

## ANTITHEISM: A REFLECTION

Christopher New

### *Abstract*

Why is there no sustained tradition of argument concerning the existence of a supreme (omniscient and omnipotent) being who is perfectly evil, as there is about one who is perfectly good? Arguments which are reflections of the ontological, cosmological and teleological arguments, and arguments based on personal experience or the occurrence of antimiracles (harmful events not explicable by science) could have provided at least as good grounds for belief in such a being (ie for antitheism) as their originals in fact provide for theism. An imaginary encyclopedia entry, in which fictional antitheistic arguments and thinkers are presented, illustrates this point. The reason for the nonexistence of a tradition of antitheism seems therefore to be that it is merely emotionally, not that it is rationally, less inviting than theism.

### I

The world might have been different, our beliefs might have been different. As well as there being theists who believe in the existence of God, there might also have been antitheists who believed equally seriously in the existence of the Devil. Not the Devil of some theologies, God's rival and inferior, but a being with the supremacy that theists attribute to God. Antitheists, like theists, would have believed in an omnipotent, omniscient eternal creator; but whereas theists in fact believe that the supreme being is also perfectly good, antitheists would have believed that he was perfectly evil.

Suppose there *had* been a tradition of antitheism as there is in fact one of theism; suppose we had antitheologians as well as theologians. What sort of arguments could they have provided for their beliefs? – Arguments just like our present theistic arguments, but stood on their heads; in other words, *reflections* of our present theistic arguments. To see that this is so, we need only consider how, if things had been different, a philosopher of today might have written an encyclopedia entry on antitheism. Let us imagine, then, that there has been an antitheistic tradition which is the reflection of our actual theistic tradition, with antitheistic thinkers whose views (and whose very names) are reflections of our actual theistic thinkers. This is how the entry might run.

## II

'Probably the most famous antitheistic argument is the ontological argument, first advanced by Ts Mlesna in the eleventh century, and later adapted (without acknowledgement) by the seventeenth century antitheist Setraced. Mlesna argues in essence that it is self-contradictory to deny the Devil's existence, hence that it is necessary that he exists. As Mlesna puts it, the Devil is by definition a being than whom no worse can be conceived. Now, anyone who has the idea of such a being in his mind and simultaneously denies that the being exists in reality is in effect saying that the idea in his mind of a being than whom no worse can be conceived is not after all that idea; for in denying that that being exists in reality he is implicitly conceding that he can conceive of a being still worse – one that exists in reality. So the Devil's existence cannot intelligibly be denied.<sup>1</sup>

'The second main argument is the cosmological argument, which is originally an antitheistic adaptation by the thirteenth century thinker Saniuqa of an argument by the ancient philosopher Eltotsira. Saniuqa argues that everything in the universe is contingent, and that every contingent thing requires a cause of its existence. In order to avoid an infinite regress, and for any contingent thing to exist at all, then, there must be a noncontingent being which is itself uncaused, but causes everything in the universe. And this necessarily existing (because noncontingent) being is the omniscient, omnipotent and omnimalevolent Devil.<sup>2</sup>

'The third argument is the teleological argument, also known as the argument from design. Unlike the two arguments just considered, it does not attempt to *prove* the Devil exists. Rather it claims that his existence is the most rational explanation of observed features of the world.<sup>3</sup> It thus has considerable persuasive power, and the eighteenth century philosopher Leunammi Tnak actually held that it was one of the most convincing of all the arguments for the Devil's existence, while the contemporary

<sup>1</sup> Compare St. Anselm, 'Proslogion', *Medieval Logic and Metaphysics*, D. F. Henry (ed.) (London: Hutchison, 1972), 101–7.

<sup>2</sup> Compare St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (London: Burns, Oates and Washburn, Ltd., 1920), Question 2, Article 3. There are various forms of this argument, as of all antitheistic arguments. I give here only the simplest forms.

<sup>3</sup> Some argue that the cosmological argument should also be presented as an argument of this type. Compare R. G. Swinburne, 'Faith and the Existence of God' (*Key Themes in Philosophy*, A. Phillips Griffiths (ed.) (Cambridge: C.U.P., 1989), 125.

philosopher Trams has declared "the argument has a fascination for us that reason cannot easily dispel."<sup>4</sup> The argument starts from the observation that the universe exhibits great regularity and order on the one hand, and a marvellous adaptation of organisms to the circumstances of their existence on the other. It concludes that the most rational explanation of these features is that they did not happen by chance; rather, they are the work of a supremely intelligent designer – the Devil. It has often been pointed out, particularly, since Emuh the eighteenth century sceptic, that the conclusion that there must have been a designer does not of itself allow us to infer that the designer must have been omnimalevolent, let alone omnipotent and eternal. Antitheists reply that omnimalevolence, at least, can rationally be imputed to the designer as the best explanation of what he appears to have designed. When we consider how well the universe functions to perpetrate and perpetuate evil, it is hard (perverse, antitheists say) not to attribute omnimalevolence to its designer. Who but a malevolent being, they demand to know, would arrange for the enormous sufferings caused in the world by natural calamities and human actions alike? Think of the pain and destruction wrought by earthquakes, floods, tornadoes, diseases, droughts and famines. Would a benevolent designer have planned them? Think of the daily and routine butchery practised by animals (including man) upon their prey. Who but a malevolent being would design the massive jaws of the shark and tiger, with which they so effortlessly rend and crush the infant seal or helpless cow? Who else would design the cancer virus, so beautifully adapted to ravage and kill innocent children? Who else, indeed, would design the human brain itself with its awesome capacity, so often actualised, to torture, maim and kill by the thousand and the million? As the antitheist Mailliw Yelap has observed, if we found a time-bomb in a nursery, primed and set to explode when it would wreak the maximum of death and destruction, we would reasonably assume that someone evil had designed and deliberately put it there. How much more reasonable must it be, then, for the impartial observer to attribute the world as we know it to an evil designer?<sup>5</sup>

Let us pause to consider these arguments for a moment. Clearly, they are open to objections. The ontological argument has

<sup>4</sup> Compare J. J. C. Smart, "The Existence of God", *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, A. Flew and A. MacIntyre (eds.) (London: SCM Press, Ltd., 1955), p. 44.

<sup>5</sup> Compare St. Thomas Aquinas, *op. cit.*, and R. C. Swinburne, *op. cit.* 127–30.

attracted both criticisms and defence ever since it was put forward, and it remains controversial. It has been claimed by many, for instance, following a slightly different objection of Nolinuag (a contemporary of Mlesna) that the same form of argument could be used to prove the existence of God – i.e. a being than whom no better could be conceived – or, indeed, the existence of the worst or best conceivable instantiation of *any* concept. And this, it is alleged, is so absurd that we must conclude the argument form is invalid. Antitheists attempt to meet this objection, but their replies have not been universally accepted.

'The cosmological argument has been criticised on the ground that it does not explain why there could not be an infinite series of causes without beginning, in which case there would be no need to posit a first uncaused cause. The teleological argument has the defect, as we have seen, that it does not establish that the designer is eternal, nor that he is omnipotent, and some even claim there are indications that he might be good, not evil. Besides, it is claimed by many that evolution can explain the adaptation of organisms to their environment without recourse to the hypothesis of an intelligent designer.

'Defenders of the arguments attempt to answer these objections, or to meet them by modifying the arguments themselves. It is perhaps correct to say that, while none of the arguments proves the Devil exists, the objections to them are not in every case decisive. And antitheists hold that, taken together with the next two arguments, antitheistic arguments do at least present a reasonable case. Let us turn, then, to the argument from antimiracles and the argument from antireligious experience. First, the argument from antimiracles. Antimiracles are harmful or evil events which cannot be explained scientifically. Such events are attributed by antitheists to the supernatural agency of the Devil. Antimiracles are not reported as frequently now as in earlier times, but many have heard of them, and there are numerous documented instances of their alleged occurrence. Sudden deaths and physical or mental injuries, for instance, which occur to apparently normal and healthy people often defy scientific explanation, and are therefore attributed by antitheists to the supernatural agency of the Devil, whose intervention, they claim, is the most rational explanation of such phenomena. Of course, some sceptics reply that even if one is not available now, a scientific explanation which 'naturalizes' these events will eventually be found. But the fact is, antitheists argue, none has been found so far, or not for all of them, so it is an at least

equally plausible hypothesis that they are antimiracles performed by the Devil; and sometimes this is actually *more* plausible. As Enrubniws, the contemporary antitheist, has observed: "If today's evidence shows that probably a violation of natural law occurred, we ought so to believe and to seek the best explanation we can of it."<sup>6</sup>

The second argument concerns antireligious experience. To many people, whom we have no independent reason to believe were deluded, it has seemed at different moments of their lives that they were aware of the Devil and his influence on them. (Literary representations of this appear in the traditional Tsuaf story, dramatised effectively by the poets Ewolram and Ehteog – although these posit also the existence of God.) These reports, it is claimed, cannot be discounted. Enrubniws has pointed out that, unless there are countervailing reasons, a person's sincere assertions should be taken at face value. "We ought to believe that things are as they seem to be unless and until we have evidence that we are mistaken." When I sincerely assert that I communicated with someone yesterday, my assertion has a probability of being true, unless there is some evidence against it. The same holds, he claims, for sincere assertions of communications with the Devil.<sup>7</sup>

When we consider all these arguments for antitheism, how convincing a case do they seem to make? Philosophical opinion is of course divided on its answer to this question. Different authors give different weight to different arguments. While most antitheists agree that no argument is conclusive, they all claim that they do at least establish antitheism as a coherent hypothesis with rational grounds to support it. Some antitheists, of course, go further and claim that no other hypothesis is as well-supported.

There is, however, one serious objection to antitheism, one that is often considered decisive by theistic or agnostic opponents, and it is that objection that I shall address in the rest of this brief article. The objection is known as the problem of good. If the Devil is omniscient, omnipotent and omnimalevolent, it is asked, why does he allow the existence of good in the world? Either he can't prevent it, in which case he is not omnipotent, or else he chooses to allow it, in which case he is not omnimalevolent. While peculiarly relevant (as briefly noted above) to the teleological argument, this objection is of wider import. If it is correct, a being with all the characteristics

<sup>6</sup> Compare R. G. Swinburne, *op. cit.* 131.

<sup>7</sup> Compare R. G. Swinburne, *op. cit.* 131–2.

which antitheists attribute to the Devil cannot exist. What answer can antitheists give here?

'Let us first of all distinguish between natural and moral good. Natural good comprises events and states like health, good harvests, good weather, the non-occurrence of earthquakes and tornadoes etc. which are the results of natural causes. Moral good arises from human actions – those that promote happiness rather than suffering. Let me deal with the antitheists' view on natural good first. Natural good occurs, they argue, as an inevitable result of the laws of nature that are necessary for the production of evil. If we are to cause harm, we must know how to do so, and this requires the regularities described by laws of nature. Thus, if we are to be able to drown unwanted girl-children, we must know that human beings cannot breathe under water. If we could not rely on this fact, and millions like it, which instantiate various laws of nature, our efforts to do wrong would be chaotic and ineffective. But, as Enrubniws has remarked,<sup>8</sup> a corollary of this fact about human beings and water, for instance, is that they will be able to breathe happily and healthily on land. So the good of easy respiration on land is a necessary consequence of the operation of laws of nature without which evil and suffering would be seriously reduced. The same point can be made, of course, with regard to other laws of nature. And it is no derogation from the Devil's omnipotence, omnimalevolence or omniscience that he does not do what will in the long run fail to maximise evil. Besides, the existence of good is necessary in another way for the production of evil. If nobody was sound or happy, how could we perform the evil acts of maiming and infecting them, or making them miserable? If the environment was filthy already, there would be no scope for us to exercise our malice or sloth in polluting it. If nobody possessed food or shelter or riches, how could we develop the evil motives necessary for pillage and theft?

'It is sometimes conceded that these arguments have force, but objected that the Devil did not need to allow *so much* good in order to obtain these evil results. He ought never to have allowed such natural goods as years of plenty, for instance, or peace or good health, goods which are not uncommon in the world. This is admittedly a difficult objection to meet, but antitheists have a reply. It is that the fewer natural goods the Devil provides, the less opportunity he provides for men to exercise responsibility. If there

<sup>8</sup> Compare R. G. Swinburn, *The Existence of God* (Oxford: O.U.P., 1979), 202–14.

are great goods which we can, through our knowledge of nature, choose to produce or preserve, and we choose, rather, to prevent or destroy them, we exercise our free will in a serious, not a trivial way; and the evil we do is not toy-evil, it is serious.<sup>9</sup>

'Whether or not what appears to be superfluous good is in reality the minimum necessary for the production of the maximum of evil, it should be noted that the antitheists' reply here, by appealing to the notion of responsibility, has brought us to the problem of *moral* good and the so-called free will defence. We sometimes choose to do good, and the Devil has made the world such that we have the opportunity to do massive good if we choose. Why does an evil creator permit that? The free will defence alleges that free will is an evil, for it makes sin possible and allows us to approach a little nearer to the status of our evil creator. Since it is worse for us to do evil of our own free will than to be causally determined to produce evil, the Devil gives us free will. But in creating men with free will, he has to accept that sometimes they may act for good rather than for evil. However, the greater evil that comes about from, and is comprised by, the possession of free will far outweighs the occasional good that also occurs through its existence. The world, in other words, is a worse place for the existence of free will, with its possessors' infrequent good acts, than it would be without it. This argument, of course, depends on an empirical assumption, that there is ultimately more evil than good in the world as a result of free will. While in the nature of the case this cannot be established until the end of the world, antitheists claim that the evidence of human history so far supports the hypothesis. His freely undertaken wars and massacres, his habitual indifference to others' suffering, they declare, are far more conspicuous in the records of man's progress than are his episodic lapses into mercy, peace and friendship. In large and in small, we choose sin and crime more often than their opposites.

'A particular problem is sometimes thought to be posed by the suffering of the guilty. If the Devil exists, sceptics ask, why does he allow the guilty, who have never done anything good, sometimes to suffer? But this objection is confused. Since the Devil promotes only evil, he has no interest in protecting the wicked from suffering. So it should not surprise us that the wicked suffer as well as the good; in that way greater suffering is brought about. It is worth noticing, by the way, that the counterpart problem for theists, who hold that

<sup>9</sup> Compare R. G. Swinburn, *The Existence of God* (Oxford: O.U.P., 1979), 218-21.

God, not the Devil, exists, is much harder to solve; which seems, indeed, to render their position virtually untenable.<sup>10</sup> For it appears wholly inconsistent with the existence of an omnibenevolent, just and omnipotent being that he should allow the innocent to suffer, and suffer pointlessly, as they apparently do. But, as we have just seen, if there is an omnimalevolent being, the motive of his every action will be to promote wickedness and suffering. Whether it is the wicked or the good that suffer is indifferent to him. It is the quantity and quality of suffering that matters, not the distribution. So he allows his pain to fall upon the unjust and the just alike.

'Antitheists therefore conclude with some plausibility that the problem of good is not insoluble, and that there is no compelling argument against the existence of the Devil.'

### III

The world might have been different, our beliefs might have been different. And it is instructive to ask why they are *not* different. In my fictional encyclopedia entry, I have suggested that antitheism has as good arguments as theism to support it, and in some cases perhaps better ones. But if that is true, why is there in fact no antitheistic tradition? The answer lies, I am afraid, more in our hearts than in our heads. Men are inclined to believe what they would like to be true, and they would like it to be true that man is the creature of God, not the Devil, that man has a loving, not an indifferent or malevolent, creator, and that man has a leading role in the evolving drama of the universe, rather than a mere walk-on part. Hence we have a theistic, but no antitheistic, tradition of intellectual inquiry. Not because theism is rationally more plausible than antitheism, but because it is more comforting to believe.

This is a sobering thought. For as Nietzsche has said in one of his less rhetorical, but therefore more telling, remarks: why should we expect the truth to be comfortable?

*Department of Philosophy  
University of Hong Kong  
Pokfulam Road  
Hong Kong*

<sup>10</sup> See, e.g., I. Goldstein, *The Philosopher's Habitat* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), 199–201.