

**“Do You Mean That You Believe in Devils Too?”:  
A Reply to Hitchens and Barker on the Eve of the Reason Rally**

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On April 4, 2009, the late Christopher Hitchens engaged William Lane Craig in a public debate over the existence of God.<sup>1</sup> Craig delivered his usual scripted arguments for God’s existence and Hitchens counterpunched with his usual wit. But there was an interesting question raised by Hitchens during the later cross-examination period pertaining to Craig’s appeal to Jesus’ use of exorcisms: “When you say exorcism, do you mean that *you* believe in devils too?”<sup>2</sup> Craig parried by keeping the focus on what *Jesus* believed He was doing and not on the reality of demoniacal invaders. But lost in the translation was that *Craig himself was being queried about believing in devils.*<sup>3</sup>

In feeding the naturalist’s penchant for accusing natural theology of employing explanatory surrogates (i.e. God-of-the-gaps reasoning), Hitchens himself brings up devils (or demons) specifically. He claims that in an ancient culture that did not yet have a germ theory of disease, a religious adherent simply thought that “maybe evil spirits caused disease.”<sup>4</sup> Richard Dawkins, in lockstep with Hitchens on this score, speaks of those who wrongly “interpret mental illness as ‘possession by devils’” to be remedied only by exorcism.<sup>5</sup> Dan Barker telescopes the entire supernatural landscape thusly:

Natural forces and random processes of fertility and weather and all the jumble of unpredictable, frightening occurrences were automatically thought to be “agents” out there— gods, devils, angels, demons, ghosts, witches, orixás. This was not because

there was any practical or immediate reason, but simply because we inherited the tendency to make that mistake for very good evolutionary reasons.<sup>6</sup>

In a 2002 interview, Barker's interviewer, Jason, brings up his own belief that the "sons of God" in Genesis 6 refer to deviant angels who married human women and sired the demons.

Barker reacts:

You actually believe that some angelic creatures came down from Heaven and ...? I mean, this is the twenty-first century, Jason. You're an adult. You're talking about devils and angels and demons and ... Think about what you're saying and how ludicrous this appears to an intelligent person. That stuff did not happen. Those are myths that the Israelites made up to try to explain, in their own bumbling way, what the origin of the world was like.<sup>7</sup>

This reaction is not even an inchoate assessment of the view. It is *no* assessment of the view. It is merely Barker's emotional reaction<sup>8</sup> – one that is obviously meant to *deride*. Shortly after, he declares that neither miracles nor demon possessions "have ever been confirmed" and that both are "misinterpretations of natural events."<sup>9</sup> Of course the evidence for this is never forthcoming.

Barker et al are indicting the Christian conscience here. Not only are demons alleged to be improper explanations for various natural events like diseases (Hitchens; Barker) and mental illnesses (Dawkins), Barker finds demons outright “ludicrous.” But reasonable people need to move past the “shock” of an idea being “ludicrous” in order to reasonably assess it (after all, a reasonable notion like quantum entanglement was once denigrated by Einstein as “spooky action at a distance”<sup>10</sup>). In the next section, I shall defend the reasonableness of belief in demons by investigating the central claims posed against it.

### **On the Reasonableness of Demonological Realism**

Christianity implies, but is not necessarily tied to, the notion that there really are otherworldly, vicious, spiritual agents commonly referred to as “demons.” This is what I call *demonological realism*. While demonological realism is perceived as superstitious nonsense left bloodied up by the natural sciences, it is still affirmed by intellectuals.<sup>11</sup> Are these intellectual believers just crazy or is it that the pushback by atheists is overstated? My response is twofold: (i) the notion that natural forces have displaced demonic causes is overstated, and (ii) there is an historical argument for demonological realism (irrespective of medicine and psychiatry). Space does not permit a full discussion of these points, but I want to sketch reasonable support for each. I shall conclude that demonological realism is *at least* plausible even if not probable. I thus welcome Dan Barker’s “commitment to follow reason and evidence wherever they might lead.”<sup>12</sup>

*The Notion that Natural Forces have Displaced Demonic Causes is Overstated*

First, it is not part of the Christian *Weltanschauung* to think that every disease or mental disorder is caused by demons. This much is embedded in the New Testament narrative. Luke reports, for example, that the father of Publius was sick, not with demons, but with dysentery (Acts 28.8). James tells his ailing readers to seek the elders for healing, not exorcism (James 5.14-15). Jesus Himself implies that one normally seeks a physician when sick (Luke 5.31). And Timothy was encouraged by Paul to use wine, not exorcism, to manage his illness (1 Timothy 5.23). Generally speaking, the New Testament seems to categorically distinguish between being sick and having an unclean spirit (Matthew 10.8; Acts 5.16). Therefore, it is of little consequence to demonological realism that most physical illnesses have natural causes.

Secondly, atheists do not take into account that the delimited episodes of demon-induced physical ailments in Scripture might be *psychosomatic*, thus reasonably allowing for them to be caused by an external mind rather than “magical powers.” For example, when Satan is said to inflict Job with skin lesions (Job 2.7), that infliction may be an instance of urticaria (viz. hives) which can be brought on by mental stress. Psychological etiologies cannot be assessed by biomarkers and, so, one cannot preclude the presence of an alien spirit’s cognitive influence (if there is one). The man who was made “blind and mute” by a demon in Matthew 12.22-28 may have been psychologically inflicted with a *conversion disorder* which only “mimic[s] neurological disease, but occur[s] in the absence of organic damage” rendering the victim’s blindness and aphonia as matters of cognitive, not biological, impairment.<sup>13</sup> Considerations of (external) psychological causes for these things would be appropriate even by today’s enlightened standards.

Thirdly, atheists who presume that demon possessions are always misdiagnoses of mental disorders are painfully unaware of the literature on the subject. I mention just one salient point: *No cognitive scientist confidently knows what explains “possession cases.”*<sup>14</sup> Psychologists and psychiatrists generally tend to identify most possession cases as instances of *dissociative identity disorder (formerly multiple personality disorder)*.<sup>15</sup> But identifying something as dissociative identity disorder is not to identify its cause or to provide an explanation for the symptoms. There just “are no successful causal explanations of (exemplary) mental disorders that cite a single main cause or a final common pathway for their pathogeneses.”<sup>16</sup> When there is a diagnosis for any reported behavior, it is usually done on the basis of a common aggregate of symptoms between conditions. Thinking that psychiatrists have narrowed a disorder’s etiology down to a cause or set of causes that is/are merely biological is nothing short of false.<sup>17</sup> And there are good reasons to think that mental disorders cannot even *in principle* obtain apart from psychosocial factors.<sup>18</sup> What precludes demons, then, from being possible contributory causes in some possession cases?<sup>19</sup> Beyond an *a priori* prejudice against the supernatural, I cannot think of any. The fact that demon-possession cases *qua* demon possessions are getting a serious second look is a credit to demonological realism.<sup>20</sup>

### *An Historical Argument for Demonological Realism*

If the reports of Jesus’ life and ministry withstand historical scrutiny, and if can be established with a sufficient degree of probability that He was raised from the dead, then I take it that this would count as solid validation of that life and ministry (who wouldn’t?). In the Synoptic Gospels, there are a number of reports of demon possessions. Such possession cases

are disambiguated by Jesus' and others' responses to them. I only have space to mention two of these: the Beelzebul controversy (Matthew 12.22-30; Mark 3.22-27; Luke 11.14-23) and the Gadarene demoniacs (Matthew 8:28-34; Mark 5.1-20; Luke 8.26-40).

At the end of the Beelzebul pericope, it is implied by the Pharisees' charge of Jesus using Satan's power to cast out demons that something like a demon possession genuinely occurred. Secondly, Jesus tells the Pharisees, "Go and tell [Herod], 'Behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I finish my course'" (Luke 13.32). Accordingly, Jesus believed and confessed openly that He could cast out demons. As for the Gadarene demoniacs, there are two marks of accreditation there. As to one, the accounts themselves contain an "undesigned coincidence" in that there is background detail that helps corroborate the story:<sup>21</sup> the accounts straightforwardly report that demons were expelled out of men and into pigs near the Sea of Tiberius. *But why would ritually unclean animals such as pigs be near the Sea of Tiberius?* The answer comes from Josephus: "... as to Gaza, and Gadara, and Hippos, they were Grecian cities" (*Antiquities of the Jews* XVII.11.4). The Greeks were pagans and would explain why pigs would in fact be in the area. As to the other, the Gadarene expulsion ends with the destruction of the people's livelihood which is awkward, if not outright embarrassing, considering that as a result "all the city ... begged [Jesus] to leave their region" (Matthew 8.34).<sup>22</sup> One would have expected this part to have been deleted or cast in a more positive light if it were an invention. To add insult to injury, the herdsmen from the offended city are reported to be the primary eyewitnesses to this event.

Thus, if these depictions of exorcism belong to the historical Jesus, then it is hard not to see His resurrection as historical confirmation of demonological realism. This seems like a

reasonable conclusion to draw. Yet despite the New Atheists' pretense to being the pursuers and champions of reason, Barker et al have not given the devil his due.

## END NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> "Does God Exist?: William Lane Craig vs. Christopher Hitchens" at Biola University (April 4, 2009). A transcript of the event can be accessed at <<http://www.reasonablefaith.org/does-god-exist-craig-vs-hitchens-apr-2009>>.

<sup>2</sup> <[http://www.reasonablefaith.org/does-god-exist-craig-vs-hitchens-apr-2009#section\\_6](http://www.reasonablefaith.org/does-god-exist-craig-vs-hitchens-apr-2009#section_6)>; emphasis mine.

<sup>3</sup> See William Lane Craig, "The Doctrine of Creation," Defenders podcast series, section 8, episodes #20-#26, <<http://www.reasonablefaith.org/defenders-2-podcast/s8>>.

<sup>4</sup> Hitchens, "Opening Speech."

<sup>5</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (GB: Bantam Press, 2006), p. 209.

<sup>6</sup> Dan Barker, *Godless: How an Evangelical Preacher Became One of America's Leading Atheists* (Berkeley, CA: Ulysses Press, 2008), p. 351.

<sup>7</sup> From an unspecified Christian radio show that aired in San Diego, California in November, 2002. A full transcript is produced at <<http://ffrf.org/outreach/item/18396-jason-gastrich-interviews-dan-barker>>.

<sup>8</sup> Barker's self-described road to deconversion from Christianity is couched in terms of his moving *from* emotion to reason: "I vividly remember ... weighing emotion against reason" (Barker, *Godless*, p. 36).

<sup>9</sup> From the radio interview.

<sup>10</sup> Anton Zeilinger, *Dance of the Photons: From Einstein to Quantum Teleportation* (NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), p. 6.

<sup>11</sup> Alvin Plantinga writes: "[t]here are large numbers of educated contemporaries (including even some with Ph.D's!) who believe [...] that there are both demons and spirits who are active in the contemporary world. As a matter of historical fact, there are any number of contemporaries, and contemporary intellectuals very well acquainted with science, who don't feel any problem at all in pursuing science and also believing in miracles, angels, Christ's resurrection, the lot" (*Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 405).

<sup>12</sup> Barker, *Godless*, p. 36.

<sup>13</sup> John Kihlstrom, "Dissociative and Conversion Disorders," *Cognitive Science and Clinical Disorders*, ed. by Dan Stein and Jeffrey Young (London: Academic Press, 1992), p. 248.

<sup>14</sup> Psychiatry has retained the appellation "possession cases" in the literature, not to legitimize it as a diagnosis of demonic harassment but to refer to the phenomenal aspects associated with the perception of such affliction. It would be similar to using the appellation "UFO abduction cases" which would not necessarily commit one to acknowledging actual alien abductions. It would only refer to the *experience* of feeling abducted by an alien oppressor.

<sup>15</sup> According to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (fifth edition), a dissociative identity disorder is a "[d]isruption of identity characterized by two or more distinct personality states, which may be described in some cultures as an experience of possession. The disruption in identity involves marked discontinuity in sense of self and sense of agency, accompanied by related alterations in affect, behavior, consciousness, memory, perception, cognition, and/or sensory-motor functioning. These signs and symptoms may be observed by others or reported by the individual" (Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Association, 2013), p. 292).

<sup>16</sup> George Graham, *The Disordered Mind: An Introduction to Philosophy of Mind and Mental Illness*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 55.

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<sup>17</sup> Rachel Cooper writes: “‘Mental’ disorders frequently have multifactorial causes” given that “many physical conditions are affected by psychological factors” (“What’s Special About Mental Health and Disorder?,” *Arguing About Human Nature*, ed. by Stephen M. Downes and Edouard Machery (New York, NY: Routledge, 2013), p. 490).

<sup>18</sup> See Charles M. Olbert and Gary J. Gala, “Supervenience and Psychiatry: Are Mental Disorders Brain Disorders?,” *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology*, Vol. 35 (2015), pp. 203–219.

<sup>19</sup> Stafford Betty bluntly says that “we do not have ... indubitable evidence (the ‘slam dunk’) we need to overturn the claim of Western medicine that infesting spirits are not the cause – ever – of mental illness” (“The Growing Evidence for ‘Demonic Possession’: What Should Psychiatry’s Response Be?,” *Journal of Religion and Health*, 44 (2005), p. 25).

<sup>20</sup> See Richard E. Gallagher, “Among the Many Counterfeits: A Case of Demonic Possession,” *New Oxford Review* 75, (March 2008), <<http://www.newoxfordreview.org/article.jsp?did=0308-gallagher>>; Stafford Betty, “The Growing Evidence for ‘Demonic Possession,’” pp. 13–30.

<sup>21</sup> J. J. Blunt, *Undesigned Coincidences in the Writings Both of the Old and New Testaments* (NY: Robert Carter and Brothers, 1851), p. 343.

<sup>22</sup> Graham H. Twelftree, *Jesus the Exorcist: A Contribution to the Study of the Historical Jesus*, reprinted edition (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2010), p. 75.