

BOOK REVIEW

of

Paul Copan and William Lane Craig, editors,
Contending with Christianity's Critics: Answering New Atheists & Other Objectors,
B&H Academic, 2009.

January 2010

This review is by Larry D. Paarmann.

There have been a number of books written in response to what some call the “New Atheism.” *Contending with Christianity's Critics*, edited by Paul Copan and William Lane Craig, is different in that it is the “fruit” of annual conferences of the Evangelical Philosophical Society, a society that is “dedicated to (among other things) addressing these challenges.” The book has 18 chapters written by 18 authors. These authors all have advanced degrees in philosophy, theology, or a related area, and most hold an academic position at a university, most in the United States. The level of discourse and the wide ranging areas presented are in stark contrast to Christianity's critics such as Richard Dawkins. As the subtitle suggests, the “critics” responded to in this book include the New Atheists, but are not limited to them. Other critics addressed include naturalistic philosophers, naturalistic scientists, critics of the historical reliability of the Bible, and critics of Christian theology. As with any book with numerous authors the quality of the individual chapters varies somewhat, as well as the theological and philosophical positions held by those authors. However, the overall result is a compelling presentation of those who have thought deeply about the subjects addressed. This book may never achieve the financial success of, say, *The God Delusion*, but those who genuinely wish an intelligent discussion of issues raised by the New Atheists, as well as those by other objectors, will find this book to be a good read.

Paul Copan is Professor and Pledger Family Chair of Philosophy and Ethics at Palm Beach Atlantic University. He is the author of *Loving Wisdom: Christian Philosophy of Religion*, Chalice Press, 2007, along with William Lane Craig, *Creation out of Nothing: A Biblical, Philosophical, and Scientific Exploration*, Baker Academic, 2004, as well as several others. William Lane Craig, who holds two doctorates (one from the University of Birmingham and one from the University of Munich), is Research Professor of Philosophy at Talbot School of Theology. Craig has authored or edited over thirty books.

The book under review contains three parts and, as mentioned above, eighteen chapters. Part 1 is titled *The Existence of God*, and contains the first six chapters with the following titles: Dawkins's Delusion; At Home in the Multiverse?; Confronting Naturalism: The Argument from Reason; Belief in God: A Trick of Our Brain?; The Moral Poverty of Evolutionary Naturalism; and Dawkins's Best Argument Against God's Existence. Part 2 is titled *The Jesus of History*, and contains chapters 7 through 12 with the following titles: Criteria for the Gospels' Authenticity; Jesus the Seer; The Resurrection of Jesus Time Line; How Scholars Fabricate Jesus; How Badly Did the Early Scribes Corrupt the New Testament? An Examination of Bart Ehrman's Claims; and Who Did Jesus Think He Was?. Part 3 is titled *The Coherence of Christian Doctrine*, and contains chapters 13 through 18 with the following titles: The Coherence of Theism; Is the Trinity a Logical Blunder? God as Three and One; Did God Become a Jew? A Defense of the Incarnation; Dostoyevsky, Woody Allen, and the Doctrine of Penal Substitution; Hell: Getting What's Good My Own Way; and What Does God Know? The Problems of Open Theism.

Part 1 is primarily responses to the claims of atheists, and I offer below comments on most of those chapters. My primary reason for reading this book was for what is contained in Part 1, and therefore I stress it in this review.

The opening chapter, written by William Lane Craig, responds directly to Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion*, by all accounts enormously successful. However, Craig, a philosopher, finds Dawkins' arguments, well, less than convincing. A few quotations from this short chapter should suffice to give Craig's impressions: “the argument is patently invalid”, “The only delusion demonstrated here is Dawkins's conviction that this is ‘a very serious argument against God's existence’”, “Several years ago my atheist colleague Quentin Smith unceremoniously crowned Stephen Hawking's argument against God in *A Brief History of Time* as ‘the worst atheistic argument in the history of Western thought.’ With the advent of *The God Delusion* the time has come to relieve Hawking of this weighty crown and so recognize Richard Dawkins's accession to the throne.” Has anyone written a positive, yet critical review of the phenomenally successful *The God Delusion*? I haven't read one yet! What does that say about how to write a book that will sell millions of copies? What does that say about the readers of those copies?

Chapter 2, written by James Daniel Sinclair, has the subtitle of “Critiquing the Atheist Many-Worlds Scenario.” One of the strangest phenomenons of our time is the seemingly serious proposal of multiple universes, and that mostly by those who are supposed to be scientists! There isn't a shred of evidence for any such thing, and assuming these imaginary universes are disjoint, nor could there be! Yet, these supposedly unbiased and evidence-driven “scientists” want us to take them seriously about multiple, perhaps infinite, universes! One may ask, what could possibly be motivating them to go down this path, given that it is not evidence. Could it possibly be something other than love of the truth wherever it may lead by these “unbiased scientists”? Well, the problem is that this universe, the one we live in and know something about, just looks too well designed for life as we know it! Not only does the biosphere here on planet earth look designed, as acknowledged even by Dawkins, but our solar system, our galaxy, and the universe itself looks suspiciously like it was designed with us (you and me) in mind. Now this causes a problem for atheists and materialistic scientists, to the point even of proposing evidence-free multiple universes to try and somehow get around this difficulty! The idea being that if there are perhaps even an infinite number of universes, then the

probability of at least one of them being compatible with life as we know it will end up being at least something greater than zero.

Chapter 4, written by Michael J. Murray, is concerned with the increasing scientific evidence that we humans have a natural, innate, belief in God with at least some notions of what it means to be moral. This seems to be increasingly acknowledged by atheists and theists alike. Many atheists believe it is something that we need to overcome, being a remnant of our barbarian past, whereas many theists consider it to be there by virtue of being created in the image of God. In other words, the old concept that we are born with a mind that is a blank slate, is being replaced by “conclusive evidence that human minds come into the world with all sorts of ‘software’ both preinstalled and booted up.” It would appear that this simply adds more to the claim that we are “fearfully and wonderfully made.”

Chapter 5, written by Mark D. Linville, makes his case that naturalism, at least intellectually, does not provide a foundation for morality. The issue of morality is a long-standing debate between theists and atheists, or naturalists. A complicating factor is that theists are not arguing that atheists are necessarily immoral, or even that theists are more moral than atheists. Rather, is moral conduct intellectually consistent with theism or atheism? Another factor at issue is that morality is not just about how you behave, but how you think you *ought* to behave. That is, the question at issue is are there any true *oughts* or not? Are there objective moral standards or not? Approached this way, as Linville develops, regardless of how you may actually conduct yourself, it is difficult to see how there could be any objective moral standards if all that exists is the material universe.

Chapter 6, written by Gregory E. Ganssle, gives the most generous review of Richard Dawkins’ *The God Delusion* that I have seen. Actually, it is not a review of the book *The God Delusion*, but of one of Dawkins’ arguments against God’s existence in that book. Ganssle expresses his conviction that this argument against God’s existence is Dawkins’ best. What is that argument? Dawkins does not attempt to prove that God does not exist, but rather provides his evidence that this universe in which we live fits better within an atheistic worldview than it does within a theistic worldview. Clearly, evaluating the evidence that Dawkins provides as to which conclusion is most valid is subjective, but Ganssle attempts to look at the evidence as fairly as he can. One of Dawkins’ arguments is that biological systems develop gradually over time through the mechanism of natural selection. Theists as well as atheists agree with this, at least to some extent, as the natural world testifies. Ganssle agrees that this seems to fit better within an atheistic worldview than it does within a theistic one. This, Ganssle believes, is Dawkins’ best argument. Since Dawkins has long been a champion for Darwinian evolution, it is not surprising that he would put forth this argument. However, Ganssle counters by offering four observations that he believes fits far better within a theistic worldview than within an atheistic worldview: 1. A world that is ordered and susceptible to rational investigation fits better in a theistic universe. 2. A world with consciousness fits better in a theistic universe. 3. A world with significant free agency fits better in a theistic universe. 4. A world with objective moral obligations fits better with a theistic universe. Ganssle develops each of these observations and concludes, perhaps not surprisingly, that his arguments better Dawkins’. One might add, of course, that if natural selection cannot be shown to be the “origin of species,” as Darwin put it, but can only account for what is sometimes referred to as microevolution (see, for example, Michael Behe’s book *The Edge of Evolution*, Free Press, 2007, where he attempts to determine just what evolution can and cannot do), then Dawkins’ *best* argument is completely undermined!

Part 2 is primarily concerned with responding to liberal theologian critics and atheists who question the historicity of the New Testament, and more specifically that of Jesus. This part addresses the authenticity of the Gospel accounts, the person of Jesus, and the resurrection.

Part 3 is concerned primarily with questions of Christian theology. The overall theme is that Christian theology is consistent and makes sense. The chapter on the Trinity (chapter 14) made the most impression upon me, as I think the author (Copan) is correct, that Christians do not know this doctrine as well as they should, and this is the most important doctrine about who God is. There is also a chapter on the incarnation, and another on penal substitution, one on hell, and the last one critical of developments in open theism.

As mentioned in the opening paragraph, this book presents a strong contrast with those written by the New Atheists, in particular Dawkins and Hitchens. It is scholarly, informative, challenging, helpful and insightful, both as a response to the new atheism, and as a reasoned presentation for some of the other issues confronting evangelical Christianity.