The New Atheism

Part 1 of 2: Engaging the New Atheism
with Darrell Bock, Glenn Kreider, Doug Blount
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Welcome to The Table, where we discuss issues of God and Culture and today, our topic is the new Atheism, and I’m Darrel Bock, Executive Director for Cultural Engagement at the Hendricks Center here at Dallas Theological Seminary. And I have with me two professors of Systematic Theology, Glenn Kreider and Doug Blount who are going to help negotiate our way through the discussion of the new Atheism and thinking through both the claims and also the issue of town and engagements, to how we have conversations and relationship to the new Atheism and to what it’s all about.

So I’ll start with this question and Doug, I’ll start with you. It’s called the new Atheism. Now, Atheism has been around for a little bit of time, so what makes the new Atheism new in your judgment?

Well, what characterizes the newer Atheist, they have affinity to Friedrich Nietzsche. Prior to Nietzsche, the Atheist got attitude was typically one of regret. The view was well there isn’t God and that’s unfortunate, would be nice if there were. What you have with Nietzsche is a view according to which God’s non-existence is actually a good thing, something in fact to be celebrated. In fact the English translation of one of Nietzsche’s best known works is called, “The gay science” or “the joyful science,” the joyful knowledge. And for him the joyful knowledge just is this knowledge that God is dead and of course what Nietzsche means by that is not God literally died but rather that he’s never existed at all.

So Nietzsche sees this as a liberating fact, something to be happy about, something to celebrate and I think you see that with the new Atheist, I think there’s a joy in their perspective and from their point of view, recognizing that God doesn’t exist. I think you also have a level of vitriol and anger and criticism from the new Atheist directed toward people of faith particularly Christians that has seldom been seen in the past.

And so would it be your premise that we very much are dealing with the continuing shadow of Nietzsche in a lot of ways in terms of what we see in the public square when it comes to the discussion between Atheist and those who hold some type of theism?
Doug Blount: Yeah I think so. I think what you see whether it’s self-conscious or not on the part of new Atheists as such as Dawkins or such as Harris. What you see is very much is a continuation of the spirit of Nietzsche, absolutely on a number of fronts. And it’s not just the attitude of joyfulness with respect to their belief that God doesn’t exist, it’s also – there’s a similarity with respect to the way they conduct the discussion. Now, I don’t think Dawkins or Harris or Hitchens or even Daniel Bennett are quite as interesting in terms of their writing as Nietzsche. I mean Nietzsche is brilliant in terms of expressing himself but they are certainly, in keeping with Nietzsche’s work in terms of being very much on the attack and even at times displaying a level of anger toward people of faith – again in general but Christians in particular. But I don’t think, at least prior to Nietzsche had been seen often.

Glenn Kreider: I think that’s another key that Doug’s mentioned a couple of times, to make it clear and explicit. This is not simply an attack on Christianity or Christian view of God but upon religion in general. So they got a strong vitriol of Islam and other religious perspectives as for Christianity. I think that’s for any number of reasons and has all kinds of huge implications for conversations in the public square about the Atheism.

Darrell Bock: So I take it you would agree with the assessment that what we’re dealing with here is a post-Nietzschean perspective that has these added elements of almost, there’s not just the joy, I almost sense a confidence about the belief that comes through in the writings -- certainly in writing doctrines.

Doug Blount: Absolutely. In fact one of the things I was reading earlier this week in Encyclopedia reference online to new Atheism, and one of the things that the author of the article I was reading said - and I think this exactly right- is something that characterizes and distinguishes these Atheists from previous is the level of confidence they have in their belief. It’s “off the charts,” so to speak.
**Glenn Kreider**  
Yet, at the same time, Dawkins will, depending on the context and depending whether he is performing or he is thinking, depending upon whether he is trying to motivate people and to call attention to himself or when he is being more nuance and reflective, he will talk about the arrogance of claiming Atheism is true and will identify -- I heard him say several times, once live that the most I can claim for myself is I’m six-sevenths of an Atheist. I’m agnostic but I’m agnostic on this side and it really is some of his strongest rhetoric for people who claim that they’re balanced or in the middle between extreme confidence in God’s non-existence or extreme confidence in God’s existence.

So I think there’s a difference in the way he performs depending upon the context and what he is trying to accomplish, but that’s not in any way to deny the extreme confidence with which he performs in public about his views.

**Doug Blount**  
And I was going to say - going – [or] following up on that, and it’s interesting in light of that, that when somebody of the stature of Antony Flew comes to affirm that there is a God, right, that this man who has been known in professional philosophical circles is the champion of Atheism for the last 50 years or so. When that man reverses himself, Dawkins’ response is to basically say, “Well, he’s gotten senile,” right?

So I mean you’ve got something of a real disconnect between what he says in some contexts and how he responds to some others.

**Glenn Kreider**  
Which is another issue and because I think there -- the issue for Dawkins is that faith for him is so unreasonable, so unbelievable, so lacking in evidence that he cannot conceive anybody who would have an epistemological ground in the faith commitment so that… there are all kinds of things going on with Dawkins particularly and it’s representing a whole group across the board, the four horsemen of the group.

**Darrell Bock**  
That’s a good place to start because some people may or may not know some of these names that we’re talking about so let’s work through… I like your image [of] the horsemen brings clouds to mind and that kind of thing. So…

**Glenn Kreider**  
Currently came out of the conversation, the four of them had several years ago.
Darrell Bock: So it’s a self-reference.

Glenn Kreider: It seems like it. And then Al Moher used it in his Atheism Remix.

Darrell Bock: Which probably it, but anyway so let’s go through these four figures and talk about them. And as we talk about them, let’s see if we can surface some of the emphases that we get out of the new Atheism. I don’t know if you want to proceed in any particular order necessarily across the four or whether you want me to raise them one at a time and you comment on them all. I’m comfortable to do either.

Glenn Kreider: We’ve mentioned Dawkins.

Darrell Bock: Okay let’s start there with Richard Dawkins.

Glenn Kreider: Evolutionary Biologist in Oxford, wrote The Blind Watchmaker back in ’86 but probably best known for The God Delusion in ’06 where he argues that faith is a virus and it infects everything that it touches. God is no longer -- God is not only non-existent but it’s a good thing that he’s not, and religions are toxic in this world.

His follow up book then- The Greatest Show on Earth- is a defense of evolution which is… those two books fit together. What drives Dawkins is his conviction that science potentially answers all the questions that evolution is the explanation which makes God not even in this, [not even] possible.

Darrell Bock: Yeah I think when I read Dawkins, the thing that strikes me is that I get a sense that we’re not just even with scientific worldview, it’s almost as if evolution itself is a worldview lens. Fair summary? We’ll come back…

Doug Blount: In fact if I recall correctly and I think this was in the period around the publication of The Blind Watchmaker, which of course was a much earlier volume but as the title suggests is making exactly the same point as the most recent book namely that in evolutionary processes, you have an explanation for all there is in terms of life.
But if I remember right, it’s in that context that he made the point that Darwin made it possible to be an intellectually satisfied or intellectually fulfilled Atheist, that what Darwin provided was the explanation for us which had been lacking prior to his work and that, I take it from Dawkins’ point of view is what really seals the faith for belief in God.

_Darrell Bock_  Okay, let’s go next to Christopher Hitchens. Anyone wants to comment on him?

_Glenn Kreider_  Just for the record, Hitchens is a philosopher.

_Doug Blount_  Is he? [Laughter]

_Glenn Kreider_  Fancies himself as such or did.. [Laughter]

_Doug Blount_  Right, fancies himself as such.

_Glenn Kreider_  Of course we have other philosophers in the mix too.

_Doug Blount_  Yeah, Daniel Dennett certainly would have a claim obviously, a legitimate claim to be professional philosopher.

_Darrell Bock_  So that’s a third name. Let’s talk about both of them.

_Doug Blount_  Before we go there, let me make this point because I think this is worth making on the hills of the comment you may go in. Dawkins’ work, Hitchens’ work, Harris’ work, and I mentioned those three because those three –Sam Harris we have yet to mention but we will, those three are not professional philosophers by any means and yet many of the issues they’re addressing in their works are really frankly quite philosophical in nature. And frankly, a lot of the discussions coming from the three of them that’s more philosophical in nature is from a philosophical point of view, fairly poor and we can talk more about that as we get into some of the more details. For instance when we talk about the Odyssey and such but that’s worth noting.
Now, Daniel Dennett is the exception here. Dennett is a well-respected and very fine philosopher. And I should say my comment about the other three, I mean take Dawkins for instance, he’s obviously very well-respected and well-regarded biologist. But that does not a philosopher make and when you’re dealing with issues that go beyond the empirical, some training is helpful to put it well...

**Darrell Bock**

I think Dawkins would recognize that he presents himself at least as a pretty strong materialist. I mean there is no other realm to go to when you read his material and he doesn’t like any distinction when someone says science has this limit, now we’re going to hand it off to either theologians or philosophers, he doesn’t like to go there. So we definitely we’ll loop back to those ideas.

Sam Harris is the name that we mentioned a couple of times now, but we haven’t described who he is.

**Glenn Kreider**

PhD in Neuro Cognitive Science from UCLA and really a couple of books that he has written. The End of Faith and then he followed that up with A Letter to the Christian Nation recently, the moral landscape where he argues that Atheism does have a foundation and a basis for morality. Harris might be the most careful, non-provocative, logical, controlled, presenter of the mix. When you watch him, he’s very effective as a debater, as a speaker. If you put Hitchens in one end, who goes out of his way to be provocative, Harris I’d put on the other end of continuum.

He’s a lot easier to listen to, but every bit as dismissive and cruel in his dismissal of religion.

**Darrell Bock**

He’s crisp. You picked up Letter to Christian Nation and it’s amazing in my thinking how much he packs into a tight space, as he make his case. In some ways I see him as you do, one of the more effective communicators of the cause because of the crispness with which he writes and the clarity also. It’s crisp and clear in terms of what it is he’s trying to say and how he goes about saying it to make the point.

Well, those are the four… Let’s build a list first, maybe the best way and then we can proceed through. There’s certain issues that consistently come up.
Well, let me make one observation before we leave this. It does strike me that three of these writers are deep in the sciences in terms of their orientation which brings up the issue that you sometimes see when we walk into these conversations about how faith and science are often -- and this is true in our culture as well, pitted against one another is as opposite, you can’t have foot in the sciences and a foot in faith, that seems non-sequitur to a lot of people and they seem to collide with one another and certainly these writers push that element of their description, that because they are scientist and deal with evidence in the material world and what they can show all those kinds of claims, the person of faith is casting their hope on things that they can’t show and demonstrate, that kind of thing. And this contrast between science and faith, or science and metaphysics almost, comes up in these conversations.

I think I want to start by addressing that first, that that is an important framing of the entire conversation that we have. And I’m not sure who wants to take that first.

Glenn Kreider
I’d love to hear Doug begin to unpack the metaphysical presuppositions there…

Doug Blount
Well, in fact Darrell it’s interesting the way you put it, you talked. You mentioned science versus faith and then science versus even metaphysics, which I don’t think is a bad way to put it although I’m going to put it slightly differently. It seems to me what they have in common is they are making science metaphysics, right? So that the view that these folks are holding is a view according to which there isn’t anything other than what science can investigate.

Darrell Bock
And that itself is a massive assumption.

Doug Blount
it’s a massive assumption. In fact it’s interesting, not only does a scientific, a rigorous scientific approach to the world not exclude faith. Isaac Newton who I think by all accounts would count as a legitimate scientist,

Darrell Bock
He’s a qualified scientist…
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Doug Blount  I would think so [laughter]. What a lot of people may not realize is that Newton was just as if not more interested in matters theological as he was matters physical. And so the view that you can’t be a serious scientist and have faith commitments is a non-starter.

Darrell Bock  Now it’s interesting because I can almost hear Dawkins echoing in my head as you said that. Well he’s -- Newton was partially a product of his age that’s why he gives the space to faith.

Glenn Kreider  And he was before Darwin…

Doug Blount  But Dawkins better be careful about wielding that sword because if he’s not, he’s going to end up getting impaled on it himself because to the extent in which he wants to write Newton off as a new product of his cultural contexts, why not make the same response to Richard, and say well, your views on science and faith, or science and religion are themselves nothing but the product of an overweaning confidence in science and a metaphysical naturalism that undergirds the view of many scientists.

Darrell Bock  It’s an interesting argument and I don’t think I will have an opportunity to pull in New Testament studies very often in this conversation but I am going to pull play the card here.

Craig Keener’s just written a book on miracles in which he has gone through and the whole gist of his book, it’s two volumes is to document how deeply seeded the belief in the transcendent is across our societies. And his claim is he said it is particularly western… segment of a western view to cut the transcendent out of conversations when it comes to humanity.

And the interesting thing is it’s basically the form of the argument you just gave to me that Dawkins is so -- if I can say it, the western elitist scientific bubble that the views of masses of humanity all around the world who live in variety of different context, all affirming of some sense of there’s something else is ignored and it’s labeled as superstition when in fact, in might be evidence of something that we internally as human beings sense about who we are as creatures.
Glenn Kreider

History – soft sciences— don’t constitute evidence for Dawkins in his ground.

Darrell Bock

That’s right.

Glenn Kreider

So it’s just dismissed as superstition. There’s no evidence. I mean you hear him talk about the resurrected Christ, there’s no evidence. So everything is dismissed except what is repeatable and what meets his fairly narrowed definition.

Darrell Bock

Yeah and that’s why I’m saying it’s a label, it’s a way of shoving it off to the side as if it doesn’t really matter. Well, let’s talk about this. What do you see is the limit of science on the one hand? Probably that might be a good way in. The limits of science on one hand and why should we think that metaphysics extends in some ways beyond that or that science doesn’t cover metaphysics.

Doug Blount

Well at the very least that there’s more to metaphysics than what science investigates and is interested in. Well, first of all philosophers of science and the point I’m about to make is a point well-known and recognized within those circles. Philosophers of science recognize there are fairly significant limits to what science can and can’t tell us. There are clearly phenomena in this world that are beyond philosophical investigation. So for instance, well morality is not a proper subject of investigation or how about the laws of logic?

If science is going to operate in a rational manner, presumably even the most hard-headed committed scientist is going to grant that they’ve got to operate by way of laws of logic but these are not amenable to scientific investigation. The beautiful – aesthetics is an area that really beyond scientific inquiry. There are all kinds of areas of human inquiry and human interest that are recognized as you say, or as Keener perhaps says and I’m looking forward to reading that book, I wasn’t aware of it. There are all sorts of areas of human interest that have been recognized all across the globe as being legitimate that are simply outside the scope of scientific inquiry.
And for science to dismiss the legitimacy of those areas of interest just simply on the grounds that we don’t deal with them, strikes one as arrogant to say the least. I mean really, what seems to me to be operating underneath this kind of imperialistic scientific perspective is the old philosophy of logical positivism. And it goes logical positivists are famous for having put a criterion of meaning on the table and the criterion of meaning they put on the table was this. A statement is meaningful only if either it can be investigated by the methods of science or it’s true by definition. Well, the problem with that very criterion of meaning is that it doesn’t need its own criteria, its own standard. So by its own light, it’s meaningless.

Well, this is a view that surprisingly enough, held great sway in professional philosophical circles for at least two and a half decades, maybe longer but it’s long since died in philosophical circles for precisely the reason I mentioned, it’s self-defeating. And philosophers came to see this but it’s a view of meaning that is particularly adaptable to a scientific perspective on the world. And I think you have, in some scientific circles, a commitment to something like that very understanding of meaning still at work. Well then without a realization that as a matter of fact that perspective has been undermined fairly decisively.

**Darrell Bock**

I’m going to shift on you here slightly because I think the conversation we’re having important but it also raises something that I have observed when you raise issues. So you can’t examine morality, scientifically you can’t examine religious faith scientifically. Something that I’m seeing happening in some discussions on the science side, is the study of -- if I can say it this way, the brain and chemical reactions and those kinds of things as a way to try in a -- I’m going to use this characterization, I’m not sure how else to say it, in a way to secularize those conversations to try and give explanation -- certain people are religious because there’s a certain combination of the way the chemicals are reacting in them that create these ideas and image. And what I see going on there is the attempt to layer with a “science” things that actually aren’t just material. And it’s almost as if science, at least an expression of science, I don’t want to generalize. An expression of science is trying to force its way in to certain territory as a way to try and claim it and thus by doing so, try and remove or give the appearance of removing a need for having any other explanation for what’s going on. Am I sensing that going on with some of the science that we see in these discussions?
Doug Blount Well I think yeah. You’re right to think you’re seeing that because I think that’s there. It strikes me that there’s a real problem for the new Atheist here. In here, I’m making an aside on your aside but there’s a real problem that the new Atheists face because on the one hand, one of the things that the new Atheist are committed to doing and this is very un-Nietzschean, is they’re committed to very vocally maintaining that you can be an Atheist and have a commitment to objective morality. They’re very committed to that.

On the other hand, by their own lights, if all there is, is the material, then really in the end all our beliefs about morality end up being a are frankly brain states and those brain states are by their own lights what they are by way of evolutionary processes. And those processes if selected simply for survivability. So there’s disconnect here because on the one hand, we want to maintain an objective morality, on the other hand are beliefs about morality are nothing but artifacts in our brain that helped us survive? I mean, there’s fairly obviously this continuity with respect to that.

Darrell Bock I’m going to tell us to put that in the cash, okay? I want to come back to that because it’s really, really an important idea and I don’t want to lose it and I’m glad you’re writing it down because we want to come back to that. But I want to ask Glenn if he wants to weigh in on what we’ve been talking about here, either in terms of the science or the brain or the metaphysics and science contrast.

Glenn Kreider One of the clear statements that one hears regularly from Dawkins and others is rooted in the Enlightenment, in the elevation of reason over revelation. What I think I would want to be sure to say is that although our position, believing that there is a God and believing that God has revealed himself to us and believing that God’s revelation of his eternal power and divine nature are plain and clear and seen in what he has made, although that view is dismissed out of hand and mocked and belittled, that remains the foundation of our epistemological -- that’s the foundation of our epistemology. We are people of faith, seeking understanding and I think we have to be clear that you can make fun of it, you can dismiss it, you can mock it, you can say whatever but we can’t give that up, that’s who we are and what we do.
Sometimes it’s necessary just to make that obvious point but knowing that everybody in this room recognizes that but to talk about brain states, etcetera. It identifies the problem with a scientific perspective but it doesn’t help or hurt our cause one way or the other. We believe there’s a God who revealed himself by what he has made.