

# A Reply to Robin Attfield

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I am grateful to Dr Attfield for his comments on my review of *God and the Secular*. But I have reservations with them. Perhaps I can here briefly try to indicate why.

Dr Attfield and myself basically disagree about the Thomistic doctrine of divine simplicity. I endorse it and he does not. My view is that God is not a subject with a set of understandable attributes which it possesses in any way. That attributes are possessed by whatever is not God. God is the cause of all beings; there is therefore some point in saying that he is not himself a being. Dr Attfield, on the other hand, thinks otherwise. He holds that just as I am an individual thing, an individual man, so God is an individual thing, an individual God, the only one possible.

Why does Dr Attfield think that my view is untenable? The core of his reasoning is contained in the following quotation from his article.

Certainly God must be an individual if he can create, but to claim that there exists an individual of no sort whatever is to claim something unintelligible to speaker and hearers alike ... If we cannot tell what sort of individual a predicate is supposed to be applied to, we cannot begin to understand what it means. To be, as Aristotle held, entails being of a sort; and conversely, to be of no sort is to be inconceivable. Further, to claim (or deny) the existence of something which is of no sort whatever is to make no claim (or no denial) whatever.

But does this argument refute my position?

One point worth making is that I do not maintain that there exists an individual (God) of no sort whatever. To be an individual of a sort is, presumably, to be some particular thing. But, as Aristotle and Aquinas say, there are no such things as things that simply are. (Cf. *An. Post.*, 92 b 13-4. See also P T Geach's discussion of Aquinas on *esse* in *Three Philosophers*, Oxford, 1973, pp 88ff). We can, however, agree with this view without having to say that God is an individual of no sort. Aquinas maintains that God exists (that he can be called *ens*, that one can truly say *Deus est*); but he denies that God can be marked off as some kind of thing. According to Aquinas we can say that God is (*an sit*), but not what he is (*quid sit*). (Cf *Summa Theologiae*, 1a.3.) At one point in his article Dr Attfield quotes this conclusion, but he evidently takes it to mean that God is an individual of no sort. If Aquinas is being consistent, however, it must, on the contrary, mean that God is not an individual of a sort. And that is what I wish to say myself.

But should it not still be agreed that God is an individual? Dr Attfield would reply affirmatively for he holds (a) that God exists, and (b) that something can only be said to exist if it is an individual of some sort. But do these points undermine my own position? I should say that they do not. Most Christian writers have held that to believe in God is to believe in a Creator who creates *ex nihilo* and who is thus the cause of all existing things. You name it and God has caused it to be. If, however, such a Creator belonged to a sort, if he were some kind of individual, he would be some existing thing and not the cause of all existing things. For to belong to a sort, to be an individual, is to be an existing thing. Furthermore, it is perfectly proper for someone to say that X exists even though X cannot be said to be an individual of some sort. As Aquinas himself points out, one can say 'Blindness exists' or 'Whiteness exists' even though there is no particular thing that is blindness or whiteness. (Cf. *Quaestiones Quodlibetales*, 9,3.) Related to such examples are propositions like 'There is nothing the matter', 'There is a glorious future in store for us' and 'There's a hole in my bucket'. In general, Dr Attfield seems very confident about what can and what cannot be said to exist. Without wishing to develop the point I would merely say here that this is a difficult problem, as one can see, for instance, by looking carefully at an essay like Peter Geach's 'What Actually exists' (*God and the Soul*, London, 1969, pp 65 ff).

Dr Attfield, however, will still object, for he thinks that only an individual can create. But why should one accept this view? A lot here depends on what one takes creation to be. In his reply to my review Dr Attfield does not explain what he means by creation, but what he says about God's individuality, particularly his question about what could serve as a Creator if not a member of a class, clearly indicates that he is not thinking of it in the way that I am. And here there is a profound difference between Dr Attfield and myself. For Dr Attfield evidently thinks that it is reasonable to say that some individual is not created. I, on the other hand, would say that if this is correct then we have no good reason for believing in God.

My position can best be indicated for present purposes by returning to *God and the Secular*. Here Dr Attfield explains why he thinks it reasonable to believe in God. One of the points he makes is that it is possible to offer a version of the Argument from Design. (Cf. Chapter 6, Section 1.) He also says (Chapter 5) that it is possible to embrace a form of the Cosmological Argument. I agree with both these points and I think that Dr Attfield has a number of important things to say in making them. If writers paid attention to them contemporary philosophy of religion would not be in the mess that it is. But I am not impressed by Dr Attfield's

version of the Cosmological Argument.

According to Dr Attfield:

The existence of whatever exists but might cease to exist or might not have existed and the actuality of whatever is the case but might cease to be the case or might not have been the case has an explanation of some sort ... except where it is necessarily uncreatable and indestructible. (p 173)

But why should we accept this principle? If we do we would be saying that the existence of at least one non-logically necessary sort of thing is not caused. But such a view is questionable since it is reasonable to accept a principle that is much more radical than that of Dr Attfield. This is that if something exists, and if its non-existence is logically possible, then it is caused to exist, but not by itself. And calling this thing 'God' does not alter matters, which is the point lying behind the remark in my review of *God and the Secular* to the effect that as a member of a class, as an individual, God himself requires a Creator. In other words, and along with Aquinas (Cf. *Summa Theologiae*, 1a, 44 and 45) I should say that we can reasonably believe in God not because we can ask why some things exist but because we can ask why anything exists at all.

Many writers would say otherwise. They would hold, for instance, that the existence of things can reasonably be regarded as a brute fact, that there could be existing things without any question of a cause of their existence. And on one view of causation this might be a reasonable conclusion. It would be reasonable if things can be said to exist independently of their causes in such a way that something that might normally be said to be caused by something specifiable could exist without being caused by it. David Hume brings this supposition to mind. He argues that it is possible to conceive of an effect without conceiving of the cause of that effect. He concludes that, given any effect E which is normally said to be caused by C, we can yet affirm E without implying that C ever existed at all. In other words, Hume holds that there is no necessary connection between cause and effect. He writes (*An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. L A Selby Bigge, 3rd edn. Oxford, 1975, p 63):

When we look about us towards external objects, and consider the operation of causes, we are never able, in a single instance, to discover any power or necessary connection; any quality, which binds the effect to the cause, and renders the one an infallible consequence of the other.

But this view of causation is open to a rejoinder if it is offered in defence of the view that we can reasonably accept that something can exist without a distinct cause. For we normally do agree that we have to ask what, apart from themselves, brings it about

that particular things exist. While we might not often stop to ask what brings it about that particular things exist, we certainly can ask what does. And if we do so we should surely be affronted at the suggestions (a) that they are themselves responsible for their existence and (b) that it is unreasonable to ask what brings it about that they exist. The first suggestion seems to hold that something can bring about its own existence, which seems plainly impossible. And the suggestion that it is unreasonable to ask what brings it about that some particular thing exists seems to suppose that something can exist of logical necessity, which is mistaken since to say that some particular thing exists is to say that there is something that satisfies some description or that some concept is instantiated. In short, it seems reasonable to hold that when something that need not exist does exist then it is reasonable to ask what, apart from itself, causes its existence.

One might reply that this principle is not reasonable; and this is evidently what Dr Attfeld would say. I can only retort that if the principle is not reasonable then I find it hard to see what principle is reasonable. Even Hume actually seems to accept it in spite of what he argues about cause and effect. In a letter written in 1754 he writes:

But allow me to tell you that I never asserted so absurd a Proposition as *that anything might arise without a cause*: I only maintain'd that, our Certainty of the Falsehood of that Proposition proceeded neither from Intuition nor Demonstration; but from another Source.

(*The Letters of David Hume*, ed. J Y T Greig, Oxford, 1932, Volume 1, p 187.)

In a similar vein C.D. Broad explains that 'whatever I may say when I am trying to give Hume a run for his money, I cannot really believe in anything beginning to exist without being *caused* (in the old-fashioned sense of *produced* or *generated*) by something else which existed before and up to the moment when the entity in question began to exist'. ('Kant's Mathematical Antinomies', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, LV, 10.)

One way of disregarding such a view would be to appeal again to Hume's argument about the possibility of disuniting cause and effect. But, as Elizabeth Anscombe has indicated, Hume's argument is very weak. He says:

. . . as all distinct ideas are separable from each other, and as the ideas of cause and effect are evidently distinct, 'twill be easy for us to conceive any object to be non-existent this moment, and existent the next, without conjoining to it the distinct ideas of a cause or productive principle. The separation, therefore, of the idea of a cause from that of a beginning of existence, is plainly possible for the imagination; and conse-

quently the actual separation of these objects is so far possible, that it implies no contradiction or absurdity; and is therefore incapable of being refuted by any reasoning from mere ideas; without which 'tis impossible to demonstrate the necessity of a cause.

(*Treatise*, pp 79 f.)

This argument only asserts that because we can imagine something coming into existence without a cause it is possible that something really can come into existence without a cause. But, as Anscombe observes of this assertion:

The trouble about it is that it is very unconvincing. For if I say I can imagine a rabbit coming into being without a parent rabbit, well and good: I imagine a rabbit coming into being, and our observing that there is no parent rabbit about. But what am I to imagine if I imagine a rabbit coming into being without a cause? Well, I just imagine a rabbit coming into being. That this *is* the imagination of a rabbit coming into being without a cause is nothing but, as it were, the *title* of the picture. Indeed I can form an image and give my picture that title. But from my being able to do *that*, nothing whatever follows about what it is possible to suppose 'without contradiction or absurdity' as holding in reality.

(“Whatever Has a Beginning of Existence Must Have a Cause”: Hume’s Argument Exposed’,  
*Analysis*, 1974, 34, 150.)

So in stopping at a God who belongs to a sort, in stopping at a God who is some kind of individual, Dr Attfield, it seems to me, has not gone far enough. Confronted by a God who is some kind of individual but yet not logically necessary, there is still a question to ask. What, apart from himself, causes his existence? He exists, but he need not. Why, then, is he there at all? It is no good replying that if he did not exist then the existence of everything else would be inexplicable. For we are now asking a question about the existence of all kinds of individual. And the only possible answer, hard though it may be to explicate, must be in terms of what is not an individual, what is not some kind of thing that exists but might not, which is exactly the conclusion offered by Aquinas’s doctrine of divine simplicity. This holds that there is a cause of existing things which must itself lie outside the order of existing things. And, as far as I can see, it is right. It might be thought that I am therefore committed to saying that God is an individual of some sort. But the term ‘cause’ does not serve to pick out some individual and something can be said to have caused something even if neither cause nor effect can be regarded as individuals of any sort. Consider, for example, a proposition like ‘her mood of depression was caused by his lack of concern for her’.

In short, then, I reject Dr Attfield's suggestion that only an individual can create. Creation as I understand it has to do with the fact that anything exists at all, with the fact that there might have been nothing at all. If God is the Creator he is the cause of the existence of all things and he cannot be regarded as an individual. If this conclusion undermines theology, then it is high time that theology was undermined.

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## Reviews

**DEATH AND AFTER: WHAT WILL REALLY HAPPEN?** by H. J. Richards *Fount*  
1980 pp 126 £1.25

Hubert Richard's answer to the question in his title is that we can know nothing of any supposed future life. He believes that hymns affirming the Christian hope are dishonest (p 24); that theology books which claim to provide information concerning another world "should be prosecuted for fraud" (p 14); and that biblical texts which appear to be talking about a future life are actually talking about the present one (p 92). Consequently he claims that the true believer is not one who looks for pie in the sky when he dies, but one who realistically accepts responsibility for our present society and "declares himself ready to change it" (p 51). The book ends with an endorsement of the cynicism of the book of Ecclesiastes concerning the absurdity of life (p 116) and the unlikelihood of it serving any kind of larger purpose.

To be fair to Richards one should add that throughout his book there are occasional lines of reverent agnosticism about the possibility that there may be something more to be said, and indeed he deliberately ends his chapter "after Death, What?" with a comma rather than a full stop to underline this. Nevertheless the central thrust of his argument is that after death we do not continue to exist (cf p 91), and that it is with the living of this life that our faith should be solely concerned.

This is a surprising conclusion for an English Catholic. According to the Vener-

able Bede, our pagan ancestors finally embraced Christianity in 627 A.D. precisely because they were assured by St Paulinus that Christianity possessed "clearly revealed truths" concerning what follows this life, whereas their ancestral paganism could claim no such knowledge. So if Hubert Richards is right, the fourteen centuries of English Catholic Christianity have been based on a false prospectus, and we are in reality in the same position as our pagan forebears.

Richards believes that New Testament faith is concerned with our present worldly existence, and that the message of the resurrection of Jesus is a disclosure of a new kind of life now available, rather than of any supposed future destiny. He supports his position by extensive quotation from the parables which speak of the gradual growth of God's Kingdom among men; from the teaching found in St John's Gospel concerning eternal life, resurrection and judgment as present realities, and from St Paul's stress on the existential consequences of resurrection faith.

It is useful to be reminded of just how much of Jesus' own teaching was concerned with the issues of everyday living, and how much of St Paul's emphasis on Jesus' resurrection is related to the transformation which he believes can be wrought in the lives of the believer by the power of the indwelling and risen Christ (cf Romans 8:10-11). At the same time however, none of this alters the fact that the New Testa-