

## MISS THE TARGET: HOW SOME 'SOPHISTICATED' THEISTS DODGE ATHEIST CRITICISM

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*This short article looks at a move made by some theists in defence of theism: the suggestion is that because the atheist (e.g. Richard Dawkins) has failed fully to grasp what the theist means by 'God' etc. so the atheist's criticisms must miss their target.*

Theism faces a variety of intellectual challenges, including both logical objections and evidential problems (such as the evidential problem of evil).

Many theologians and philosophers of religion tackle these various atheistic objections in an intellectually honest and straightforward fashion. Responses of that sort are not my focus here. Here, I focus on a different theistic response to such atheistic critics, one I shall dub *Miss the Target (MTT)*.

### Miss the Target

The singly necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for a response to qualify as MTT are:

1. The theist accuses the atheist critics armed with such arguments as having a crude, unsophisticated understanding of what theists like themselves are committed to.
2. The theist supposes that just the fact that the atheist has misunderstood what the theist is committed to entails that the atheist's criticisms must miss their target.

Those using MTT typically employ some combination of the following two moves:

**1. The Juicer Move:** John Cottingham suggests that many critics of theistic and religious belief target something much thinner than that to which the religious theist is actually committed. In particular, analytic philosophers are, he thinks, prone to engage with a straw man: targeting propositions they have clinically extracted from the religious context in which they have their proper place, with the result that much of the real significance of what the religious believe is bleached out. Cottingham writes:

Our language games are interwoven with a web of non-linguistic activities, and cannot be understood apart from the context that gives them life. ... analytic philosophers are often prone to use the 'fruit juicer' method when approaching modes of thought of which they are sceptical: they require the clear liquid of a few propositions to be extracted for examination in isolation from what they take to be the irrelevant pulpy mush of context. Yet to demand an answer to the Yes/No question: 'Do you or do you not believe that P?' where P stands for a statement or series of statements in one of the Creeds, or some other doctrinal summary, often tells us surprisingly little about how a religious worldview informs someone's outlook. A juice extractor does not, as might first be supposed, give us the true essence of a fruit; what it often delivers is a not very palatable drink plus a pulpy mess. Someone who has only tasted strawberries via the output of the juicer, and has firmly decided 'this is not for me', may turn out to have a radically impoverished grasp of what it is about the fruit that makes the strawberry lover so enthusiastic.<sup>1</sup>

Cottingham may well be correct here: some atheist critics of religious belief may indeed have a radically impoverished grasp of what the religious are really committed to. It's not implausible to suggest there are layers of meaning or significance to the religious use of sentences such as 'God exists', 'There will be a judgement day', and so on that are lost on many atheist critics.

Perhaps, in some cases, it's not just true that what the religious person means or expresses by such sentences extends beyond what the atheist is capable of grasping, what the religious person means actually lies *entirely* beyond what the atheist critic is able to grasp. There is no overlap *at all* in the respective understandings.

One explanation for this would be that sometimes the religious use *metaphors*. In *Romeo and Juliet*, Romeo says that Juliet 'is the sun'. Of course Romeo does not mean Juliet is literally the sun – a massive hot object around which the planets rotate. To interpret Romeo in that way would, obviously, be *entirely* to misunderstand him. There's no overlap *at all* between what Romeo is actually saying and the absurd claim that someone who fails to grasp that Romeo is speaking metaphorically thinks he is making. But then, similarly, when religious people talk about God being our father, who resides in heaven, etc. perhaps they are using metaphors, with the result that there's really no overlap at all between what the religious person means and what the atheist critic thinks they mean.

By the Juicer Move, I mean appealing to the atheist's failure to grasp such further layers of meaning and significance as a *blanket* response to any and all atheistic arguments, *irrespective of the specific objection an atheist opponent might actually be raising*. (Notice I don't accuse Cottingham himself of the Juicer Move.<sup>2</sup>)

**2. The Idolatry Move:** The Idolatry Move is another blanket response to atheistic arguments. The suggestion here is not that what the religious person means by 'God exists' extends *beyond* what the atheist has grasped, but

rather than what the religious person means is rather *less*<sup>3</sup> than what the atheist supposes. The atheist has, as it were, added more to the concept than should properly be included.

Here's a particularly crude example: suppose the atheist supposes that God *lives on a cloud*. Were the atheist to include this further thought about God in their conception of God, then what they mean by 'God' and what a sophisticated theist means would obviously not be the same thing. Were the atheist to say 'God does not exist', using 'God' in the way such an atheist understands it, they would *fail to contradict* what the sophisticated theist understands 'God exists' to assert. Moreover, to refute what the atheist understands 'God exists' to express by examining every cloud and finding that God lives on none of them would clearly *not* be to refute what the sophisticated theist understands 'God exists' to express.

Of course, few atheists think God lives on a cloud, but plenty speak of God as being a 'thing' – by which they mean either some entity within the universe, or else some entity that exists in addition to and alongside the universe. Many sophisticated theists reject that sort of conception of God. God, they insist, is not a 'thing' in addition to all the other things that exist, including the universe itself. Both the theist who thinks of God in such terms, and the atheist who criticizes belief in such a 'thing', are guilty of *idolatry*: of worshipping, or alternatively of rejecting, what is in truth not God, but a mere *substitute* for God (in this case, a mere *thing* among other things).

One way in which this sort of misunderstanding can occur is if the theist uses analogy to explain what they mean by 'God' and the atheist takes the analogy in an overly literal way. For example, the theist may say that God is 'like a father to us', or 'watches over us', and the atheist may assume this means God is our actual biological parent, has physical eyes, and is located somewhere overhead.

The Juicer Move and the Idolatry Move can be combined. The theist may suggest, in response to any atheistic

argument, that, in some respects, atheists have built *more* into their conception of God (e.g. God lives on a cloud, is a thing) than they should have, and also, in other respects, that the atheist's conception of God involves rather *less* than does the theist's.

Someone employing MTT as a blanket response to any and all atheistic arguments may employ either one or else some combination of both of these two moves.

It's not very difficult to see what's wrong with MTT as such a blanket strategy for dealing with atheist arguments.

Yes, *sometimes* an atheist really may miss the target with one of their criticisms of theism. An atheist who thinks they can prove there's no God by showing there's no cloud on which God sits has certainly misunderstood what the theist means by God, *and in such a way that their criticism does indeed miss its mark.*

However, the mere fact that atheists have either a thicker and/or a thinner conception of God than does the theist does not establish that the atheists' various criticisms must then all miss their target.

### Counterexample to the Juicer Move

Here's a counterexample to the Juicer Move. Suppose Anna is insult-blind. She just doesn't 'get' the use of language to insult people, or indeed the nature of insult, period. She hears Tom call Otto a 'Kraut'. Now Tom is using insulting language towards Otto. In calling someone a 'Kraut' we are calling them a German, but we are clearly doing much more than that. The term is pejorative and insulting. However, this additional meaning or significance is entirely lost on Anna, who is insult-blind. Anna responds to Tom by pointing out that Tom is mistaken: Otto is not a Kraut, for he is not German. Has Anna contradicted Tom? Has Anna refuted Tom? The answer, it seems to me, is yes, of course she has done both these things. True enough, much of what Tom is trying to convey in calling Otto a 'Kraut' may be

lost on Anna – there are rich depths of meaning on which she is missing out. Still, Anna can simply and straightforwardly refute what Tom asserts when he calls Otto a ‘Kraut’.

In this example, the additional layers of meaning are perhaps expressive. Perhaps when we call someone a ‘Kraut’ we’re not asserting any more than what we assert when we call them a German. Perhaps all we are doing, in addition, is expressing an *attitude* towards Germans. However, the moral would remain the same even if the further meaning were assertoric (or were something else). It remains the case that our failure fully to grasp what *n* means when they say they believe ‘*x* exists’ does not have the automatic consequence that we cannot straightforwardly refute what *n* believes. If fairyists conceive of fairies as having attributes *x*, *y* and *z* (they deem possession of *x*, *y* and *z* singly necessary and jointly sufficient to qualify something as a fairy) whereas I conceive of fairies as having just *x* and *y* (I deem *z* not necessary), I can still conclusively establish that there are no fairies at the bottom of the garden by establishing that there are no beings with both *x* and *y* at the bottom of the garden. My misunderstanding of what the fairyist means by ‘fairy’ is beside the point.

The ‘Kraut’ example shows that as long as there is *some* overlap between what the atheist and theist mean by ‘God’ etc. the atheist can still contradict and even refute what the theist is committed to, despite the atheist’s missing out on some dimension of what the theist means. But what if there is no overlap in meaning *at all*, as in the ‘Juliet is the sun’ example? Well, then the atheist probably has missed the target. However, *it is unlikely that there is no overlap*. Suppose Mary is also metaphor blind. She fails to understand that when Romeo says ‘Juliet is the sun’, he is speaking metaphorically. So she responds to Romeo’s remark so: ‘But Juliet clearly *isn’t* the sun, Romeo – she is not a massive hot body about which the planets rotate.’ How should Romeo respond? Given Romeo is not committed to the claim that Juliet is such a massive hot body, he is obviously not going to try to defend that claim. However,

when atheist critics of theism attack theism – using the problem of evil, say – even the most sophisticated of theists will usually attempt to deal with the objection by appealing to theodicies, or God’s mysterious ways, etc. Almost all theists consider the problem of evil at least as a *problem*, which it wouldn’t be if there was no overlap in what they meant and what their atheist critic took them to mean. If the theist’s God-claim really was *wholly* metaphorical, then their usual responses to the problem of evil would make as much sense as Romeo’s responding to Mary by saying ‘But the evidence that Juliet is not a massive hot body about which the planets rotate is less than decisive.’

But then, given that there *is* such an overlap in meaning between what the theist claims and what the atheist understands them to mean, it remains possible for the atheist both to contradict and to refute that to which the theist is committed.

### Counterexample to the Idolatry Move

True enough, if by ‘God’ I mean a being that is omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent, *and lives on a cloud*, then I have built rather more into my conception of ‘God’ than has the theist. I am guilty of idolatry. This has the consequence that I cannot, by saying ‘There is no God’, *contradict* what the theist believes. For we could both be correct: there may be a God as the theist understands the term, but no God as I understand the term.

Still, despite my misunderstanding, I might nevertheless refute what the theist believes. For perhaps I can show that there is no being that is omnipotent, omniscient and omnibenevolent. Then I have not only shown that there’s no God of my sort, I may also have shown there’s no God of the theist’s sort either. For the theist to point out my misunderstanding would be completely irrelevant so far as actually dealing with my argument is concerned.

Also note that, insofar as the atheist has to whittle down their conception of God in order to be in a position to contradict the theist's belief that 'God exists', the atheist can often do this quite easily. It's simple enough for an atheist to drop 'lives on a cloud' from their conception of God, for example.

So, while specific atheist arguments might be dealt with successfully by pointing out that the atheist has misunderstood what the theist is committed to, MTT, as a *blanket* strategy, is no good.

## Conclusion

Those who employ MTT as a blanket strategy for dealing with atheistic arguments will often dismiss the latter arguments in fairly contemptuous terms – the atheist critic, they suggest, is a fool: a crude, unsophisticated thinker with little grasp of what it is that they suppose they are rejecting. The irony is that, irrespective of whether the atheist has misunderstood what the theist means when they say they believe 'God exists' (and in some cases no doubt they have), *it is the theists employing MTT that are exhibiting crude, unsophisticated thought*. For all their posturing as 'sophisticated' thinkers and their condescension towards this or that atheist critic (Richard Dawkins is often in the frame), they have, in truth, made a simple logical blunder.

Moreover, that atheist's objection may still be good.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> John Cottingham, 'Lessons in Life: Wittgenstein, Religion and Analytic Philosophy', in P. M. S. Hacker, H.-J. Glock and J. Hyman (eds) *Wittgenstein and Analytic Philosophy: Essays for P. M. S. Hacker* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 203–27.



<sup>2</sup> Note that while I have borrowed Cottingham's juicer analogy, I don't mean to suggest that Cottingham himself is guilty of the Juicer Move.

<sup>3</sup> Of course, remove from one's conception of God the thought that God is a 'thing' alongside other things, including the universe, and *in a sense* one may end up with a richer conception of God. Certainly it may take a great deal of hard work to get one's head round the idea of a non-thing God (if, indeed, the idea even makes sense). This I acknowledge. However, my point remains that while the atheist may have added thingness to their conception of God, that does not entail that the atheist's criticism must be no good – must miss its target. It may still have hit both targets – both God as understood by the atheist and God as understood by the theist.