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Letters to Doubting Thomas: A Case for the Existence of God

By C. Stephen Layman

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[1] *Letters to Doubting Thomas* is a series of imaginary letters between a Philosopher, Zach, and his friend, Thomas, exploring reasons for and against believing in the existence of the God of Theism. Thomas's role is that of the philosophical ingénue (albeit, as his name would suggest, an ingénue inclined towards scepticism); Zach's role is that of the wise guide, gently leading the sometimes-faltering Thomas through new conceptual territory, away from his agnosticism and towards the conclusion that 'the evidence favours Theism, all things considered' (248). Had Zach found himself in dialogue with a sophisticated atheist, rather than a philosophically naïve agnostic, then of course he would have encountered more obstacles as he proceeded in this direction and the conversations recorded in letters between the two would have been less one sided (as it is, some of Thomas's letters are little more than requests to hear more). However, the aim of the book is to introduce the Philosophy of Religion to those new to the subject, rather than to provide an example of it as a conversation conducted between experts (and perhaps one only capable of being fully appreciated by experts as a result). That being so, there is a limit to the extent to which one can press as a criticism the fact that Thomas's objections to Zach's arguments are rather wanting. In any case, the literary conceit is well maintained; the artificiality of the contrivance seldom forces itself on one's attention as one switches back and forth between the careful (whilst informal) and perspicuous argumentation of Zach and the commonsensical, if not always perspicacious, rejoinders of Thomas. Overall, despite the arguments not always meeting as much opposition as they might and despite the points being made in an informal fashion, *Letters to Doubting Thomas* constitutes a clear cumulative case for Theism; throughout, the tone manages to be as non-dogmatic as it is accessible and thus the book could be enjoyed, as well as understood, by beginners in the subject, and enjoyed whatever their religious beliefs or lack of them.

[2] Of all of the points Zach makes to which this reader wished Thomas had objected, there is only one that Thomas offers no remarks on whatsoever and which is yet crucial to Zach's argument. This is Zach's unchallenged assumption that God would be more likely to favour the creation of a universe that is conducive to conscious life than the creation of one that is not or than no creation at all. We

are told that a 'loving and generous being would have reason to create entities with which to share good things' (94); more fully, a 'God would have reason to create both embodied and un-embodied intelligent conscious creatures, since both could enjoy God's blessing. Of course it doesn't necessarily follow that God would create both—one can have good reason to do something but decide not to do it. Nevertheless, it wouldn't be surprising if God create one or the other (or both) of these kinds of intelligent creatures. Furthermore, given that God is generous, it would be quite surprising if he didn't create *any* intelligent beings to share good things with' (118). I take it then that Zach's claim would be that God has a reason, stemming from his generosity, to create intelligent conscious creatures whom he can then bless. This reason, however, is not a compelling one; he might well have decided not to create any such creatures although it would have been 'surprising' if he had not.¹ Despite its being unchallenged by Thomas, this does not seem at all obvious. What would be needed to make it more plausible, it seems to me, are some examples of cases of which we have had more obvious experience, cases which illustrated that we think *ipso facto* generous those who create intelligent conscious life. The problem – I would contend – is that there are no such cases. Consider the following.

^[3] Suppose that one day you meet a happily married couple and get chatting to them. They tell you, amongst other things, that they have had five children. You find yourself comparing them in your mind to another couple you know and reflecting on the – admittedly strange, but then this is a thought experiment – fact that in all respects except one these two couples are identical. The respect in which they differ is that whilst this couple has had five children, the couple that you knew already have had only four children. On this basis, do you incline to conclude that the couple you've just come across are more generous than the couple you knew already? Surely not.

^[4] Suppose that the next day you meet a third couple and get chatting to them. They tell you various things about themselves including the fact that they've chosen not to have any children at all. When you inquire whether this is to conserve their resources so as to be able to be more generous to those who already exist or will come into existence independently of them, you discover that it is not. Neither though is it to enable them to pursue some project the morality of which you find yourself with reason to question. Their decision not to have children has had, as far as you can tell, no effect other than to mean that there are less intelligent conscious creatures in the world than there could have been. Would you think less highly of their generosity than of that of either of the couples you met the day before? Surely not.

^[5] Generosity, it seems to me from reflections such as this, is not a virtue

1. One might object that it could not have been surprising to anyone if he had not, as if he had not then there'd be no one other than God himself around to be surprised; presumably God cannot be surprised by his own choices. However, this presumption doesn't hold on Layman's preferred 'Open Theism' model, whereby God could in principle have surprised himself by not, after all and despite his goodness remaining unimpugned, having created any intelligent conscious creatures whom he could then bless.

one can display towards a person by bringing that person into existence. My parents have been generous to me in various ways, but none of these was in their conceiving me in the first place: the brother that I never had because they didn't conceive him wasn't less generously treated than me because they did conceive me. Elsewhere,² I have expanded on this thought, arguing that it is plausible to maintain that God has no reason at all (not just no reason stemming from generosity) to create life rather than not. In that context I encouraged people to imagine the following situation:

^[6] You are an astronaut. One day you are working on a distant planet rather like the Earth as it was several million years ago, with what Biologists would call primordial soup swilling around under stormy skies. Conditions are ripe for the emergence of life, but as yet no life has formed. (The latest research would suggest that this is rather a simplification of the biology involved, but we need not worry about that.) You have a certain aerial, which you need to set up somewhere to send a signal back to your orbiting space ship. Two locations are equally suitable for sending the signal. You could set up your aerial in location A, where it would be more likely to be hit by lightning; conduct some electricity down into a pool of primordial soup; and thus assist this planet in developing life. (This lightning wouldn't damage the aerial in any way.) Alternatively, you could set it up in location B, on a rocky outcrop with no soup around. Each location is equally close to your current position; the aerial would work equally well in either place; and you would be perfectly safe whichever location you chose: the only difference is that if you put it up in location A, then – as a by-product of your sending your signal – you're more likely to create – with the help of the pre-existent conditions – life than if you put it up in location B. This life is likely – let us further suppose – to evolve over millions of generations into intelligent conscious, morally sensitive, free beings, such as ourselves. Would you get any good feeling from thinking that you'd helped create this sort of life, rather than left this planet a barren rock, a good feeling that wouldn't be based on your assessment of yourself as having done what you had most reason to do? Let me suppose for the sake of argument that you would not; you find as you look into yourself that, pushing aside for a moment any sense of achievement you might get from feeling that you'd done what you had most reason to do,³ you would not feel any better having put your aerial at location A than you would do had you put it at B (or indeed vice versa). Now with all these features of the thought experiment fixed: Do you have more reason to site your aerial at location A than you do to site it at location B?

^[7] A positive answer is going to be needed to questions such as this if Zach is going to have a hope of being justified in thinking that if there were a God, he'd have a good reason for creating a universe with intelligent conscious creatures in it and thus if Zach is potentially going to be able to generate a good argument from these features of the universe to the existence of God. You might have a different

2. T. J. Mawson, *Belief in God* (OUP, 2005), page 147ff.

3. This of course needs to be pushed aside for the appropriateness of such a feeling is precisely the point at issue.

intuition about this from me, but I report that I think that the answer to my last question is 'No': you have no more reason to put your aerial at A than you do to put it at B.

^[8] Finally, one might ask what reason *could* God have to create anything (a lifeless universe; a universe fine-tuned for life; a set of non-physical angelic beings; anything)? Being God, it's not as if any of these things could fulfil some previously unsatisfied need of his and their not existing prior to his creating them means that they themselves could hardly be said to have previous requirements met by their being created. None of this is to suggest that God could not have created the world because it would have been positively *unreasonable* for him to do so. Sometimes, we do things for no reason at all and this doesn't make our doing them *unreasonable*. But it is to suggest that the best account on Theism might well be that whilst God's free choice explains why this universe exists, that God made this choice, rather than another, is something for which there is no explanation. And if that is right, then at least the fine-tuning version of the Design Argument and the Argument from Consciousness, as Zach uses them in making his cumulative case, are fatally undermined.

^[9] Zach sums up his case in the closing pages: 'A consideration of religious experience and the Cosmological Argument leave Theism and Naturalism on a par. But the design argument and the argument from free will provide significant support for Theism over Naturalism. The phenomenon of evil, commonly thought to provide evidence for Naturalism over Theism, supports neither of these hypotheses over the other. The Moral Order provides further evidence for Theism over Naturalism. Therefore, in the end, it seems to me that the preponderance of evidence favors Theism over Naturalism' (248). Thomas is, as always, less generous than Zach in his assessment of reasons for believing in God. So it is that he closes the interchange of letters admitting simply 'that Theism has a lot more going for it than I supposed' (249). A reader who has been introduced to the Philosophy of Religion by reading this interchange of letters will, by these closing pages, have questions of their own to pose to Zach's arguments and perhaps some arguments of their own to add to his side of the debate. In any case, they'll want to know more and discuss more. This, surely, is a large part of what one should hope for from an introduction to a subject. In *Letters to Doubting Thomas* one finds that hope vindicated.