A Response to On Being An Atheist

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David C. Taylor, Jr.

Liberty University

Phil. 201-D30 LUO
Abstract

This paper examines H. J. McCloskey’s “On Being an Atheist” which was published in February of 1968. The conclusions of the article will be examined against the Cosmological, Teleological, and Problem of Evil arguments as well as the use of a proof system. The goal is to explain the shortcomings of McCloskey’s arguments and make a case for theism.

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In 1968, H. J. McCloskey wrote an article in the journal Question titled “On Being an Atheist.” The article set out to settle the fact that being an atheist simply made more sense than being a theist. In fact, McCloskey contends that being an atheist takes less faith than being a theist (McCloskey, 1968). The purpose of this paper is to examine his claims and give analysis of what Theists should consider when faced with these arguments.

On the Use of Proofs

McCloskey argues repeatedly that there are no amount of “proofs” for the theist point of view. He contends that there is no proof for design, and no proof for God. Nothing in his worldview appears to be absolute (McCloskey, 1968).

Dr. Mark Foreman of Liberty University disagrees with the use of “proofs” to discuss the existence of God. He claims that that this is not how the arguments were designed to work. He goes further to say that it is impossible to prove the existence of God with certainty and that it is possible that he could be wrong (Foreman, 2012).

I tend to agree with Dr. Foreman that we most certainly cannot 100% prove the existence of God. If we could, there would be no need for faith. However, this is not a theological study but a philosophical investigation. To prove God would mean we would need to be absolutely certain. But how could we be absolutely certain when we cannot even see God? The answer is that we cannot. However, we can see evidence of God in the world around us. Therefore, we do not need “proofs” for the existence of God, we simply need to have justifiable reasons to believe in the existence of God.
On the Cosmological Argument

McCloskey has also claimed that the “mere existence of the world constitutes no reason for believing in such a being” (McCloskey, 1968). Can we truly say that? We look at a building and say that it must have had a builder, the same with a painting, it must have had a painter. Why would the world and the universe be any different?

To the point, we must determine if God is a necessary or a contingent being. Evans and Manis discuss this in length. In their view, Theists do take God as being an absolute necessary being (Evans & Manis, 2009). They also state that the universe is contingent and therefore had a causal point. God, being the necessary being, did not have cause Himself, but was the cause of an unnecessary universe (Evans & Manis, 2009).

The Universe, like a building or painting, is evidence that there must have been a Creator. There must have been a cause of some type, it was not by chance. However, McCloskey disagrees. He claims that the argument of the Universe’s existence does not lead us to a logical conclusion of an all-powerful and perfect being (McCloskey, 1968). But how can one come to these conclusions? How can we not assume that the contingency of the Universe calls for a Creator, a Supreme Being?

It is my belief that the Cosmological Argument does in fact answer these questions. McCloskey does not believe that the Cosmological argument is legitimate. How could he? If he gave any merit to the argument it would break down his entire philosophical premise that God does not exist in any form. Dan Story concludes that this Being has to be a Theistic God and identical to the Christian God (Story, 1997).

However, with the description given by Evans and Manis we can conclude that the Cosmological Argument was not designed to provide for the existence of a Christian God, but
rather, to argue for the existence of some form of a God (Evans & Manis, 2009). The Cosmological Argument should provide people enough curiosity to figure out more about the God that is necessary to exist, no matter who He is (Evans & Manis, 2009). It is clear that while the Cosmological Argument does not answer everything about God and His existence, it does answer the question that if one is logical about the world around him, he will conclude that there is in fact a God.

**On the Teleological Argument**

McCloskey claims, with regard to the Teleological Argument, that to get the proof going, you must have indisputable examples of design and purpose (McCloskey, 1968). What exactly is indisputable? The argument in the article by McCloskey is extremely vague. What would be indisputable to him? According to Merriam-Webster, indisputable means that something is unquestionable (Merriam-Webster, 2003). I do not see how this can be reasonable. Anything can be questioned to a degree, does that decrease the validity of an argument? Does simply coming under question discredit something? The answer to that question is emphatically, no it does not.

A question that arises is, are there any examples that may not be “indisputable” as McCloskey argues, but would have strong enough evidence for a designer of the universe? Evans and Manis provide several examples that could be candidates for this explanation in *Philosophy or Religion: Thinking about Faith*. One that is particularly solid deals with modern science and tracing the history of the universe. Scientists have claimed that they can recreate models of what the universe would be like had some of the components been different throughout the course of time. What they have found is that even the smallest of changes to the
way things work in the universe would have resulted in almost certain impossibility of a viable universal existence (Evans & Manis, 2009).

The reality is, the complexity of the world around us could only mean there is intelligent design. Do we look at things that man has created and say they must have happened by chance? No, you would call that crazy. Why then would we think the universe would be any different?

However, could the evolutionary process displace the need for a designer as McCloskey claims in his article (McCloskey, 1968)? If we assume that evolution is true, Evans and Manis argue that we cannot look at it as a purely mechanical operation. They give an illustration of a machine designed to make shoes. The machine is set to produce one thing, it does not stray or change the template, if it did, it would be at the hand of a designer (Evans & Manis, 2009).

I would have to argue in favor of the position of Evans and Manis. Even if the evolutionary theories were correct, though I do not believe they are, they do not and cannot displace the fact of a designer. The sheer complexities of the world around us simply do not allow for it.

Could it be possible though, that the presence of imperfections and evil argue against intelligent design? According to Evans and Manis there are limitations to the arguments presented, both cosmological and teleological. Neither of these arguments prove the existence of God, but rather, the existence of a necessary causal being (Evans & Manis, 2009). The point is that we are not trying to prove, at this point, the existence of an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-loving God. We are trying to prove the existence of a designer being. If we look through the prism of only a designer and not necessarily a perfect designer, then the arguments hold true without question.
According to Story, atheists actually acknowledge that there is a designer without realizing it. They do this by using the term, *Mother Nature* (*Story, 1997*). By their own admission, whether they realize it or not, they do believe in intelligent design.

**On the Problem of Evil**

McCloskey’s main objections to theism are related to the existence of evils in the world. He notes that no perfect being would have created such a place where evils and harm to innocent beings could exist and take place (*McCloskey, 1968*). Notably, this is a problem that has plagued theists for centuries. How could a perfect God, or being, allow such things to exist in the world today?

While there is not a simple answer to these claims and accusations, it is a topic that can be looked at logically, and even explained properly. Arguments on the theist side often lean towards making arguments that while evil does exists, there is always the possibility of good that comes out of that evil. In other words, the argument is that the evil will serve a greater-good (*Evans & Manis, 2009*).

Atheists, however, will argue that there is in fact evil that is pointless and serves no purpose whatsoever. The logical argument to this, according to Geisler, is that while we may not see the good involved with that evil that does not mean it does not exist. We are finite beings and as such we may not be able to know everything about the evil at hand (*Geisler, 1999*).

The point to make to McCloskey’s argument is that we do not have all the answers, and, based on Geisler’s point, we may not be able to know all of the answers. However, we can logically conclude that if we do not know all of the answers, we can reasonably say that the greater Being, God, does know the answers and that the problem of evil does not discredit the possibility of His existence.
Conclusion

While atheists will applaud McCloskey’s article, “On Being an Atheist,” as a great work for the arguments of atheism, I believe it is clear the shortcomings of his arguments. The evidence for a Supreme Being, God, are too obvious to deny. The world around us is evidence to intelligent design, the intricacies are too numerous to count. And there are too many complexities to have merely happened by chance.

While the arguments that have been discussed in this paper are not 100% certain, and certainly not without flaws, they are reasonable enough to accept as evidence and justification for a Supreme Being. They have been tested against probable defeaters, and those defeaters have more issues with them than the arguments themselves. So, while not 100% certain or conclusive, I believe that we are justified in believing in a higher Supreme Being. We are justified in believing in God.
References


