incomprehensible a God? Only give me something affirmed and I will at last have something to deny. All you are doing is endlessly postponing God: so all I have to do is tag along while you get on with the denials I thought it was my job to deal in and wait until you actually affirm something, which, by the sound of your Thomas Aquinas, you

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are never going to get round to doing'.

Now as an atheist response to the theologian, this line of attack, though promising, is not yet quite fair. There is something which the theist affirms, namely that the world is created. That, he thinks, is our starting point for talking about God, and so long as we remain resolutely anchored in the implication of that starting point—that the theologian is always speaking of the ultimately ungraspable, that we do not know what God is—the theologian can feel justified in all manner of talk about God, and can safely and consistently allow that everything true of creation, everything about being human, is in some sort grounds for a truth about God. Negative theology does not mean that we are short of things to say about God; it means just that everything we say of God falls short of him.

The theologian, therefore, howsoever 'negative' of disposition, need not be quite so slippery a creature as would reduce his position to a form of theological post-modernism, a position of endless *deferral*, according to which there is only postponement, only *pen*ultimacy, an endlessly contingent 'otherness', no rest in any ultimate signifier which could stabilise the whole business of signification upon a foundational rock of fixed and determinate reference. But at what price does the theologian at the last minute draw back from so extreme a negativity? Might not the theologians now be differently accused—precisely because they do not want to go so far down the post-modern road of an intellectual nihilism—of a form of intellectual cheating, of attempting to eat their cakes and have them? On the one hand, they will say, with the emphatic negativity of— to quote another negative theologian—a Meister Eckhart: God is a 'being transcending being and a transcending nothingness'[9]; on the other, they will take back with unblushing affirmativeness what they have just apophatically given away, and add a good, plain, unproblematical, undeconstructed existential '*there is*' one such. And are not the hidden theological interests betrayed at the last minute by that surreptitious '*there is*', howsoever negative-sounding and apophatic you get the description to be which follows it? Would not the theologian be obliged thus to cheat if he is to make any claim to a theism which does not simply collapse into the nihilism of a Derrida[10] or of a Nietzsche, who famously thought that getting rid of God required the abandonment of all grammar[11]? But the theologian cannot have it both ways: either, in a sort of reversal of Nietzsche, he can have his grammar, and his 'there is a ...' is a plain, ordinary existential assertion in good grammatical form, in which case it cancels the apophaticism of the description asserted to exist, and God is just another, ordinary 'thing-in-the-world'; or else the existential claim is

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cancelled as affirmative utterance by the apophaticism, in which case you have no ordinary, defensible, sense of '...exists' affirmed. Are we not then simply back to square one, forced to choose between an idolatrous affirmation and a negativity indistinguishable from atheism, with no third possibility falling between them?

I think at this point things are looking up for the atheist, though he is still not quite all the way to determining how to contest with a negation on terms adequate to the theologian's affirmation. For though it is true, as I said, that the theologian does affirm something the atheist can deny, we need to look a little more carefully at what it is that the theologian affirms, and it may not be quite what the atheist was expecting. The minimum the theologian cannot deny is that the world is created. 'Out of nothing'. And you get to say that by entertaining a question which the assertion 'God exists' answers to. It is a question about the world. It is a logically odd question about the world, but still a question with an intelligible sense: it is the question with which, in one or other version, each of Thomas' five ways ends: 'Why is there anything at all, rather than nothing at all?', for it is the legitimacy of the *question* which those arguments purport to demonstrate, by which I mean that, being a fair question, it has to have an answer. It is not the purpose of those arguments to place in our hands some knowable answer to it. It is an intelligible question, because it stands at the top end of a scale of questions which are all unproblematically intelligible and is intelligibly connected with them. For you can ask of anything whatever in the world, 'Why does it exist, rather than something else?' and you ask it, in the relevant sense, in one of the many disciplines of enquiry in which we human beings engage, most of which we call 'science'. And I do not see, if that is so, if you can legitimately ask of this or that, or of this or that kind of thing, why it exists, why you are to be prevented from asking why *anything* at all should exist rather than nothing.

You might disagree; you might think the question does not make sense, as Bertrand Russell did on a famous occasion in discussion with Frederick Copleston on the Third Programme, when he insisted that all you can say about the world, however it has come about, is that it is 'just there, that's all'[12]. There can't be a question: 'how come there is *anything* there?' because you could not give any account of the answer, the business of accounting for things belonging within the world; it can have no purchase on anything which might count as the cause of it. Now that is something we can argue about as theist does with atheist. For my part, I think it is an intelligible question, one the answer to which would bear the name 'God'. And it seems just arbitrary to close

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up shop just at the point where that question had begun to purchase.

On the other hand, one has to admit, like Russell, that it is a logically odd question, and just how odd can be best understood from its eccentric syntax. Attend to the 'rather than'. We can get this relational expression going when we can supply symmetrical values for the variables 'p' and 'q' in the expression 'p rather than q': for example, 'such and such is red rather than green'. The 'rather than' has the force of an intelligible contrast because red and green are both colours, and so we know what they differ as. But what are you to make of the 'p rather than q' if I substitute 'red' for p and 'Thursday' for q?—for it would seem odd to consider what 'red' and 'Thursday' differ as. All the same, as Chomsky says, no nonsense phrase is beyond all possible reach of some context which could make sense of it, and since I happen to think of days of the week as having colours, in that context it makes perfectly good sense to contemplate the disjunction 'red rather than Thursday', though admittedly it is the rather special one in which Thursdays are blue. But while you are thinking about the eccentric thing you have got 'rather than' up to in this case, let me add to your burdens: What oddity have you inflicted upon 'rather than' if you substitute 'anything whatever' as a value for *p* and 'nothing' as a value for *q*? Has the '...rather than...' any meaning left—is it still intelligible? In a way, yes, it is intelligible; it has the force of a very radical sort of 'might have been : there might have been *nothing*. A thing which is red, like a letter-box in the UK, might have been green, as letter boxes are in Ireland, but there are no doubt good reasons why they are red in the UK and green in Ireland, some prior states of affairs which account for the colours they are—providing a causal narrative, you might say. But if we could imagine that rather than there being anything at all there might have been nothing at all, we have, indeed, some force of contrast going for our '...might have been...' but not one you could give any account of in terms of antecedent states of affairs, no possible Chomskyan context to make sense of it, no explanatory causal narrative, for *a fortiori* there is nothing left to account for the fact that there is something rather than nothing, no bit of the world there functioning to explain the existence of things, but only nothing. And 'nothing', as Thomas says, is not a peculiar sort of causally explanatory something, it is not an antecedent condition; nor, alternatively, is there some specialised theological sense which might give force to that sort of 'out of' which is 'out of nothing': it means, he says, just the contrary: the negation negates the 'out of...' itself, as if to say: we have a making here, but no 'out of'[13], no antecedent conditions, so no process, no event; an after, but no before.

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Therefore, when you ask of the world 'How come that anything at all exists?' you are not asking an as yet unsolved question of empirical fact, because you are not asking any sort of empirical question: as Wittgenstein demonstrates in the *Tractatus*, there is no possible sense of 'fact' in which 'that there is anything at all' can be a fact, Russellian 'brute' or otherwise[14]. When you ask that question you are merely giving expression to something you know about the world: it is a state of affairs which might not have been, that's the sort of world we have: that it exists at all has been *brought about*.

Now an empiricist, upon hearing that the statement '*that* there is anything at all has been brought about' is not a 'factual' statement, will quite naturally conclude that it is not a proper proposition at all, but just the expression of a sort of non-propositional *attitude* towards the world, the sort you could choose to adopt or not without offence to facts or evidence either way. But it is clear that Thomas Aquinas drew no such conclusion, for he thought it *demonstrable* that the world is created, and non-propositional attitudes cannot be demonstrated. And of course it is just here that he is in trouble not just with the atheist but also with the most common sort of theist of our own times. Notoriously he is in trouble with Kant, who thought that you could get causal questions and answers going within the world, but that in principle you could not make sense of a causal explanation of the fact that there is one at all. But for me, a much more enjoyable part of daily academic life than being out of sorts with Kant, is the fact that I find myself in constant debate with most of my friends in Cambridge—colleagues in the Faculty and graduate students in our 'God' seminar—who disagree with me on much of this, though not all of it. I think most of us agree that the statement 'the world is created' is a proposition capable of being true or false, and further that it is a true proposition. But my theologian friends in Cambridge are endlessly telling me that I am wrong both in claiming that a purely rational causal proof of God is possible and in thinking that Thomas offers one.

On the score of the first, more general, disagreement, sometimes the appeal against proof is made on epistemological grounds of the sort found in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, sometimes on the theological ground, also found there, that you must deny reason its demonstrations in order to leave room for faith; but more recently another, now former, Cambridge theologian, John Milbank, has appealed to an argument of formal logic in Aristotle's *Posterior Analytics*. He tells me[15] that a supposititious causal proof of the existence of God is bound to be formally invalid by the fallacy of equivocation, since the sense of 'cause' in the premises could not be the same as the sense of 'cause' in

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the conclusion supposedly entailed. Now Aristotle maintains[16] that any deductive inference constructed from premises whose terms belong to one *genus*, to a conclusion whose terms belong to another *genus*, must fail by equivocation, for, as he puts it, scientific explanation and inference cannot thus 'skip' generic gaps. But if Aristotle forbids inferences which 'skip' the finite distance between one *genus* and another, how much the more, Milbank insists, must an inference be prohibited which purports to skip the *infinitely bigger* gap between any *genus* and a being which transcends *all possible genera.* In either case, the inference would fail by the fallacy of equivocation; and if in the theological case it did not fail for that reason, this could be only because it fails for the opposite reason. For if the sense of 'cause of the universe' were the same sense as that of 'cause *in* the universe'—if 'cause' were predicated univocally in premises and conclusion—then you would get a valid inference alright, but to an idolatrously worldly conception of God as just another, worldly, cause. Hence, a causal proof is either formally invalid because equivocal, or else valid because relying on an idolatrous univocity.

To which argument (by the way, it owes everything to Duns Scotus and nothing to Thomas Aquinas), of necessity all too briefly, I reply: validity is as validity does—or as the scholastics used to say, *ab esse ad posse valet illatio.* There cannot be a *general* case against arguments from premises to conclusions not univocally continuous with them, for we can easily construct counter-instances. Geach quotes one from Quine: from the relational term, '. . .smaller than...' and the general term, 'visible', both belonging to the universe of things which we can directly observe, we can form the compound term 'smaller than any visible thing' which is in perfectly sound logical order, yet could not, *a fortiori*, have application within that same universe of directly observable objects. As Quine points out: the compound gets us out of the universe within which the uncompounded terms both have application, 'without a sense of having fallen into gibberish'. He adds, 'The mechanism is of course analogy, and more specifically extrapolation'[17]. Now what holds for this simple compounding will hold for any argument whose premises contain the simple uncompounded terms and the conclusion the terms thus compounded: what holds is that such an argument will not fail of the fallacy of equivocation. On the other hand, those premises will, on condition of the formal validity of the argument, entail a conclusion whose terms are not univocally related to the premises. Now what holds for Quine's case, holds equally for one of Geach's on the score of inferential validity: an argument, if it could be constructed, whose premises contained the uncompounded

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terms, '...cause of...' and 'every mutable thing', both having univocal application within the domain of our human, natural, rational experience, would not fail of the fallacy of equivocation just because the conclusion entailed was the existence of the cause of every mutable thing. On the other hand, since it would be clear that the relational term '...cause of...' in the conclusion could not be understood in the same sense as it is understood in the premises, the argument would trade in no theologically offensive univocity, thereby reducing God to 'just another cause'. For the argument would have demonstrated the necessity of an analogical extrapolation which could not have been presupposed to it.

But you may be caused to protest—as one PhD student of mine did the other day, causing me hurriedly to write this next bit—that the two cases are crucially different: for is not God *infinitely* different from any creature? What may hold for inferences from one *genus* of creatures to another—even if Quine is right—cannot be supposed to hold between any creatures and God, for the 'othernesses' in question are not comparable, the one being finite, the other infinite, and in the latter case the gap to be crossed by inference must be unbridgeable, no rational argument could possibly get you across it. Well, *you* might not be caused thus to protest, but John Milbank was in an email sent from the depths of Virginia when I put Geach to him, and though I should not think it fair to take him on here without right of reply, I think I may fairly make one comment of a kind with which I know he anyway agrees.

You say: 'God's difference from creatures is incomparable with any creaturely difference'. Just so. But God's difference is not 'incomparably *greater*', because to say that it is 'greater' is to use a word of comparison and so is to say that it is comparable. You cannot even say: it is of this kind or that, only *infinitely* so. And you certainly cannot say, 'the difference between chalk and cheese is of *this* kind, and the difference between God and cheese is of *that* kind—see how incomparably different the two differences are!' We philosophers in the tradition of Herbertical Thomism all get on famously with each other agreeing that God 'is not any kind of being'; but, that being so, it follows that we should not fall out over *how* God is different from every created being which is of some kind, belonging, as one says, to some *genus* or other; for if God is not any kind of being, then his difference from creatures is not a *difference* of any kind, hence, is not incomparably greater, but, on the contrary, is, simply, *incommensurable*: that is to say, there is *no* measure of it at all. So, if we have a problem about inferences across different sizes of gap

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between creatures, we should be cautious of too readily supposing that, in the matter of God, 'size of gap' can in any way come in to it. That, as Herbert used to say, is just to make a mistake of theological grammar[18].

I apologise that all this is excessively condensed and, in the absence of a fuller explanation of these obscure thoughts, can I try a more theological tack? I sympathise with any Christian theologians who think that, in their proper concern to defend the divine 'transcendence', they should go in for maximising gaps between God and creatures to an infinite degree of difference; but I think it not helpful to put it this way, and that if they insist on doing so, they should consider how, consistently with such a strategy, they will approve of Augustine's fine words: 'But you, O Lord, were more *intimate* to me than I am to myself' —*tu autem eras interior intimo meo*[19]; for Augustine's sense of the divine 'otherness' is such as to place it, in point of transcendence, *closer* to my creaturehood than it is possible for any creatures to be to each other: for creatures are more distinct from each other than God can possibly be from any of them. The logic of transcendence is not best embodied in metaphors of 'gaps', even infinite ones, and if we must speak in such metaphors, we should at least acknowledge that, since we are in possession of no account of the gap to be crossed between God and creatures, it is difficult to see what force there is to the objection that rational inference could not cross it.

Now if you will permit me that much—and to be quite honest you should not do so without a lot more argument—then we have some support for the legitimacy of the question: 'Why is there something rather than nothing?' and we know that whatever the answer is we are led to contemplate a cause beyond our ordinary understanding of causes. And if we say, as Thomas does, that whatever the answer is, it is 'what people refer to when they talk of "God"'[20], then we know at least one thing about God: we know that we could not know what it means to say 'God exists' because the notion of existence has now run off the edge of our intelligible world, even if it was necessities of thought *about* our world which led us to it: before God, language has, as it were, run *itself* out of the possibilities available to it. So we have to conclude that to assert 'God exists' is to make an existential claim in a perfectly ordinary sense of 'exists' because there is no other available to us, there being no special theological or religious sense of 'existence' available to do for the existence of God. But that being so, and for no other reason, I know that what requires me to say 'God exists' is true also denies me a grasp on what it means to say it[21]. Therefore, if you, dear atheist, are to deny what I affirm, I must insist that you know how to deny all that follows from what I affirm. And it

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follows from what I affirm that, if there is an answer to that question, then we could not possibly know what it is: it could not be any kind of thing. So to repeat: it is no use supposing that you disagree with me if you say, 'there is no such thing as God'. For I got there well before you. What I say is merely: the world is created out of nothing, *that's* how to understand God. Deny that, and you are indeed some sort of decent atheist. But note what the issue is between us: it is about the legitimacy of a certain very odd kind of intellectual curiosity, about the right to ask a certain kind of question.

Let me therefore conclude with a few lightweight remarks about that business of asking very odd questions—the sort that you can make sense of asking, but not a lot of the answer. They are, if you like, rather infantile questions: adult questions are questions you have some sort of control over, questions you have disciplined procedures for dealing with, since the sense of the questions determines what kind of answers stand as good answers to them. This symmetry between questions and answers is simply what we mean by scientific method. Scientific questions are adult, intelligible questions demanding sensible answers arrived at by explicitly controlled methodologies. Theological questions, on the other hand, are childish: and this thought came to mind a while ago when I read in a newspaper report that Richard Dawkins had said that belief in the existence of God is childish, like belief in Santa Claus or in the Tooth Fairy.

Now I am not very sure what Dawkins does understand, but he clearly does not understand children if he thinks that the childishness of theism makes theism like belief in Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy. For Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy are adult stories and children do not spontaneously believe in them. Children only believe in Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy because adults persuade them to, and often for unimpressive reasons of their own, like contriving cover for the choice of inappropriate presents; whereas theism is closely connected not with adult myths foisted upon children, but with more spontaneous forms of thought which are natural to children's own minds; and adults seem often to want to suppress such childish thoughts, seeing that they energetically set about systematically destroying a child's capacity for them by means, principally, of compulsory education in properly ordered questions which you can answer in accordance with teachable methodological routines: this is nowadays called the 'core curriculum', or otherwise what you are being asked to do when you spell out your 'aims and objectives'.

Now you may have observed how children seem quite early to rumble this adult conspiracy to educate them into asking only sensible

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questions, for they soon learn the joys of irritating adults with truly offbeat questions; and when it comes to theology, Thomas is a pure child. For the child asks the question 'why?' once too often, where 'once too often' means: when there is no intellectual possibility of understanding an answer, where science and knowledge run out of things to say, indeed where reality itself has run out of things which can be said about it—in other words where language itself has run out. And that, for Thomas, is where theology begins, with a question so childish that now it is adult answers which are irrelevant and an impertinence: 'why is there something rather than nothing?' That is a question to which it is essential that premature and merely adult answers be ruled out, for the question could not have the sort of answer which you would expect from good science. Philosophers seem happy enough to say, after Aristotle, that philosophy begins in wonder. Alas, all too often their philosophy ends in its elimination. Instead of leaving us, as it were, in a condition of *instructed* awe—what Nicholas of Cusa called a *docta ignorantia*—it leaves us instead with Russell's blank and indifferent stare: that there is anything at all is just a brute fact[22].

On the other hand, as I have argued, too often theologians I described earlier as parasitical fundamentalists want to jolly things up with a quite mistaken and idolatrous account of how theology makes a difference, hoping to find for themselves a purchase on something to say that others cannot, a *particular* difference that their theism makes to our ordinary routine ways of explaining things. They will derive little comfort in such hopes from Thomas Aquinas. For him, to say that the world is created adds nothing at all to our information about the kind of world we have got. As Thomas, who thought the world is created, said in reply to Aristotle, who thought that it is not, the difference between a created and an uncreated world is no difference at all so far as concerns how you describe it; any more, as later Kant said, than the difference between an existent and a non-existent dollar can make a difference to what a dollar is. For Thomas, the logic of '... is created' is the same as the logic of '... exists': an uncreated X and a created X cannot differ in respect of what an X is, and so to say that the world is created makes not the least difference to how you do your science, or your history, or read your literatures; it does not make that kind of *particular* difference to anything. The only difference it makes is all the difference to everything.

And what kind of difference is that? Just this. What you mark by way of difference in saying that the world is created out of nothing is that it stands before us not in some brute, unmeaningful Russellian 'just thereness', in that sense as something just 'given' in which further

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questions are gratuitously ruled out, and that just at the point where they are beginning to get really interesting. Rather, in saying that the world is created out of nothing, you are beginning to say that the world comes to us, our existence comes to us, from an unknowable 'other'; that is to say, you are claiming that existence comes to us as pure gift, that for the world to exist just *is for it to be created.* As for why it exists, goodness only knows what the reason is. Of course, it might be the case that the world exists for a reason which *only* an omnipotent goodness knows, as a sort of act of love. But that would be another story which we could not tell for ourselves, but only if we were told it first, as a sort of *second*, superadded, gift.

In the meantime, what is at stake between the theist and the atheist? What is at stake is an issue which is, after all, central to our preoccupations as academics here, to our university responsibilities as such. It is an issue about the nature of *intellect*, and about how to take responsibility for all that it is capable of, about how to respond to the demands which, of its nature, it makes on us to persist in asking questions. It is about the legitimacy of a certain kind of last ditch question and about whether it can be right to set *a priori* limits to a capacity which is, as Aristotle says, potentially infinite; which being so, Thomas Aquinas adds, it is not going to be satisfied—that is to say, enjoy any question-stopping complacency in—even an *infinite* object. Deny that, and you do, for certain, deny God and you have got your atheism in one move. But in denying the legitimacy of the question you also deny intellect its nature, which, as I have argued, you can just as easily do with bad theology, for *eadem est scientia oppositorum.*

So, 'how to be an atheist?' It is not easy; you need to work at it. Be intellectually adult, get an education, get yourself a discipline; resist all temptation to ask such questions as you do not know in principle can be answered, being careful to suppress any which might seem to push thought off civilised limits; be reasonable, lest you find yourself being committed to an excessive rationality; and have the good manners to scratch no itches which occur in intellectually embarrassing places—at least in public. Then I shall argue with you on behalf of the child, not in the name of God but in the name of a question which remains about the world, not yet in the name of theology, but in the name, merely, of an intellectual possibility you have excluded, not on account of *how* the world is, which seems a relatively sensible and obvious state of affairs to me, but out of amazement of intellect, and a sort of primal gratitude of spirit, that there is anything at all, rather than nothing, and that there is any*one* at all, rather than no one, for whom it exists. For, of the two possibilities there are, that there is anything at all must be by far the

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more unlikely outcome. If you want to be an atheist, then, it is necessary only to find *that the world is* to be a platitudinously dull fact. But, I warn you, to be as resolute as it takes in the conviction of such cosmic dullness requires much hard work, not a little training, and a powerful mental asceticism. Anything less resolute, and you run the risk of affliction by theological itches which, the atheists will no doubt be distressed to hear, my theological colleagues and I will be paid at the same rate as them to scratch.

1 Nicholas Lash, *A Matter of Hope*, London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1981; Denys Turner, *Marxism and Christianity*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983.
2 A "Plea for Excuses" in J.L. Austin, *Philosophical Papers*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961.
3 Aristotle, *Peri Hermeneias*, 1 7a 31-33.
4 See K Marx, *Early Writings*, trans. R Livingstone and George Benton, London: Penguin Books, 1975, pp. 357-8, where he says: '...the question of an *alien* being, a being above nature and man.. .has become impossible in practice. Atheism, which is the denial of this unreality, no longer has any meaning, for atheism is a *negation of God*, through which negation it asserts the *existence of man.* But socialism as such no longer needs such mediation...' (p. 358).
5 Karl Barth, *An Introductory Essay* to Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. George Eliot, New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1957, p. xi.
6 *Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q2 a3 corp.
7 *Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q3 Prol.
8 Though it might be contingently impossible for there to be more than one: if there is only one Dodo left, then there cannot in fact ever be more Dodos than that one.
9 Sermon 83, *Renovamini Spiritu*, in Edmund Colledge and Bernard McGinn (eds), Meister Eckhart: *The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatise and Defense,* New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1981, p. 207.
10 See, for example, Jacques Derrida, 'How to avoid speaking: Denials', in Sanford Budick and Wolfgang Iser (eds), *Language of the Unsayable: The Play of Negativity in Literature and Literary Theory*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1989, pp. 1-70.
11 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Twilight of the Idols*, trans., introd., and notes Duncan Lange, Oxford: OUP, 1998, p. 19: what Nietzsche actually says is: "I am afraid we are not getting rid of God because we still believe in grammar".
12 In *The Existence of God*, ed. John Hick, London: Macmillan, 1964, p. 175.
13 *Summa Theologiae*, la, q 45 a1 ad3
14 See *Tractatus*, 1, p.31: "The world is everything that is the case" (or: ". .the totality of facts"); 6.41, p. 183: "The sense of the world must lie outside the world". *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, London: Routledge

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and Kegan Paul, 1962.

15 In private correspondence.

16 *Posterior Analytics*, I, 9, 75b 37—76a 30.

17 W.V.O. Quine, *Word and Object*, Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press, I 960, p. 109, and Peter Geach, 'Causality and Creation' in *God and the Soul*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969, pp. 80-81.

18 A 'grammar' of which many theologians in the middle ages other than Thomas had a firmer grasp than many moderns. As Eckhart insisted, God is 'distinct' from creatures by virtue of being *indistinct* [for a discussion of Eckhart on 'distinction' and indistinction' in God, see my article, 'The Art of Unknowing: Negative Theology in Late Medieval Mysticism' in *Modern Theology*, 14.4, October, 1998, pp. 476-479]. Likewise, Nicholas of Cusa insisted that the proper name for God was 'the not-other' [*ly non-Aliud*], for God is 'other' by virtue of being uniquely the one who is in *no* relation of creaturely otherness. This 'grammar' is necessarily the grammar of such paradoxes.

19 *Confessions*, 3.6.7

20 *Summa Theologiae*, la q2 a3 corp.

21 It is hard to know quite *how* to put this point clearly without being misleading. You do not want to find yourself distinguishing between what 'God exists' means *in itself* and *what we can mean by it*—for it is hard to know what sense can be made of an expression's meaning something that no one can mean by it. In any case, one thing Thomas clearly does not imply is that there is something we can 'mean' but not 'say' about God, which is the dubious formula Hacker uses *a propos* Wittgenstein's talk in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* about what can be 'shown' but not 'said': it is possible, Hacker says, 'to mean things which cannot be said'. Thomas' position seems nearer to saying this: we are justified in saying 'God exists', though what '... exists' means of God is beyond our comprehension. By the time we *do* get to know what 'God exists' means—in the beatific vision—we will no longer need to say it.

22 Wittgenstein was much better on this: in the *Tractatus* he shows why *that* there is anything at all cannot itself be just one of those things which '... are the case', a fact *in* the world: '*How* the world is, is completely indifferent to what is higher. God does not reveal himself *in* the world' (*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* , 6. 432, p. 187). Later, he adds that that there is anything at all gives rise to an 'astonishment'. He differs less from Aquinas than one might suppose when he adds: 'This astonishment cannot be expressed in the form of a question, and also there is no answer whatever.., we... run up against the limits of language' (Wittgenstein in conversation with Waismann, 30 December, 1929, in *Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle*, pp. 68–9). I am grateful to my PhD student, Andy King for pointing out this reference.

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