

A Muddled Defense of New Atheism: On Stenger's response

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Victor Stenger (this issue) has responded to my recent criticism of the so-called New Atheism movement (2013). Here I endeavor to counter Stenger's note and highlight several of the ways in which it goes astray. To begin with, however, let me summarize the main points of my earlier paper.

In it I briefly recounted the history of New Atheism (NA), focusing particularly on the contributions of its most vocal and popular proponents. I then suggested that there is not much "new" in the NA, in the sense that its basic tenets are essentially the same as those articulated by earlier ("classical") atheist authors. However, there are two truly novel traits of NA: i) it has had a significantly higher popular impact than any public outreach effort by atheists in recent memory; and ii) it seems to be characterized by a marked turn toward "scientism" (Haack, 2003), a general attitude seeking to extend the epistemic (and possibly social and political) domain of science in areas where it is of questionable import, or to exaggerate scientific claims out of a sense that science as an epistemic enterprise deserves more respect than it is perceived to receive.

I then suggested that (i) is likely the result of the cultural shock triggered by the 9/11 terrorist attacks, a shock that has permeated Western, and especially American society, and that has had the peculiar mirror effect of emboldening people disaffected with religion as well as people who cling to it; the link in question has been acknowledged by NAs themselves (e.g., Sam Harris and Richard Dawkins) as a major motivator of their efforts. I further suggested that (ii) is problematic for both atheism and science, because it is accompanied by an almost anti-intellectual dismissal of non-scientific disciplines (especially philosophy), which impoverishes both atheism qua science-informed metaphysical and epistemic position, as well as science itself, by exaggerating its scope and making it into an all-encompassing ideological doctrine rather than the very powerful set of tools for discovery that it actually is.

Stenger's misguided defensiveness

Ironically, I think Stenger's response to my paper makes some of my points about New Atheism painfully clear: his tone is both defensive and outraged; his arguments are muddled; and he doesn't seem to realize on just how much we agree (for the record, I am an atheist myself, as well as a scientist by original training, before turning to philosophy full time). Let me give the reader a sense of what I am referring to.

Stenger begins by accusing me of saying that only philosophers can write competently about atheism, of ignoring the popularity of books by the NAs, and of discounting the fact that such books were written for a general, not technical, audience.

Nowhere do I make the first statement. What I did instead was to criticize what I see as some inherently philosophical arguments advanced by a number of NA authors, which I think is a perfectly legitimate intellectual exercise. Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins and other NAs are more than welcome to make forays into philosophy, but if they do so they better come equipped with what it takes — just like any philosopher who writes about science better be familiar with the science she writes about. As for the second charge, the fact that some NA books are very popular is indisputable, and indeed I highlighted it in my original paper; it is also, of course, entirely irrelevant to the soundness of their arguments. And yes, I am aware that the NA authors write for a general public and not a technical one.¹ But does that mean that they get to be sloppy as a result? Would Stenger say that it is okay for a scientist to write questionably about his discipline just because he is addressing a general audience? Stenger is also factually incorrect about some of the specifics: he says, for instance, that Jerry Coyne's *Why Evolution is True* was an "instant new atheist bestseller." But Coyne's book — which I reviewed very positively in *Science* (2009) (a fact of which apparently Stenger is not aware) — is a non-technical introduction to evolutionary biology for the lay public, not at all a book about atheism (although that is also the title of Coyne's *blog*, which certainly has been a major platform for NA).

Throughout his essay, Stenger confuses religion (i.e., an organized set of beliefs, characterized by a social structure of one sort or another) and belief or faith in one or more gods. For instance, he says that polls show an increasing number of people disaffected with organized religion. This is true, but it does not equate to a higher number of atheists in the streets, as most

¹ Stenger amusingly writes that "philosophical treatises ... are read mainly by other philosophers," which is just as true as the statement "scientific papers are read mainly by other scientists," and precisely as irrelevant to the merits of any intellectual discussion.

of those people retain a belief in gods or the transcendental while at the same time severing ties with formal structures like the Catholic Church. From there, Stenger seamlessly goes on to state that NAs question the idea that “faith” should carry “any moral or intellectual authority.” I wonder where Stenger gets the idea that I think faith provides anyone with either moral or intellectual authority? And does he really think this point is something that had not occurred to atheists before Harris, Dawkins, Hitchens and Dennett?

Stenger then moves to make a parallel between my position and that of the late Stephen Jay Gould, as expressed in his famous *Rocks of Ages* (1999). There Gould argued for what he termed NOMA (for Non-Overlapping MAgisteria), a rather Solomonic division of labor between science (which deals with matters of fact) and religion (which deals with matters of morals). Stenger thinks Gould is perniciously wrong about this, but doesn’t seem to realize that so do I, as should be clear after reading my review of *Rocks of Ages*, which is readily available on the Internet.² (Stenger also writes — incorrectly — that this was Gould’s last published book. In fact, he published six more.)

Stenger in defense of Harris

Stenger’s note then continues with a peculiar defense of Sam Harris’ book, *The Moral Landscape* (2010), reiterating the standard NA talking point that science can resolve questions of morality. Stenger writes that “science is not precluded from considering moral issues, which involve observable human behavior in response to different types of social and personal stimulations.” Well, it all hinges on what one means by “considering.” Science is in the business of describing and explaining the natural world, and in that sense science has indeed contributed to our understanding of how people make moral decisions, and even — more speculatively — to our comprehension of where a moral sense comes from, evolutionarily speaking. But I certainly did not object to — in fact, clearly praised — this sense of science “considering” moral issues. What I do object to is Harris’ simplistic idea that science can *solve* ethical questions, i.e. that science is in the business of providing us with value judgments.

Stenger accuses me of misrepresenting Harris’ position, and cites a *personal email* he got from the latter to the effect that he never intended to say that science can settle moral questions,

² Originally published in *Skeptical Inquirer*, pdf downloadable here:

http://www.godslasteraar.org/assets/ebooks/Gould's_Separate_'Magisteria'_%20Two_Views_book_reviews_sec.pdf

he only wanted science to be granted “a place at the table.” It is hard to square this modest aspiration both with the reality on the ground (science *does* have a place at the table) and with what Harris actually writes in *The Moral Landscape*, the wholly unsubtle subtitle of which is “How Science Can *Determine* Human Values” (my emphasis). I will not rehash my analysis of Harris here, since that material is widely available,³ but it is entirely disingenuous of Harris to write the sort of thing he wrote to Stenger, and rather naive of Stenger to take the former at face value.

My critic then slides into another *non sequitur* immediately afterwards, when he writes: “Already we can see antiscientific policies, promoted by morally corrupt corporations and egged on by the equally morally corrupt religious right, resulting in drastically reduced funding for many types of important basic scientific research.” Indeed we do. And I have been a constant critic of precisely the sort of policies Stenger decries. But what on earth does that have to do with science’s alleged ability to “determine” human values? And he continues: “it is not outside the bounds of science or atheism to be highly critical of those institutions, especially religion, that promote detrimental policies based on ignorance and superstition.” Certainly not, but science is not the same as atheism, and criticism of certain institutions and policies has nothing whatsoever to do with either atheism per se or the relationship between science and morality. Mixing the whole thing up is precisely the sort of intellectually questionable scientism that I think is detrimental to both atheism and science.

Is God a falsifiable hypothesis?

Inevitably, Stenger gets around to what really seems to bother him: my contention that there is no such thing as “the God hypothesis,” and that to insist along those lines is yet another clear instantiation of scientism. After having compared me again to Gould, Stenger complains that I am trying to have my way by simply redefining religion (again, notice the conflation between religion as a social activity and belief in god), but evidently didn’t read carefully what I actually wrote. I never said, for instance, that *specific* empirical claims made by or on behalf of one religious doctrine or another cannot be rejected on scientific grounds. Does Stenger think I am agnostic about whether the earth is 6000 or a few billion years old? Obviously I am not, and that

³ For instance, here: <http://www.skeptic.com/eskeptic/11-02-02/#feature>

is certainly a good example of an empirical question settled by science. But I don't think that "falsifying" that sort of claim amounts to a rejection of "the God hypothesis." This for the simple reason that saying things like "God did it" doesn't rise remotely close to the lofty level of a hypothesis, let alone a scientifically testable one! (As a side note, I really wish that scientists who write about philosophical topics updated their knowledge of philosophy of science: falsifiability as a criterion for considering a hypothesis scientific has been superseded a number of decades ago (Ladyman, 2002).)

After treating us to a mini-lesson on the scientific method (another thing that philosophers, historians and sociologists of science agree by now simply doesn't exist), and having incurred in additional factual errors,^{4,5} Stenger chastises me for not having discusses his "central and unique" argument in *God: The Failed Hypothesis* (2008), in which he allegedly *disproves* the existence of God on scientific grounds.

To begin with, I did not address Stenger's book in detail in my original paper for two reasons: first, his argument — Stenger's protestations notwithstanding — is actually not qualitatively different from Dawkins' (and the latter's book came out a year earlier); second, and more important, since I don't think "God" is a hypothesis to begin with, it follows that *a fortiori* I don't think it can be disproven. As physicist Wolfgang Pauli famously put it in another context, it is "not even wrong," in my book.

Stenger nevertheless goes on at length summarizing his approach toward the falsification of the God hypothesis, but he doesn't really break any new ground. All the arguments he brings up are well known, and have been discussed for many years before the first NA book hit the bookstores. Moreover, he doesn't seem to realize that many of those arguments constitute the very same reasons I myself am an atheist. I just don't think those reasons are particularly "scientific" (though some are certainly science-informed), and I also don't think they constitute disproof.⁶ Let me give you a few representative examples.

⁴ China never developed science, according to Stenger, because it is a society where "dissent resulted in the loss of the part of your body above your shoulders." See Joseph Needham's multi-volume "Science and Civilization in China," published by Cambridge University Press for a different view.

⁵ Stenger also subscribes to an out of date view of the Middle Ages as a period of uniform intellectual darkness imposed by the Catholic Church, which was only overcome with the birth of the Renaissance. Most modern historians would beg to disagree. See, for instance: David C. Lindberg (ed.) (1978) *Science in the Middle Ages*. University of Chicago Press.

⁶ Stenger also chides me for deploying a "deductive" sense of the term "scientific proof." Needless to say, I simply don't. It is a construct of his own making.

His first exhibit is that “No violations of physical law were required to produce the universe, its laws, or its existence rather than nonexistence,” which is immediately followed by “current cosmological theories strongly suggest that our universe is just one of an unlimited number of other universes in a ‘multiverse’ that always existed, in which case there never was a creation.” Wait, which is it? Do we have scientific explanations of how the universe came about from nothing (we don’t, at the moment⁷), *or* does science tell us that the universe did not have a beginning (it doesn’t, yet). It can’t be both, because those are logically mutually exclusive possibilities. Besides, Stenger here engages in the sort of activity that Jim Baggott (2003) unceremoniously labelled “fairy tale physics,” way overstating what we *know*, presenting highly speculative (though certainly fascinating) hypotheses from contemporary fundamental physics as pretty much established facts. Dare I say “scientism”?

The God hypothesis, further tells us Stenger, has been disproven on the grounds that the universe doesn’t show any “of the expected signs of design.” And what would such signs look like, exactly? One of the most intriguing design hypotheses currently floating out there — and one that is not (traditionally) religious in nature — is the so-called simulation hypothesis (Bostrom, 2003) (flirted with by some philosophers and mathematically inclined physicists). The idea is that our universe may actually be a gigantic mathematical simulation, designed and run by intelligent programmers who would be — literally — outside of our space and time. Our so-called laws of physics, then, would really be the basic parameters of the simulation. And miracles, if they occurred, would take the form of alterations or suspensions of such parameters. Now, assuming for the sake of argument that the simulation hypothesis is true, what sort of “signs” should we expect that would allow us to detect the Simulators? What kind of evidence of your presence could possibly be present to the characters in a Sims video game?

Just one more, for the road. Stenger confidently assures us that prayer doesn’t work (I agree), and that we know this because *scientific* studies have been done on the effects of intercessory prayer, and no positive results have been obtained. But this clearly won’t do. Assume you are a god, and you do answer prayers — whenever and to whoever you happen to like, because of your inscrutable god-like reasons. Now consider your reaction, if you can, at discovering through your well known omniscience (we are imagining a Judeo-Christian-Muslim type god for the sake of this example) that some scientist on one particular planet in the recesses

⁷ See: On the Origin of Everything, by David Albert, The New York Times, 23 March 2012. Available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/25/books/review/a-universe-from-nothing-by-lawrence-m-krauss.html>

of the Milky Way galaxy actually thinks he can treat you like an experimental subject, to actually *test* your ability to respond to prayers. Seriously? If such god has a psychology that is anything like the human variety he would simply refuse to participate to the experiment, or may even serve you with bizarre and totally incomprehensible results, just for the fun of it. You see how hopeless it is to subject gods to scientific scrutiny? And say this — once again — most certainly *not* because I think that gods can defy science. I don't think gods exist, and moreover they aren't conceptually coherent enough to present us with anything like a "hypothesis" that we can actually "test."

Conclusion: Philosophy, and all that jazz

Stenger concludes his note by at the same time praising and damning philosophy — again, to nicely make my points for me. He acknowledges that "Pigliucci is justifiably miffed by the statements made by a number of scientists that question the value of philosophy," but then immediately adds: "Scientists as a whole are a hard-headed lot and can be skeptical, if not downright dismissive, of thinking that they see as vague and muddled⁸ — which, it is fair to say, is true of much of what passes for philosophy." Really? and how much of "what passes for philosophy" has Professor Stenger actually read? What is his esteemed opinion of, say Kant's first Critique, or Wittgenstein's Tractatus?

This is precisely the sort of scientific, in a sense, anti-intellectual, arrogance that I said characterizes much (though not all) of the New Atheist movement, and certainly many (though, again, not all) of its main exponents. Both Stenger and I are genuinely concerned about rampant irrationality in our society, want to defend science from anti- and pseudo-scientific attacks, are critical of the social and political effects of (much, some) organized religion, and reject facile moral relativism. And yet I think that all these worrisome issues ought to be approached in an intellectually measured way, drawing on the best resources that both science and philosophy have to offer, while admitting — as a matter of simple intellectual humility — the limits of one, the other, or both disciplines. To insist instead in overreaching does not serve any of our shared goals, and it undermines the credibility of both atheism and science.

⁸ I assume this is the same sort of "hard-headed" skeptic who brought us phrenology, eugenics, cold fusion, and so on.

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