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# Richard Bentley Against Atheists

Richard Bentley (1662–1742), primarily a philologist and classicist, a master and later a professor at Cambridge University, and a committed Christian, was the first to deliver lectures in the series funded by the inheritance of Robert Boyle, hence, the Boyle Lectures. True to the design of these lectures, Bentley defended the validity of the Christian religion by arguing against atheists and deists, whose voices were becoming louder and louder in England and in Europe. As Bentley stated, atheism is dangerous because of its popularity since "taverns and coffee-houses, nay Westminster-hall and the very churches, are full of it."[1]

## Deists and atheists

Bentley directed his criticism against atheists and deists.[2] In fact, he did not really distinguish between the two since, in his estimation, he who denies the providence of God – which is a distinguishing mark of deists – really denies His existence (4).[3] He believed that there is "an innate idea of God, imprinted upon every soul of man at their creation, in characters that can never be defaced"; therefore, atheism is a matter of speculation, not a part of human nature (3). Atheists really are believers who fight against their inborn idea of God; thus, atheism is an acquired folly which may

[1] A 1692 letter to Edward Bernard, *The Correspondence of Richard Bentley*, London 1842, vol. 1, p. 39.

[2] And, we may add, freethinkers for whom free means the same as bold, rash, arrogant, and presumptuous, even perverse (297) as argued in his polemic with Anthony Collins' *Discourse of free-thinking* (1713), cf. J.C. Williams, *Happy Violence: Bentley, Lucretius, and the Prehistory of Freethinking*, "Restoration: Studies in English Literary Culture, 1660–1700" 38 (2014), pp. 61–80.

[3] References are made to R. Bentley, *Works*, London 1838, vol. 3, which includes the text of Bentley's *Eight Sermons Preach'd at the Honourable Robert Boyle's Lecture*, London 1735[6].

be dispelled by rational arguments, and Bentley wanted to provide such arguments. However, in a somewhat hair-splitting distinction Bentley also stated that the proposition "God is" (52) is not imprinted in humans, but God's existence can be detected by natural reason and such an imprint would make the belief in God necessary which would destroy moral virtue (53); no seeking would be needed; Paul's arguments in the Areopagus would be superfluous (54). That is, the idea of God is inborn, but not the fact of God's existence, which appears to be Bentley's explanation of the phenomenon of atheism: atheists do carry the idea of God, but they did not have any chance or did not make any effort to learn that the idea corresponds to the reality of the existence of God.

The need to address the problem of atheism goes well beyond a personal choice. If atheism became a national religion, it would turn the country into the kingdom of Satan (24), because no atheist can be just, generous, grateful, friendly, affectionate, or loyal (25). With this statement, Bentley was vehemently opposed to the idea of the possibility of a society of atheists as it was promoted in his times by Pierre Bayle or Bernard Mandeville.[4] In fact, Bentley advocated punitive actions against atheists by saying that the government should "put some timely stop to the spreading contagion of this pestilence" (23). This is because "no community ever was or can be begun or maintained, but upon the basis of religion" to ensure, among others, the validity of judicial proceedings and of oaths (22). For similar reasons, John Locke stated that tolerance did not apply to atheists.

## The soul

One argument Bentley used for the existence of God was the existence of the soul.

There in an immaterial soul in each person because, as stated in the Cartesian spirit, it is self-evident that there is something in humans that thinks (34), wills, senses, and causes the motion of the body, a cogitative substance, "some incorporeal inhabitant within us." These abilities are not matter since every stone would be able to think and every atom would be a distinct self-conscious animal (35). The soul did not create itself and no one can seriously think that the soul existed from eternity (141); therefore, there must be God who created the soul, an eternal, immaterial, and intelligent Creator (47) who created immaterial souls out of nothing. Moreover, the soul is not compound (141); it is a simple substance; thus, it cannot be destroyed by dissipating into its elements. Only God could annihilate it should He wish to do so.

Not only is it evident that the thinking substance exists in humans, but also the "desire of immortality is a natural affection of the soul" (17). The immortality pertains primarily to the human person as embodied in the soul with its ability to think, reason, and remember. Just the immortality of the body would be rather meaningless if it were a body emptied of the soul. Revelation indicates that the body – renewed, resurrected, that is – is also immortal, but only because the soul is immortal.

[4] Cf. K. Sheppard, *Anti-Atheism in Early Modern England 1580–1720*, Boston 2015, ch. 6.

Thus, the immortality of the body is secondary. In any event, the behavior of atheists is "extremely absurd" when they reject the promises of immortality (10). In fact, "when the very pleasures of paradise are contemned and trampled on, like pearls cast before swine, there's small hope of reclaiming them by arguments of reason" (11). It appears that, by this statement, Bentley undercut at the outset his efforts to win over atheists by reason. He probably considered it to be his Christian duty to try to lead atheists through rational means to the right path, notwithstanding the awareness that there is only a little hope of success. That would be regrettable, with eternal consequences, if atheists could not see that "the very life, and vital motion, and the formal essence and nature of man, is wholly owing to the power of God; and that the consideration of ourselves, of our own souls and bodies, both directly and nearly conduct us to the acknowledgment of his existence" (37).

## Infinity

Is it possible that the human race has no beginning, as some tried to claim, and thus admitted an existence of an infinite number of generations? Suppose there was a man "at infinite distance from us now," so also his son would be at an infinite distance from us, the number of people would be infinite and the number of eyes of these people would be twice the number of these dead people so that one infinity would be twice the other infinite, which is a contradiction (63).

First, Bentley made a wrong assumption here: the man mentioned first would be at a finite distance from us at the present moment; in fact, no one in such a hypothetical infinite succession would be at an infinite distance from anyone else. Consider the sequence of all integers representing generations of humans:... –2, –1, 0, 1, 2, ...; the distance between any two integers is always finite: for $n < m$, it would simply be $m - n$. Also, Newton was minutely more careful when he was speaking about different infinities to be neither equal nor unequal (208, 210); for instance, an interval of one foot divided infinitely renders 12 times more parts than an inch divided infinitely (209). Still the arguments used by Bentley and Newton are rather bizarre even considering the fact that they had been made in the pre-Cantorian times since they could have easily seen that their arguments do not hold, for example, for a set of positive integers vs. a set of both positive and negative integers, both sets being of the same cardinality as simple function $m = 2n$ would demonstrate. Incidentally, Descartes tried a terminological subterfuge by speaking about God's infinity vs. the fact that space is indefinite.

Second, Bentley accepted a common view at his times that there is only one infinity and this infinity in a real sense can be ascribed only to God, whereby infinity acquired a sacred status, as probably most forcefully believed by Descartes. Consequently, no material entity can be infinite, infinity is only one and it is reserved to God alone.

In any event, Bentley's conclusion was that humankind is not infinite; on the other hand, God's existence is of the eternal duration which is permanent and indivisible, not measured by time nor counted by the number of successive moments (64).

Another argument against past eternity of the world stated that the data from censuses indicate that the proportion of the number of births to the number of burials is 50 to 40, which means – although Bentley did not explicitly state it – that for an eternally existing world the population of the world would be infinite. To disallow such a possibility, an assumption would have to be made that there was an infinite number of worldwide catastrophes to reduce humanity to a small number to repopulate the earth (65), and these catastrophes would have to occur at the right time, before an overpopulation would lead to a possible collapse of the human race. What would be a natural cause of such catastrophes? Moreover, by the present moment, all possible discoveries would have been made (64). However, is there a limit to discoveries humans can make? Also, wouldn't it be possible that some worldwide catastrophes could wipe out all or most of the existing discoveries unless a Noah-like provision would be made to carry these discoveries through catastrophes?

Materialists say that not only is the infinity of human generations possible, but also the infinity of the existence of the world is conceivable. If the world had no beginning, there would be a revolution of the earth at an infinite distance from the present, but the interval marked by this distant revolution and the present would be finite. Also, there would be 12 times more revolutions of the moon and 365 times more rotations of the earth, whereby there would be three different infinities (135). This is impossible, said Bentley, repeating the same error: even for an infinite past, each revolution would be at the finite temporal distance from the present; also, the number of revolutions and rotations of the earth and revolutions of the moon would be of the same cardinality. "God may do any thing that implies not a contradiction" (141), and Bentley pronounced the existence of two unequal infinities to be contradictory, which allowed him to make a theologically perilous statement, that even God could not create an eternal world (136) – and this just from the concept of a unique infinity – although He could have created it earlier (138).

There is nothing that could be almost infinite; there is nothing second to an omnipotent God. There is always an infinite distance between God and the noblest creation, "so that no actual creature can ever be the most perfect of all possible creation" (139); thus, each creation could be better regardless of its level of perfection. In Bentley's universe, the Leibnizian argument of the world being the best possible does not quite hold, unless an addition is made: the current world, that is, the world of this particular age, is the best possible among all the possible worlds of the same age.

## Randomness

Could the world be the result of a random motion of atoms or some aggregates of atoms which would unite into harmonious wholes? Bentley considered such an argument absurd. Would atheists believe that a monkey while scribbling with a pen could

write Hobbes' *Leviathan*? (50, 113), but they believe that the structure of the human body is the result of an accidental arrangement of atoms (50). In the forerunner of Paley watch-on-the-beach argument, Bentley said that we have no doubt that an excavated medal or a sculpture (109) or an existing house were designed and made by rational beings. A person "must be a mere idiot, that cannot discern more strokes and characters of workmanship in the structure of an animal (in an human body especially) than in the most elegant medal or edifice in the world" (110). When a very large number of 24 letters are thrown to the ground, they will not produce the *Aeneid* (111, 200).[5] There are a million of millions possible outcomes, and so that would be for random ordering of different parts of a body (113). One chance throw does not have an impact upon another chance throw, so, at each throw there is as little chance of forming a meaningful whole at it was before (114). Even allowing for an accidental formation of an organism, what are the chances that the environment will be right for its preservation, climate, food, etc. (115)? Moreover, very few species can provide for themselves without the help of parents. Also, how would randomly emerged humans protect themselves from randomly emerged animals (116)? Finally, some organs come in pairs: two ears, two eyes, etc. how could chance produce it if one such organ would suffice (107)? The argument that at first, bodies were made by chance but then they improved by usefulness is contradicted by the absence of cyclopes, one-nostril people, etc. (108).

The impossibility of emerging any harmonious entity from the random motion of atoms is increased by the fact that the vacuum is very sparsely populated by atoms. In Bentley's estimation, the empty space of our solar region is $8{,}575 \cdot 10^{17}$ times larger than the matter in it (153) and each particle would be 9,000,000 times of its length away from any other particle, actually from only 12 particles evenly placed (and at a larger distance from other particles), if matter was evenly dispersed in space, whereby it would be 1 chance in $10^{14}$ that a mechanical movement would lead to a collision with another particle (155). It is hard to believe that particles so distant from one another in the state of chaos could get together to form solar systems. It is more likely that a few particles that would clash would right away rebound or be separated by some other collisions. But the chance of one particle colliding with another would be much smaller than the chance for two ships without pilots on the Atlantic to collide with one another (158). Also, even allowing for planets to be formed, how can they acquire revolutions around a sun (159)?

In an interesting remark, Bentley stated that a resort to randomness is really no explanation at all. If chance is allowed, then no explanation can be provided since if an explanation were possible, it would have to be made in terms of some mechanism (98). "If this chance be supposed to be a body, it must then be a part of the common mass of matter; and consequently be subject to the universal and necessary laws of motion; and therefore it cannot be chance, but true mechanism and nature" (99).

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[5] Cf. Cicero, *De Natura Deorum*, Cambridge 1967, p. 158.

## Gravity

Five years before Bentley's lectures, the first Latin edition of Newton's *Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy* (1687) came out. Unlike in later editions, no theological argument was made in it (in the General scholium); however, Bentley recognized the scholarly brilliance of Newton's work and enlisted it in the service of his own anti-atheistic counterarguments and was praised by one editor for having been the first to use the then unknown principles of Newton to prove the existence of God.[6] Interestingly, it even appears that Newton participated in selecting Bentley for the inauguration of the Boyle Lectures and encouraged him to use the theory of gravitation as one of the themes in these lectures.[7]

Gravity is "the powerful cement which holds together this magnificent structure of the world," and without it, the world would be in chaos, for gravity is the force created by God (75); noteworthy, Newton said in his letter to Bentley that he, Newton, did not know what the cause of gravity was (210).

According to Bentley, matter is something that has extension, is impenetrable, divisible, and passive (37)[8]; thus, self-motion is impossible, the motive force must come from the outside, and it does: this is gravity, whereby the existence of gravitational force by itself is a proof of the existence of God who can be the only source of this force. Incidentally, the passivity of matter also indicated that the soul, "the principle of self-activity" (99), is an entity of different, namely incorporeal, nature.

Even allowing gravitation to be an innate force of matter, atoms could not form the solar system; in the space, which is likely finite, atoms would be falling toward the middle of space forming one huge sphere (165; Newton agreed, 203; there would have to be a particle exactly in the center of this finite space (207-208)). Even if planets were formed, they would fall into the sun (166). Only God could make them go around the sun (167).

To indulge the atheists, Bentley stated that a solid inanimate body cannot produce life, so the first human body was produced from a fluid (78). The atheist would consider "the primitive man to be produced by a long process in a kind of digesting *balneum*, where all the heavier lees may have time to subside, and a due *aequilibrium* be maintained." In an undisturbed fluid, all solid parts would have the

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[6] To the reader, in *The Present State of Trinity College in Cambridg[e], in a Letter from Dr. Bentley*, London 1710, p. [1]; and, J.H. Monk, *The Life of Richard Bentley*, London 1830, p. 32, the claim that was feebly contested by T. Blomer, *A Full View of Dr Bentley's Letter to the Lord Bishop of Ely*, London 1710, p. 8. In any event, by his use of Newton's recent theory, Bentley showed his "vigorous originality in the use of new acquisitions," R.C. Jebb, *Bentley*, New York 1882, p. 30.

[7] H. Guerlac, M.C. Jacob, *Bentley, Newton, and Providence (The Boyle Lectures Once More)*, "Journal of the History of Ideas" 30 (1969), p. 318.

[8] The view of passivity of nature was very early contested in a pamphlet attributed to H. Layton, *Observations upon a Sermon Intituled, A Confutation of Atheism from the Faculties of the Soul, Aliàs, Matter and Motion Cannot Think*, [London 1692].

position in it according to their weight. But in a body to be formed, something light would have to be below heavier parts, e.g., muscles below bones (79). Also, just mechanical laws would have to lead to the formation of various parts of the body and to a harmonious combination of these parts. Only "an intelligent artist" who would have a plan of the body could accomplish this by using mechanical motions (80). In what order would such motions produce the body parts? Would the blood exist before the heart was formed? (81). Also, such a random mechanism would hardly put the same organs in similar places of various species. Next, it would not account for the mechanism of the development of an organism (82), hardly for the formation of all seeds enclosing the developed organism (83). Mechanical formation of organs is just "impossible and utterly inexplicable" (84). Also, why are no species produced that way today (86)? Bentley quoted recent discoveries that animal and plant organisms are not generated from inorganic matter, but from parents, eggs, or seeds except for the moment of creation when God created "seminal forms of all animals and vegetables" (94).

Planets must have gotten an impulse to go around the sun. A larger or smaller impulse would cause going in ellipses or hyperbolas, with which Newton agreed (205, 210). It is beyond random cause to harmonize these motions in the solar system (179). Ethereal spaces are perfectly fluid and do not affect the motion of planets. Chance could not cause that all planets revolve in the same direction (180), to which Newton consented (205). Not by chance does the earth revolve on the current orbit. If it were closer to the sun, the oceans would evaporate and life would be scorched; if it were further away from the sun, all earth would be frozen (181). If the earth revolved around the sun in 6 months, the seasons would change too quickly and some plants could not get ripe; the retarded rotation would cause droughts (184). The change of the revolution around the axis would make days shorter or longer significantly affecting human lives (185) and so would the change of the angle between the axis of the earth and its ecliptic (187). And thus, all these motions and their duration and position were carefully set in place by the designing hand of the benevolent God.

## Theodicy

There were some complaints made about insufficiencies of the world, thereby contesting the perfection of the power and wisdom of God. Why are there only five senses? atheists asked; maybe, Bentley responded, matter is unable to have more ways to sense (57)? Although Bentley leaves that open, maybe it is part of the essence of matter that it is limited to five senses. Trying to create more senses would then be contrary to its nature.[9] Besides, the same complaint could be made for any

[9] "Bentley's considered view is that God's actions are bound by the essential natures of things. God is unable to make something to act in a way that is contrary to its nature," P.J. Connolly, *Metaphysics in Richard Bentley's Boyle Lectures*, "History of Philosophy Quarterly" 34 (2017), p. 161.

number of senses that could be (57). Can senses be better? There would be always limitations, e.g., seeing beyond the curvature of the earth. A very discerning eye that would not require a microscope would see everything "rugged and deformed" (58)[10] and the field of vision would be narrow. After all, there are instruments that allow for seeing things better. Hearing that would be very acute would make any sound unbearable (59).

God's omnipotence is limited by the law of non-contradiction; if God cannot do something, "'tis not any imperfection in the power of God, but an incapacity in the subject" (45).

Why do illnesses exist? They are often self-inflicted by people's lifestyle; however, there is often medicine available. Life is too short. The same complaint would be regardless of the length of life (61).

Is too much surface of the earth covered by water? By making oceans smaller, the circulation of water would be affected (191), and thereby the fertility of the earth (193). Some complain that seashores are uneven (195), but "all pulchritude is relative" and irregular shapes can also be beautiful (196). Truly, beauty is in the eye of the beholder and can humans judge what is beautiful in angelic and divine eyes?

## Conclusion

Bentley can be considered to be an early representative of physico-theology which sprung onto the European theological scene in the second half of the 17th century and flourished in the 18th century, particularly abundantly in Germany. He argued against atheism using rational arguments from the concept of infinity, regardless of how ineffective and erroneous this argument was, but also very strongly from the improbability or randomness to account for the physical and, in fact, also spiritual nature of the world. He did not provide any elaborate physical examples of the complexity of the world and its elements the way later physico-theologians did, although, among others, he pointed to the remarkable makeup of the eye (103), incidentally, one of the most prized examples used by physico-theologians. With the view of the physical world, he stated that "when we consider how innumerable parts must constitute so small a member as the finger, we cannot look upon it or the whole body, wherein appears so much fitness, and use, and subserviency to infinite functions, any otherwise than as the effect of contrivance and skill, and consequently the workmanship of a most intelligent and beneficent Being" (55). However, God did not leave the world to its own devices, as deists would claim, but He constantly exercises His providential care for it: "'Tis concluded, I think, among all those that have well considered these matters, that the same divine energy which gave a being to any creature must be constantly and in-

[10] Cf. J. Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding,* London 1825, p. 200–202.

cessantly exerted to continue it in being" (265).[11] The harmony and beauty of the world was for Bentley a very clear indication of such a providential care, which was also a constant theme used by the physico-theologians.

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### Elaboration

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[11] With this, while mechanistic philosophy espoused by atheists banished God from the universe, Bentley "brought him triumphantly back under the banner of the new natural philosophy," based on theories Newton supplied, J.J. Dahm, *Science and apologetics in the early Boyle Lectures*, "Church History" 39 (1970), p. 186.

**Summary**

In his Boyle lectures, Richard Bentley presented arguments designed to stop the growing tide of atheistic and deistic sentiment in England. He argued for the existence of the soul and the existence of God using arguments based on the science of his time, in particular, Newtonian physics. He argued against randomness as an explanatory principle and addressed the problem of theodicy.

**Keywords**: Richard Bentley, the soul, infinity, randomness, gravity, theodicy

**Richard Bentley przeciwko ateistom**

**Streszczenie**

W swoich wykładach będących częścią programu Boyle Lectures, Richard Bentley przedstawił argumenty mające na celu powstrzymanie rosnącej fali nastrojów ateistycznych i deistycznych w Anglii. Argumentował za istnieniem duszy i istnieniem Boga za pomocą argumentów opartych na nauce swoich czasów, w szczególności na fizyce newtonowskiej. Argumentował przeciw przypadkowości jako zasadzie wyjaśniającej istnienie świata i dyskutował też problem teodycei.

**Słowa kluczowe**: Richard Bentley, dusza, nieskończoność, losowość, grawitacja, teodyce