Contemporary Responses to Atheism – David Fergusson


David Fergusson is Professor of Divinity at the University of Edinburgh. Although Fergusson is a Christian by persuasion his aim seems to be to defend faith generally from its critics. He also engages with Judaism and Islam at various points in his response to the new atheism (NA).

Fergusson believes that it is important to engage with NA and respond to the claims / arguments. The issues that the NA touches upon are significant for every person and so it is important for us to give a reason for the hope that is within us. Fergusson also believes that the NA may have something to teach us (pp. 1-2)

He notes that there is much hostility in the arguments of atheists towards people of faith and also vice versa.

“Some of the heat needs to be taken out of the discussion if we are to reach a measured and balanced account of the validity of the arguments.” (p.11)

To do this, Fergusson wants to apply a method that parallels the scientific method in our approach to dealing with NA:

“This we are frequently reminded is how science ought to be practised – what is required is a judicious weighing of the evidence, a fair consideration of alternative hypotheses, a willingness to revise and even on occasion abandon deeply held convictions. These are the marks of the scientific spirit which need to be brought to the study of religion.” (p.11)

Fergusson’s method is not one of purely offense or purely defence, but one of conversation:

“My claim is that a conversation needs to be established between those occupying the middle ground of scepticism and faith, where each side recognizes that is has something to learn from the other whether that is about the persistence of faith or its many pathological expressions in the world.” (p.12, emphasis mine)

Chapter 1 – Atheism in Historical Perspective

Fergusson sketches a brief history of Atheism from the Ancient world, through the Enlightenment to modern day. At the end of his chapter he argues that basing faith on philosophical reasoning (proofs of God’s existence etc.) has led to and continues to open faith to greater attack and its further undermining.

“The ‘proof’ of God lies within the act of faith, but this does not absolve theology from the responsibility of attending the claims of atheism.” (p.30)

For Fergusson God can only be apprehended by faith, reason is redundant in this regard. From the rest of Fergusson’s book it seems as if the best we can hope for is to say that faith in God can be consistent with other areas of knowledge. Other than that, belief in God is a choice of faith.

Chapter 2 – The Credibility of Religious Belief: Claims and Counter Claims
Fergusson starts off arguing that “Belief in God is quite different from belief in other things.” (p. 35) Belief in God rarely comes from weighing all the evidence and then making a judgement that God probably exists. Religious belief isn’t just about the existence of one object amongst many but it affects our whole perception of the world. It involves a complete reorientation of self and our living.

“... the truthfulness of a religion is best known in living it. When it enables one to live well, this will be a strong reason for judging that some of its deepest convictions contain a measure of truth.” (p.37)

For Fergusson the validity of faith is therefore not found in reason but the pragmatic question ‘does it work?’

He follows the line that “... religious beliefs are properly basic in their own right. We are entitled to hold them as fundamental ways of perceiving and acting in the world without requiring their justification by links to more fundamental belief states.” (p.37)

**The classical proofs of the existence of God**

Fergusson mentions the cosmological argument but concentrates on the design argument. For the NA evolution offers a powerful argument that the design argument for God is flawed because science can account for the design of specific objects in the world.

Response: For him modern science shows that literal understanding of the Biblical account of human creation and history is wrong. Religion needs to accommodate the evolutionary description not reject it. Evolution is does not favour atheism or religion, it is neutral. *Religion and science offer complementary descriptions but are intimately linked.*

Fergusson also says that there is a design cannot be explained by science: the order in the world presupposed by science is explained as God’s design. Even if science can explain the ‘design’ of specific objects it cannot explain the general appearance of order in the world.

**The Anthropic Principle**

The idea that the fundamental physical constants of the universe are fine tuned to ensure that life may exist. This has been combined with the idea of multiple universes to explain away the appearance of design. If there are multiple universes then we should not be surprised to find one in which life exists.

“If we have an ensemble of universes that is amenable to scientific description and which is capable of generating one like ours, then we can reasonably ask whether this requires more explanation ... A multiverse that is rationally intelligible is almost as much in need of explanation as our universe alone, even if it lacks a single anthropic bias.” (p.50)

ie. Even if we can explain the fine tuning of the universe away using a multiverse and there is no bias towards humanity, this multiverse still needs explaining. Explaining away the anthropic principle does not prove that God does not exist.

“When all the smoke is cleared, we seem again to be confronted with the twin questions of why there is a universe at all and why it exhibits a rational structure capable of scientific description by its conscious inhabitants. To these questions, theism offers a single explanation.” (p.51)
The problem of evil

The problem of evil is frequently used as a counter-argument to theism. Theologians typically respond using a free will or great good defence. Fergusson allows that these defences contain some truth but they falter, are inadequate or inappropriate in the face of the scale of evil. There is no theodicy (an account of why God actually permits evils in the world) that will resolve the problem. However faith does not deny the magnitude of evil. Struggle and suffering are found throughout the Bible, including at the cross. In scripture we find resources for coping with evil and dealing with our complicity and even recognising its eventual defeat.

“Again it needs to be conceded that this is not a simple rejoinder to the sceptic’s challenge. Yet it does remind us that the problem is already acknowledged and engaged where faith arises and is practised. For this reason, it is difficult to see the problem of evil as a sudden and successful knock-down argument that can unexpectedly ambush the forces of theism.” (p.54)

Conclusion

He concludes: “…there is no knock-down argument that will finally secure either of the competing positions against its rival ... the project of natural theology today is often that of showing that faith is not unreasonable.” (p.54, emphasis mine)

Chapter 3 – Darwinism: How much does it Explain?

Physical Evolution

Fergusson continues his use of complementary descriptions. Evolutionary description and faith can complement each other.

“... there is nothing to prevent the theist from claiming that diving agency resides ... in creating and sustaining a cosmos that is informed with sufficient natural properties to bring [evolution] about.” (p.69)

“The complementarity of different types of description is central to the argument here. No one discipline or perspective can tell the whole story. No-one discipline or perspective can tell the whole story.” (p.69)

Fergusson is not in favour of Intelligent design arguments to counter atheism. Intelligent design is the idea that life shows complexities of design that cannot be explained by evolution. Evolution is breaks down and is considered an insufficient explanation. God must have stepped in at various points along the evolutionary track. NOTE: Intelligent design is not anti-evolution but just says it is not sufficient.

The problem with Intelligent Design is that if we try to indentify particular things in the world that could only be designed by God and then science describes them, we end up with a God-of-the-gaps problem. God gets squeezed out. Also intelligent Design theory does not advance scientific understanding. How do we describe how, when and where God acts in Intelligent Design? Also if God needs to intervene in the evolutionary process, does this not imply a defect in the original plan of creation? Creation is not good!
Evolutionary Psychology

Evolutionary psychology hypothesises that religious behaviour is a result of evolution. The mind is not a blank slate but is equipped with a range of psychological mechanisms designed by natural selection over time. Evolution has predisposed us to religious belief and practices. These were naturally selected because the increased our ability to survive.

Fergusson dismisses the concept of ‘memes’ (a virus of the mind that spreads) as being useful for the dismissal of the existence of God. Some scientists say that everything ‘memes’ purport to explain can be accounted for in different ways by a range of different disciplines. Others ask how memes relate to brain functions – a meme has not been detected experimentally. A final problem with memes is that they do not allow for the role of critical thinking and evaluation in the survival of ideas. Are science and atheism just memes?

Response: Just because we are predisposed to believe in God this doesn’t mean God doesn’t exist. Evolutionary psychology and theology are compatible / complementary. An evolutionary description of the origin of religion does not exclude the possibility of divine revelation. The truthfulness of God is not dependent on whether we are predisposed to belief or not.

Chapter 4 – Morality, Art, and Religion: Invention or Discovery?

Do you need God for morality?

Fergusson points out that morality is not dependent on God. Some people who do not believe in God are deeply ethical eg. Buddhists

Sociobiology seeks to explain morality in terms of evolution. Altruism towards those inside our group facilitates the survival of our genes and therefore was naturally selected. Ethics therefore becomes an illusion – there are no real moral categories eg. good / evil. However the sociobiological explanation struggles to explain charity to those outside our group eg. Parable of the good Samaritan. There is also the problem of describing justice and mercy.

Fergusson returns to the idea of complementary views again:

“while evolutionary forces may have generated powers of empathy and moral reasoning in human societies, these then have a capacity for more independent reflection and assessment that is not bound by evolutionary drives.” (p.108)

ie. We can transcend the evolutionary description.

Art

Fergusson discusses the evolutionary idea that art finds its origin in sexual attraction eg. The colour tail of the peacock. He argues that whilst evolution may offer a plausible description of the origins of art, it stops short of explaining art as a cultural phenomenon. Explanation is multi-layered and the biological explanation of artistic origin is not exhaustive.

Chapter 5 – Is Religion Bad For Our Heath? Saints, Martyrs and Terrorists

In this chapter Fergusson moves from arguing for complementary views to calling for balance in the arguments of NA.
Conflict and violence

NA contends that religion is bad and that it exacerbates the conflict in the world. Fergusson concedes the point that we cannot dismiss that religion is part of many conflicts. The bloody history of Christianity using force to extend Christ’s kingdom cannot be ignored. The modern ‘martyrdom’ of suicide bombers is a distortion of the ancient concept of martyrdom. In Islam the term ‘Jihad’ has different interpretations which depend on complex cultural and historical histories. Culture and history, not just religion are important in conflict. Conflict is exacerbated by atheists and those of faith. There are resources in religion that lead to peacemaking and these can just as much be discerned in action as well as the resources that lead to conflict. Religion can be used for good and evil. There needs to a more balanced use of the evidence whilst not underestimating the capacity for religion to fuel hatred and intolerance.

Health

NA sometimes portrays religion as resisting secular progress in healthcare. This may be partially true but a balance is needed. Religious organisations are important in the promotion of education and healthcare in communities, especially those in poverty. Research also suggests that faith is good for psychological and social well-being.

Child Abuse

NA argues that religions are guilty of child abuse through indoctrination. Fergusson argues for a more balanced view. The bad examples do not prove the theory that all religious nurture is abusive or brainwashing. Good religious education enables children to develop skills of discernment and gives the freedom to make decisions the child progresses to adulthood.

After calling for balance on the part of NA arguments in this chapter Fergusson also comments on the NA:

“Not all their criticisms are misplaced. We need to recognise the inherent dangers of some mutations of religion, the presence of superstitious elements in much popular piety, and the need for a critical and informed account of our religion. One’s own faith will be chastened and even enriched in this encounter.” (p.145)

Chapter 6 – Sacred Texts: How Should We Read Them?

In his last chapter Fergusson criticises the way that the NA handles Biblical texts and compares their methods Biblical fundamentalism.

“Much of the attack on sacred texts actually commits the same kind of error that is elsewhere condemned in fundamentalist traditions. The verses are simply fork-lifted out of their original historical setting. They are then treated without reference to standard methods for reading, and it is assumed that they are or ought consistently to be applied as a guide to faith, morals and politics, independently of communal patters of interpretation.” (p.152)

He gives a brief overview of hermeneutics showing why interpretation is complex. A literal or surface reading of religious texts is not enough.
“The sceptic may concede the necessity of critical interpretation and appropriation, but may still claim that the sheer plurality of sacred scriptures must inevitably induce doubts about the claims of each of them ... Our sacred texts cannot be proven as authoritative to outsiders or sceptics by any single argument, any more than can our most deeply held religious beliefs. Here again their worth and rationality are displayed, rather than demonstrated, through the ways they function the practice of the believing community.” (p.173)

**Key concepts for Fergusson: Complementary descriptions, Balance, Reason, Weighing of evidence, Learning from each other.**