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Style, Volume 50, Number 1, 2016, pp. 1-18 (Article)

Published by Penn State University Press



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# The Rhetoric of New Atheism

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**ABSTRACT:** New atheists base their arguments on scientific reason, but scientific reasoning by itself cannot provide a causal explanation for the ultimate cosmological question: why does the world exist? Faced with this impasse or *aporia*, new atheists tacitly deploy a number of rhetorical tropes to supplement the science proper. The most effective devices include *paralepsis*, the sarcasm cluster (*apodioxis*, *tapinosis*, *diasyrmus*), *pathopoeia*, and the linked tropes of *catachresis* and *metalepsis*. These tropes bolster the persuasiveness of new atheist arguments by devaluing and ridiculing theist positions, but also by appropriating the pathos and prestige of the religious discourse they hope to supplant.

**KEYWORDS:** atheism, rhetoric

New atheists face an old problem as they mount their cases against the existence of God: scientific truth, founded on cause-effect reasoning, cannot deliver a clinching causal argument. The ultimate cosmological question cannot be answered. Why is there anything here at all? Like their religious antagonists, new atheists find themselves positing that *something* must simply exist as the foundation of our universe. The question of “what caused this” necessarily slips into infinite regress; either God or some rudimentary version of the natural world must be granted exemption from the cause-effect requirement. Scientific reasoning cannot take us all the way down.

I would characterize this problem as the “*aporia*” of new atheism. *Aporia*, which means roughly “impasse” at its root, is a Greek rhetorical trope that poststructuralists renovated for their weightier hermeneutical purposes. In its simpler rhetorical sense, *aporia* describes a moment when doubt stalls a speaker as he or she puzzles over how to proceed with an argument. (For the Greeks and their Renaissance disciples, this expression of doubt may be either genuine or feigned.) Poststructuralists appropriated the term to name

that site where a text undermines its authority in the very act of trying to establish it. Poststructuralist aporia is serious business, not merely a tool in the rhetorical workshop. Although new atheists have no patience with poststructuralist critiques of scientific epistemology, the aporia they face has the feel of deconstructive paradox. Scientific reasoning cannot quite seal the deal: what else might serve? The new atheists tacitly compensate for aporia by deploying rhetorical devices to supplement the science proper.

"New atheism" has not been defined very precisely, and some of the writers I include under this rubric would not see themselves as part of a coherent school. Both Jim Holt and Alan Lightman, for instance, criticize other new atheists, but for matters of tone rather than substantive conviction. Both of them unambiguously assert their atheism. As I will use the term, new atheists share three features. First, they all write in the aftermath of September 11, 2001. Either explicitly or implicitly they react against the religious ideas that helped motivate those attacks. Arguably the first of the new atheists, Sam Harris, says he "began writing this book [*The End of Faith*] on September 12, 2001" (333). Second, new atheists all reject a compromise position called "NOMA," short for "Non-Overlapping Magisteria." Stephen Jay Gould identified himself as an atheist, but he coined the term "NOMA" to recognize religious discourse as something separate from science. For Gould and other NOMA advocates, science and religion ask and answer different sets of questions. The two domains of inquiry can coexist peacefully. New atheists do not accept the NOMA compromise: for them, scientific reasoning overlaps significantly with religious thinking. What science discovers clearly impacts religious beliefs. A third feature of new atheism is its public boldness about a subject once considered taboo, or in any event a matter of private conviction. Earlier atheists tended to show more reserve and tolerance than is evident in the new generation. If new atheists differ in the tone they use to address the religious mainstream—some, like Lightman, maintain a gentle *détente*, while many others, including Richard Dawkins, passionately attack believers—they all write with a new sense of cultural confidence. And certainly their books have found a broad popular audience.

For all their confidence, the new atheists cannot simply ignore the cosmological aporia that lurks at the base of their arguments. This essay will first focus on their efforts to address this aporia, then analyze their use of several tropes to make atheist arguments more attractive: *paralepsis*; the sarcasm cluster (*apodioxsis*, *tapinosis*, *diasyrmus*); *pathopoeia*; and the linked tropes of *catachresis* and *metalepsis*. Each of these rhetorical devices, labeled with its old-school Greek name, deviates from strictly scientific reasoning even as it serves the ends of rational science.<sup>1</sup>

## APORIA

All of the new atheists concede at some point that they cannot answer the most basic cosmological question: why does the world exist? (Or alternatively, why is there something rather than nothing?) Harris briefly engages the question and files it away as “a mystery absolute,” forever opaque to rational inquiry (227). Holt is the only new atheist to embrace the mystery with open arms. In *Why Does the World Exist? An Existential Detective Story*, he interviews scientists, philosophers, and theologians; he ends up elucidating the aporia but does not uncover a detective who can solve the mystery. One promising candidate is Oxford physicist David Deutsch. He first brushes aside Holt’s question with a joke. Why is there something rather than nothing? “Even if there was nothing, you’d still be complaining!” (125). But then Deutsch gives a more serious description of the aporia as a “brick wall”:

“I don’t think that an ultimate explanation of reality is possible,” he said, shaking his head. “That doesn’t mean I think there’s a *limit* to what we can explain. We’ll never run into a brick wall which says, ‘NO EXPLANATION BEYOND THIS POINT.’ On the other hand, I don’t think we’ll find a brick wall that says, ‘THIS IS THE ULTIMATE EXPLANATION FOR EVERYTHING.’ In fact, those two brick walls would be almost the same. If, *qua impossibile*, you were to have an ultimate explanation, it would mean the philosophical problem of why *that* was the true explanation—why reality was this way and not another—would be forever insoluble.” (125)

Deutsch uses the aporia-friendly metaphor of an impassable brick wall, but he does so with some discomfort. There is no brick wall, he begins, but as he thinks about it, there might as well be—if “beyond the wall” means finding the answer to why we have the world we have. Holt hears something similar from physicist Steven Weinberg. Like Deutsch, Weinberg has great expertise in an area of science that might one day describe the original conditions of the universe (quantum mechanics and the multiverse); but like Deutsch, Weinberg concedes that the final causal question cannot be answered. When Holt asks “why this huge assemblage of universes should exist,” Weinberg simply replies, “I don’t see any way out of *that* mystery” (157). Elsewhere Weinberg shows that he does take the (unanswerable) mystery seriously, even as he dismisses religious belief as more harmful than beneficial. He understands human curiosity about ultimate purpose, but he rejects any defense of a benevolent deity who would permit something as atrocious as the Holocaust: “It seems a bit unfair to my relatives to be murdered in order

to provide an opportunity for free will for Germans, but even putting that aside how does free will account for cancer?" (4).

Another prominent physicist and new atheist, Lawrence Krauss, has no patience at all with suggestions of cosmological impasse. In fact, Krauss's title—*A Universe from Nothing: Why There Is Something Rather Than Nothing*—seems to promise a definitive answer. But it turns out that he cannot make good on that promise. He presents a fascinating set of theories that indicate our traditional notion of "nothing" actually amounts to "something" in the world of quantum physics. He grudgingly concedes, however, "this does beg the possible question, of what, if anything, fixed the rules that governed such creation" (174). Krauss does not find the question interesting and barely includes it (near the end of his book). In his preface to the paperback edition, he confesses his exasperation over reviewers who have used the ultimate question against him, and offers a testy sort of concession:

Can one ever say anything other than the fact that the nothing that became our something was a part of "something" else, in which the potential for our existence, or any existence, was always implicit? In this book I take a rather flippant attitude toward this concern, because I don't think it adds anything to the productive discussion. . . . No doubt some will view this as my own limitations, and maybe it is. (xvi–xvii)

Krauss finds the brick wall, in other words, and shows no interest in what lies behind it. If that is not good enough for you, he sneers, "Write your own book." Aporia annoys Krauss, amuses Deutsch, and makes Weinberg somber.

New atheists sometimes touch on two other fundamental questions that science has not solved: How did life begin? What is the nature of consciousness? But they distinguish these two problems from the ultimate cosmological question. The origins of life and consciousness, they believe, will eventually be solved by scientific investigation. Dawkins acknowledges that natural selection becomes relevant only after life begins, which rules out a Darwinian explanation of the origin of life. We may have needed a "stroke of luck" for life to start up, he says, an event that was "statistically improbable," but it only had to happen once—and natural selection took it from there. Similarly, "The origin of consciousness might be another major gap whose bridging was of the same order of improbability" as life (140). Our world

includes life and consciousness, however improbable their origins, and the new atheists have confidence that chemistry and neuroscience will sort out the causes. Life and consciousness present gaps to be bridged, not an aporetic wall.

#### PARALEPSIS

Of all the rhetorical devices used by new atheists to supplement scientific reason, *paralepsis* is the simplest and most rarely deployed. But it works quite well. The term comes from Greek roots meaning to leave something aside. When speakers use *paralepsis*, they state that someone or something is not worth talking about: a subject is raised but only to dismiss it. *Paralepsis* amounts to a version of irony, because in pretending to pass over a subject, a speaker actually draws particular attention to it. As Henry Peacham describes it in *The Garden of Eloquence*, “*Paralepsis*, of some called *Praeteritio*, of others *Occupatio*, and it is when the Orator faineth and maketh as though he would say nothing in some matter, when notwithstanding he speaketh most of all, or when he saith some thing: in saying he will not say it” (S2v).

The new atheist who deploys *paralepsis* most strikingly is Alain de Botton. In *Religion for Atheists*, he dismisses as tedious all argument for or against the existence of God. He cannot be bothered to wade into the subject. “The most boring and unproductive question one can ask of any religion is whether or not it is *true*,” he begins the book. “To save time, and at the risk of losing readers painfully early on in this project, let us bluntly state that of course no religions are true in any God-given sense” (11). De Botton’s *paralepsis* achieves his purpose in three ways. First, he leverages the handy phrase “of course” to confirm that the question of God’s existence has long been settled by the (boring) arguments of those who have come before. It needs no discussion now because it is perfectly obvious. *Paralepsis* offers an unassailable verdict because it rules out consideration of evidence. Second, de Botton invites all readers to join his elite club—“let us bluntly state . . .”—or else concede their unworthiness by caring about a pointless, archaic argument. And third, he leavens all this with humorous self-deprecation that actually reinforces his elitism: I am so brash in my truth telling that most people will not be able to handle it.

Other new atheists, for the most part, want to earn their victories by going into all the details de Botton sweeps aside. But *paralepsis* still proves useful now and then. Philosopher Daniel Dennett dismisses as fruitless the process of arguing with believers:

Many of us brights [atheists] have devoted considerable time and energy at some point in our lives to looking at the arguments for and against the existence of God, and many brights continue to pursue these issues, hacking away vigorously at the arguments of the believers as if they were trying to refute a rival scientific theory. But not I. I decided some time ago that diminishing returns had set in on the arguments about God's existence, and I doubt that any breakthroughs are in the offing, from either side. (27)

He declines the debate, but with a weary condescension. Believers obviously have nothing like a "scientific theory" to compete with the reasonable brights. Refuting them would be easy enough but accomplish nothing. Once again, through *paralepsis*, a new atheist pretends to pass over debate about God, but achieves a preemptive rhetorical effect of making atheism seem the obvious right answer. Bill Maher does something similar near the beginning of his documentary *Religulous*. He breezily dismisses any arguments about the big questions of why we are here: "My big thing is 'I don't know,'" he tells viewers. "That's what I preach." Technically, Maher would count as agnostic, but his antireligious zeal aligns him securely with the new atheists. Like them he invites us to bypass detailed argument and join the brights without delay. He spends much of the film interviewing loopy advocates of faith-based silliness.

THE SARCASM CLUSTER: APODIOXIS,  
TAPINOSIS, DIASYRMUS

Maher's *Religulous* exploits a number of easy targets for ridicule—but he is a comedian, after all, not a scientist or philosopher, and the film makes no claim to offer a balanced slate of religious representatives. Many of the scientists and philosophers who write as new atheists share Maher's appetite for sarcasm. Richard Sherry in *A Treatise of Schemes and Tropes* defines sarcasm as "jesting or scoffing bitingly" (46). New atheists frequently frame an

opponent's argument as ridiculous or absurd on the face of it. Greek rhetoric has many terms and categories for this sort of strategy; the three listed above seem most useful for analyzing how the new atheists gain an edge through some form of mockery.

Apodioxis offers the broadest stroke in this cluster of tropes: a speaker rejects the opponent's argument as obviously absurd. In Peacham's phrasing, apodioxis means "to reject vaine and fond arguments of an adversary: namely such as are unworthy of answere" (S4r). Christopher Hitchens is the laureate of apodioxis among the new atheists. Often he rejects faith-based arguments with a sweeping, contemptuous dismissal:

One must state it plainly. Religion comes from the period of human prehistory where nobody—not even the mighty Democritus who concluded that all matter was made from atoms—had the smallest idea what was going on. It comes from the bawling and fearful infancy of our species, and is a babyish attempt to meet our inescapable demand for knowledge (as well as for comfort, reassurance, and other infantile needs). Today the least educated of my children knows much more about the natural order than any of the founders of religion, and one would like to think—though the connection is not a fully demonstrable one—that this is why they seem so uninterested in sending fellow humans to hell. (64)

Hitchens means to entertain atheists as well as infuriate believers, and he surely recognizes that hyperbolic passages such as this one will do both. Religious arguments are too "babyish" to deserve serious consideration. The mention of Democritus, which might seem to undermine his point, actually adds a layer of atheist self-congratulation. Democritus earns the epithet "mighty" because his atomism provided a foundation for the proto-atheism of Epicurus and Lucretius. Hitchens caps this section with an apodioxic flourish: "All attempts to reconcile faith with science and reason are consigned to failure and ridicule" (65). Not even scientific prominence can safeguard a believer. Hitchens rejects the ideas of "ex-agnostic" astronomer Fred Hoyle as "the same old mumbo-jumbo" (87). With similar rhetoric, Krauss brushes aside a complex theological argument as "semantic hocus-pocus" (xxv).

A more specific trope of sarcasm known as *tapinosis* amounts to a kind of name-calling. From a root meaning "demeaning" or "humbling," *tapinosis* substitutes a debased, conspicuously diminished word or



phrase for the proper term. Like apodioxis, tapinosis serves as much to entertain atheists as provoke the religious. Harris offers a nice example: “Jesus Christ—who, as it turns out, was born of a virgin, cheated death, and rose bodily into the heavens—can now be eaten in the form of a cracker” (73). He cleverly demeans the sacramental vehicle by substituting “cracker” for “host.” If he had used a plainer word like “bread” to name the object in question, the sarcasm would lose its edge. The word “bread” takes on allegorical meanings readily (e.g., “I am the bread of life”). A cracker has no comparable gravitas: the word looks and sounds funny, and it carries pejorative connotations, at least outside the world of snacks. Hitchens deploys tapinosis when he refers to St. Francis as a “mammal”: “[Ockham] was a Franciscan (in other words, an acolyte of the aforementioned mammal who was said to have preached to birds)” (69). Hitchens likes to cast the religious as “babyish” and primitive; reducing St. Francis to his animal class removes his dignity and encourages bright readers to laugh at anything associated with him. De Botton uses a gentler tapinosis at the start of his book. In the caption to his first full-page picture—a painting of St. Agnes of Montepulciano, who was credited with levitation and bringing dead children back to life—de Botton writes, “Probably just a very nice person” (10). Dawkins’ name-calling tropes differ sharply from de Botton’s, and even from Harris’ “cracker” and Hitchens’ “mammal,” which are relatively subtle by comparison. There is nothing subtle about Dawkins’ renamings of God. God becomes, to cite a few examples, a “sky-fairy” (134), a “bloke” (134), a “Divine Knob-Twiddler” (143), “the monster of the Bible” (46), and a “psychotic delinquent” (38). This last one, to be fair, purports to describe only the God of the Old Testament.

One last trope of the sarcastic sort, diasyrmus, mocks a subject by means of a ridiculous comparison. Many new atheists delight in the creative opportunities offered by diasyrmus. Because careful argument is not the point here, they have a free hand to invent laughable analogies with religious beliefs. More than any other trope, diasyrmus shows new atheists acting as comedians; the best examples are quite entertaining. Harris reflects that although believers have been conditioned to accept the most absurd assertions of their faith, they would be as skeptical as anyone of similar absurdities put forward as truth—such as the proposition,

say, “that frozen yogurt can make a man invisible” (19). Like his “cracker” tapinosis, this remark shows nice comic flair: frozen yogurt is just funnier in this context than regular yogurt, probably because it has less cultural dignity. Dawkins ridicules theologians by comparing their profession to those of lesser intellectual status. He recalls a moment when an Oxford astronomer answered a deep cosmological question, “Ah, now we move beyond the realm of science. This is where I have to hand over to our good friend the chaplain.” Dawkins continues, “I was not quick-witted enough to utter the response I later wrote: ‘But why the chaplain? Why not the gardener or the chef?’” (56). Dennett once likens religious belief to tobacco smoking. Religion may eventually be heavily discouraged as a practice, he speculates, but still tolerated, “since there are those who say they can’t live without it” (36). Both Harris and Dawkins use comic cross-paradigm comparisons to mock Biblical literalists about the age of the universe. “This means that 120 million of us place the big bang 2,500 years *after* the Babylonians and Sumerians learned to brew beer” (Harris 17). A fundamentalist teacher holds the view that “the entire universe began after the domestication of the dog” (Dawkins 335). Together these evoke the absurd (but cute) image of a divine creator sitting somewhere drinking a beer and patting his collie.

Sometimes the new atheists use diasyrmus for gentler satirical effects. Dennett, for example, compares organized religions to sports teams: “In this scenario, being a member of a religion becomes more and more like being a Boston Red Sox fan, or a Dallas Cowboys fan. Different colors, different songs and cheers, different symbols, and vigorous competition—would you want your daughter to marry a Yankee fan?” (36). Harris refers to religious disputes between Indians and Pakistanis over “‘facts’ that are every bit as fanciful as the names of Santa’s reindeer” (26–27). Several other new atheists also bring up Santa as a fantasy comparable to belief in God. The Santa and sports comparisons have a mocking effect, to be sure, but they also show the potential downside of such rhetorical gestures. A potential atheist who laughs wholeheartedly at frozen yogurt superpowers may well reflect that our collective Santa fantasy is pleasant, productive, and endearing. The diasyrmus meant to ridicule might backfire: who wants to get rid of Santa, or the Red Sox? Or even the Dallas Cowboys?

## PATHOPOEIA

As entertaining as they are, the tropes of sarcasm can only accomplish so much for the new atheists. Pathopoeia adds a dimension to their rhetoric that is more serious, moving, and (usually) quite personal. A speaker uses pathopoeia to arouse strong emotions in the audience. According to John Smith in *The Mystery of Rhetoric Unveil'd*, "Pathopoeia is a form of speech whereby the speaker moves the mind of his hearers to some vehemency of affection, as of love, hatred, gladness, sorrow, &c. It is when the speaker himself (being inwardly moved with any of those deep and vehement affections) doth by evident demonstration, passionate pronunciation and suitable gestures make a lively expression thereof" (266).

The most effective instances of pathopoeia in new atheism emerge from personal narratives that stir deep emotions, especially sorrow and fear. One exception comes at the beginning of Harris' book, where he aims to arouse fear, but does so with a narrative that does not come from his direct experience. A religious terrorist is about to blow himself up in a crowded bus: "The young man boards the bus as it leaves the terminal. . . . His pockets are filled with nails, ball bearings, and rat poison. . . . The couple at his side appears to be shopping for a new refrigerator. The woman has decided on a model, but her husband worries that it will be too expensive" (11). Harris adds relatable details of the couple to make us care more about their imminent deaths. *The End of Faith* more generally prompts us to fear the apocalyptic consequences of believers equipped with nuclear weapons. It is not just isolated unlucky couples we need to worry about. "The days of our religious identities are clearly numbered," he says at the end of the book. "Whether the days of civilization itself are numbered would seem to depend, rather too much, on how soon we realize this" (227). Maher's film ends on a similar note of warning. As he stands at the supposed site of Armageddon, he explains that such a mythical apocalyptic event could actually happen—a self-fulfilling prophecy—unless we free ourselves from religious absurdities.



The most moving instances of new atheist pathopoeia, however, are subtler and more personal. One minor example of personal pathopoeia comes in an uncharacteristically sentimental passage from Dawkins. As he

remembers his first “convert” to atheism, the late Douglas Adams (author of *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*), Dawkins invites our sympathy with this elegiac apostrophe: “Douglas, I miss you. You are my cleverest, funniest, most open-minded, wittiest, tallest, and possibly only convert. I hope this book might have made you laugh—though not as much as you made me” (117). He poignantly uses the present tense to address his friend. The sarcastic, combative Dawkins shows an emotional softness here that gives atheism more of a heart. You do not have to believe in God, the passage implies, to feel the kind of love promised by religious communities.

De Botton includes a moment of autobiographical pathopoeia that hints at deeper emotions. In his introductory chapter, he writes about his father: “I was brought up in a committedly atheistic household, as the son of two secular Jews who placed religious belief somewhere on a par with an attachment to Santa Claus. I recall my father reducing my sister to tears in an attempt to dislodge her modestly held notion that a reclusive god might dwell somewhere in the universe. She was eight years old at the time” (13). His sister’s tears suggest a problematic relationship with the elder de Botton, who comes off badly for rejecting his little girl’s imagination of some other sort of father—a cosmic anchor she apparently finds comfort in. De Botton lets his sister provide the emotion in this little anecdote, but in the next paragraph, he returns to the subject of his father. “In my mid-twenties I underwent a crisis of faithlessness,” he writes. He loved religious art and longed to engage with it, despite his unshakable commitment to atheism. A subtly pathopoetic moment comes when he talks about his father’s death: “It was not until my father had been dead for several years—and buried under a Hebrew headstone in a Jewish cemetery in Willesden, north-west London, because he had, intriguingly, omitted to make more secular arrangements—that I began to face up to the full scale of my ambivalence regarding the doctrinaire principles with which I had been inculcated in childhood” (13–14). Here the sadness associated with the loss of his father joins with inchoate trans-atheistic emotions. Neither he nor his father moves away from atheism, but both find themselves “intriguingly” engaged with symbols of the religious life they cannot embrace.

Two other moments of pathopoeia—one in Holt, one in Lightman—present the most complex expressions of personal emotion in the new atheist oeuvre. In both cases, a personal narrative supplements and almost displaces scientific reason. Holt’s and Lightman’s books have a literary richness that distinguishes them from the others. This should come as no surprise: Lightman

works at MIT not only as a physicist, but as a practicing novelist and teacher of writing; and Holt, although well-versed in math, logic, and physics, writes literary nonfiction.

The most intensely pathopoetic moment in new atheism comes as Holt narrates a personal story that interrupts his project. He has traveled to Austin to interview physicist Steven Weinberg, one of his most authoritative and promising subjects. Weinberg has excellent scientific credentials as well as the broader philosophical perspective necessary to address Holt's question: why does the world exist? The night before he is to meet Weinberg, Holt learns that his beloved dog "Renzo" is suffering seizures from metastasized cancer. He postpones the interview and flies home to comfort Renzo in his last few days.

Before he heard the news about Renzo, Holt had spent a pensive afternoon and evening in Texas. He walks around the noisy, "beery" streets of Austin and begins to feel existential angst:

Making my way through the cacophonous crush under the hot sun, I pretended that I was Roquentin, the existential hero of Sartre's novel *Nausea*. I tried to summon up the disgust he would feel at the surfeit of Being that overflowed the streets of Austin—at its sticky thickness, its grossness, its absurd contingency. Whence did it all spring? How did the ignoble mess around me triumph over pristine Nothingness? (149)

Holt expresses a gnostic revulsion from the carnival of bodily life, perhaps triggered by a simpler feeling of loneliness. His sense of alienation sharpens because "everyone around me seemed to be having an awfully good time" (150). Even the famous Austin bats refuse to perform for him. In an effort to elevate and dignify his malaise, he salutes "pristine Nothingness"; the phrase suggests Buddhist emptiness and detachment as well as the existentialism he has been imitating.

His pose of detachment lasts only until he gets the news about his dog. Now "nothingness" becomes something terrible: "Renzo's once-rich canine sensory world had disappeared into nothingness. All he could do was blindly stumble around in circles, whimpering in distress. Only when I held him in my arms did he seem to get some relief" (151). He sits with Renzo as the veterinarian euthanizes him. Holt makes no attempt to moderate the pathos or retreat into a cooler, *New Yorker*-style sophistication. Instead he maximizes the emotional effects. When the vet injects the lethal chemical,

Renzo “exhaled in a burst. ‘That was his last breath,’ the vet said. Then he exhaled again, and was still. Good dog.” Holt surrenders his dog’s body for cremation, and then, “carrying only Renzo’s blanket, I walked home. The next day, I called Steven Weinberg at his home in Austin to talk about why the world exists” (153). His pathopoetic interlude has given the ultimate question new weight and more urgency. It is as if Holt now *really needs* Weinberg to explain the point of this upsetting world. The pathos of Renzo’s blanket calls for more than an aporetic shrug.

Lightman’s most striking pathopoeia also develops from an animal story, this one about a nest of ospreys near his summer home in Maine. He and his wife had spent a lot of time studying the ospreys in the way scientists do: observing, measuring, counting, predicting. “After several years of cataloguing such data,” he summarizes, “we felt that we knew these ospreys. . . . Reading our ‘osprey journals’ on a winter’s night, we felt a sense of pride and satisfaction. We had carefully studied and documented a small part of the universe” (53). Then something happens that transforms Lightman’s “pride and satisfaction” into sublime feelings of terror and awe. From the deck of his house, he watches two fledgling ospreys take their first flight:

They did a loop of my house and then headed straight at me with tremendous speed. My immediate impulse was to run for cover, since they could have ripped me apart with their powerful talons. But something held me to my ground. When they were within twenty feet of me, they suddenly veered upward and away. But before that dazzling and frightening vertical climb, for about half a second we made eye contact. Words cannot convey what was exchanged between us in that instant. It was a look of connectedness, of mutual respect, of recognition that we shared the same land. After they were gone, I found that I was shaking, and in tears. To this day, I do not understand what happened in that half second. But it was one of the most profound moments of my life. (53–54)

The event he narrates might seem trivial alongside Harris’ bus explosion, but it is much more intense in its pathopoetic effects. A man who has mastered the universe through scientific knowledge abruptly finds himself vulnerable and speechless. Words fail him—even now, in retrospect—and he cannot “understand what happened.” If this were simply a matter of physical threat, the emotion would be easy enough to understand. There must be more to it. The osprey moment includes not only a fear of bodily harm, but something

of a more cosmic complexity. Lightman's emotion may come in part from a reversal of subject-object orientation: the ospreys, formerly objects of his study, suddenly become subjects looking at *him*, with indecipherable intentions. Any moment that transforms a person's sense of cosmic identity can arouse terror and inspiration all at once: panic and profundity. Such moments happen all the time to religious believers and users of psychedelic drugs, but it is unusual to see someone like Lightman "shaking, and in tears" over an event that seems perfectly natural. He by no means compromises his atheist convictions in the aftermath of the osprey epiphany; in the same chapter, he reaffirms, "I am an atheist myself. I completely endorse the central doctrine of science" (44). But his sublime moment with the ospreys suggests that science by itself cannot account for the complexity of human experience. Our emotional reach, in other words, should exceed our scientific grasp. The better a new atheist can accommodate his convictions to our profoundest emotions, the more effective his appeal to those who have been conditioned to find those emotions only within religious discourse.

#### CATACHRESIS AND METALEPSIS

If Lightman found a way to fuse religion and science by means of *pathopoeia*, other new atheists achieve this effect through the linked (and complex) tropes of *catachresis* and *metalepsis*. It might be helpful to start with an example from Harris.

In his first chapter, "Reason in Exile," Harris urges humanity to recognize "the absurdities of most of our religious beliefs. I fear, however, that the time has not yet arrived. In this sense, what follows is written very much in the spirit of a prayer. I pray that" humans will awake to reason (48–49). His use of "prayer" provides a clear example of *catachresis*. Like most words with the prefix *cata-*, *catachresis* suggests trouble. It means that a speaker "misuses" a word by applying it outside of its proper realm of signification. Smith calls it an "abuse" (the Latin equivalent is *abusio*): "when words are too far wrested from their native and genuine signification." "For lack of a proper word," he continues, a speaker "borroweth the next or the likeliest to the thing that he would signify. . . . [It] is the expressing of one matter by the name of another, which is incompatible with, and sometimes clean

contrary to it" (184). Some rhetoricians are kinder to catachresis, which they consider defensible if language does not contain a "proper" term for the speaker's intended meaning. A simple example from English would be our reference to "the legs of a table."

When Harris uses "prayer" and "I pray," he obviously "wrests" a word from its native discursive realm. He applies it in a context which is "incompatible with"—indeed, "clean contrary to"—its religious signification. In the act of denouncing religious faith, he summons a word that has radically religious meanings. Harris' catachresis would be defensible (rather than an "abuse") only if the new atheist had no scientific, secular word available for what he meant to say. I would argue that this is precisely the case. Harris borrows from religion the only word with sufficient gravitas and charm to signify the urgency of his appeal. By invoking prayer, he borrows the prestige of the supernatural in an attempt to eradicate all belief in the supernatural.

Harris' use of prayer could also be described as metalepsis. Metalepsis is harder to pin down than most tropes, but like catachresis, it means using words at some remove from their expected contexts. Metalepsis requires a hearer or reader to make interpretive connections that involve more than one figurative leap. When Harris says "I pray" that humans will renounce faith, we first register the proper sense of "pray," which means a communication between a person and God. But then we must move beyond this first trope (my words are a prayer) to a further trope: prayers are often caused by some sort of crisis, and such a crisis now compels me to write. Harold Bloom made metalepsis the sixth and climactic trope in his *Map of Misreading*. Bloom's use of metalepsis, somewhat idiosyncratic but well enough founded in classical rhetoric, provides a good key to the importance of this trope for new atheists. For Bloom, the final trope of misreading is "a metalepsis or transumption of the process of reading (and writing) poems, a final ratio of revision that I have named *apophrades*, or the return of the precursors" (73). In metalepsis, he argues, a later poet gains leverage over the great precursor by "substituting early words for late words"; and by this means, "the dead return, to be triumphed over by the living" (74). Harris uses the early word "prayer" to name something late. The great precursor, religious faith, reappears with its native vigor, but only to be "triumphed over" by new atheism.



Similar examples of catachresis and metalepsis can be found in many new atheist books. Another religious word Harris appropriates is “sacred”: “Nothing is more sacred than the facts. No one should win any points in our discourse for deluding himself” (225). By giving “facts” the blessing of “sacred,” he circumvents philosophical objections that might be raised about what constitutes a fact. Antifoundationalists would find his rhetoric clever but evasive. Dennett, too, borrows “sacred” to defend atheism against charges of disenchantment. “Is something sacred?” he asks. “Yes, I say with Nietzsche. I could not pray to it, but I can stand in affirmation of its magnificence. The world is sacred” (245). Dennett amplifies the effect by mentioning “the glory of nature” (244). Although Hitchens, like other new atheists, shies away from the word “miracle,” he substitutes for it a word only slightly more secular, “wonder”: “We have only recently established that a cow is closer in family to a whale than to a horse: other wonders certainly await us” (94). Even the pragmatic physicist Krauss finds “wonder” useful. “The universe is far stranger and far richer—more wondrously strange—than our meager human imaginations can anticipate” (178).

Lightman quotes and seems to endorse a remark by his friend that “science is the religion of the twenty-first century” (38). Harris asserts that “spirituality can be—indeed, must be—deeply rational” (42). In both statements, Bloom’s metaleptic apophrades comes into full view. Religious faith returns, but only to the extent that it recognizes the triumph of rational science. Science, according to Harris, may one day help us answer the old religious question, “Is there life after death?” (20). Krauss offers physical explanations of the end of the world to replace the religious ideas of apocalypse. In one theory, “protons and neutrons will decay” and “matter will disappear” (179); in another, our unstable world will “recollapse inward to a point” and “our universe will then disappear as abruptly as it probably began” (180).

But the beginning of the universe remains a problem. All of these rhetorical maneuvers still leave intact the aporia with which we began: why does the world exist? This was the title of Holt’s book, and it is Holt who offers one final, thought-provoking instance of metalepsis. It comes as he is reviewing the efforts of physicists to discover a “final theory,” which “promises to go far beyond our current physics in clarifying the origins of the universe” (160). But even scientists

like Stephen Hawking and Alex Vilenkin, optimists about the prospects for a final theory, do not hold out hope for progress with Holt's ultimate question:

[A final theory] might, for instance, show how space and time emerged from still more fundamental entities that we as yet have no conception of. But it is hard to see how even a final theory could explain why there is a universe instead of nothing at all. Are the laws of physics somehow to inform the Abyss that it is pregnant with Being? If so, where do the laws themselves live? Do they hover over the world like the mind of God, commanding to exist? (160–61)

Holt's metalepsis revives his great precursor in theodicy, John Milton—unmistakably, although without any direct mention of him. He echoes these early lines from *Paradise Lost*, where Milton addresses the Holy Spirit:

Thou from the first

Wast present, and with mighty wings outspread  
Dove-like sat'st brooding on the vast abyss  
And mad'st it pregnant... (1.19–22)

Milton himself is echoing the account of creation at the start of the Bible. Milton's God becomes, in Holt's trope, "the laws of physics." Both of them make "the Abyss . . . pregnant with Being." Holt knows that the comparison cannot really work, at least for minds that have shed faith. It offers no relief from the stubborn aporia of beginnings. But by assimilating Milton, he does earn a rhetorical advantage: he borrows the prestige and inspiration of a man who, like the new atheists, set out to rewrite Genesis.

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## NOTE

1. Although I have chosen to use definitions of tropes drawn from Renaissance handbooks, readers who prefer more contemporary definitions will find Lanham helpful.

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