



New Atheism and Jewish Philosophy: An Analytical Study of William E. Kaufman's Perspective on the Existence of God

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Abstract

This article examines William E. Kaufman's Jewish philosophical response to the New Atheists' arguments against the existence of God. It focuses on the criticisms of New Atheists concerning God, evolution, faith and the problem of evil and analyses Kaufman's replies from the perspective of contemporary Jewish philosophy. Kaufman argues that the existence of God is a metaphysical rather than a scientific question and therefore cannot be resolved by empirical science alone. He further maintains that evolutionary theory does not necessarily lead to atheism and that faith cannot be reduced to belief without evidence. Drawing on the thought of Milton Steinberg, Abraham Joshua Heschel, Martin Buber, Emmanuel Levinas and Mordecai M. Kaplan, Kaufman presents alternative Jewish understandings of God based on rational reflection, religious experience, ethical responsibility and divine creativity. Using a qualitative and analytical approach, this study concludes that Kaufman's work offers a significant Jewish philosophical contribution to the contemporary debate on the existence of God by challenging the assumptions of scientific materialism and presenting belief in God as a coherent and intellectually defensible worldview.

Keywords:

New Atheism, Jewish Philosophy, Existence of God, Faith and Reason, Divine Creativity, Contemporary Jewish Theology.

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1. Introduction

The emergence of New Atheism has revived the contemporary debate on the existence of God. Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Daniel C. Dennett and Christopher Hitchens brought this debate into public discussion through their books, lectures and media appearances. They argue that belief in God is not supported by sufficient evidence. In their view, scientific knowledge provides a better explanation of reality than theism. They also maintain that the existence of God should be examined through science and rational inquiry rather than accepted as an article of faith.

William E. Kaufman offers a different response to this debate. His book, *A Jewish Philosophical Response to the New Atheists*, is not simply a defence of religion. It is a philosophical examination of the assumptions behind New Atheist arguments. Kaufman argues that the New Atheists rely heavily on scientific materialism and naturalism. He believes these philosophical assumptions shape many of their conclusions. For this reason, he maintains that the debate about God cannot be settled by science alone. It is a metaphysical question before it is a scientific one.¹

Kaufman rejects the idea that God is a scientific hypothesis. According to him, science investigates the physical world through observation, measurement and experimentation. The question of God belongs to a different level of inquiry. It concerns the ultimate ground of existence and the meaning of reality as a whole. The disagreement between theism and atheism is therefore a disagreement between two competing worldviews. One explains reality through materialism and naturalism. The other understands reality in relation to a self-existent and transcendent source of existence and value.²

Kaufman also argues that the New Atheists criticize a limited concept of God. Their objections focus mainly on a supernatural Being who intervenes in nature. In his view, this does not represent the full range of contemporary Jewish thought. Modern Jewish philosophy includes several approaches to God and religion. Some emphasize rational reflection. Others begin with religious experience, ethics, dialogue or divine creativity. By overlooking this diversity, the New Atheists criticize only one theological model while ignoring other important philosophical interpretations. To develop this argument, Kaufman draws on several contemporary Jewish thinkers. Milton Steinberg presents faith as a rational interpretation of reality. Abraham Joshua Heschel emphasizes awe, wonder, and religious experience. Martin Buber understands God through personal encounter rather than scientific investigation. Emmanuel Levinas approaches God through ethics and responsibility. Mordecai M. Kaplan

reconstructs the concept of God through Transnaturalism and divine creativity. Although these thinkers differ in method, they agree that reality cannot be explained fully by scientific materialism alone. Their ideas form the philosophical basis of Kaufman's response to the New Atheists.³

Despite the growing literature on New Atheism, Kaufman's contribution has received limited scholarly attention. Most studies focus on Christian responses, while his Jewish philosophical perspective is discussed only briefly. This article addresses that gap. It examines Kaufman's understanding of the existence of God and analyses his response to the principal objections raised by the New Atheists.

This study adopts a qualitative and analytical approach based on textual analysis. It examines the major arguments of the New Atheists and analyses Kaufman's responses in the light of contemporary Jewish philosophy. Particular attention is given to his distinction between science and metaphysics, his criticism of scientific materialism, his understanding of rational faith and his interpretation of God through religious experience, ethical responsibility, Transnaturalism and divine creativity. The study argues that Kaufman does not simply defend traditional theism. He develops a broader philosophical framework for discussing the existence of God beyond the limits of scientific naturalism.

2. New Atheist Arguments and Jewish Philosophical Responses

This section examines the principal objections raised by the New Atheists against the existence of God and analyses William E. Kaufman's responses from the perspective of contemporary Jewish philosophy. The New Atheist arguments are presented only to provide the context of the discussion. The primary focus remains on Kaufman's philosophical critique and his use of modern Jewish thought to offer an alternative understanding of God, faith and ultimate reality.

2.1 God as a Scientific Hypothesis

The New Atheists argue that the existence of God should be examined through the methods of scientific inquiry. Richard Dawkins, in particular, maintains that God is either a reality or an illusion and that this question can ultimately be answered by science.⁴ William E. Kaufman rejects this claim. He argues that Dawkins applies scientific methods to a question that belongs to metaphysics rather than empirical science. As Kaufman states:

“God is a metaphysical, not a scientific, hypothesis. God is the entire framework, a worldview not a set of facts within a worldview.”⁵

This statement forms the foundation of Kaufman's response. He argues that Dawkins treats God as though He were an object within the universe that could be confirmed or rejected

through observation and experiment. Kaufman rejects this assumption. In his view, science investigates observable and measurable phenomena. The question of God concerns the ultimate ground of existence. It cannot be settled by empirical methods alone.

Kaufman explains that scientific inquiry depends on observation, measurement, experimentation, prediction and repeatability. These methods are appropriate for studying the natural world. They are not intended to examine metaphysical reality. He therefore argues that Dawkins extends the authority of science beyond its proper limits.

“Science consists of agreed upon procedures by scientists, analysis of empirical, physical data and evidence, detection, measurement, quantification, prediction and repeatability. Dawkins is trying to measure what cannot be measured.”⁶

Kaufman further argues that Dawkins' position rests on the assumptions of scientific materialism. This worldview reduces ultimate reality to matter, energy, particles, and physical forces. Mind, consciousness and human thought are treated as products of material processes. Kaufman summarizes this position by stating:

“Scientific materialism is a reductionist worldview. It reduces ultimate reality to matter, energy, particles, forces, etc.”⁷

According to Kaufman, this reductionist approach leaves important philosophical questions unanswered. It cannot adequately explain consciousness, rationality or the reality of mind. More importantly, it presents materialism as if it were the only intellectually acceptable worldview. Kaufman argues that materialism is itself a philosophical interpretation of reality rather than a scientific conclusion. To strengthen this criticism, Kaufman refers to Keith Ward. Ward questions Dawkins' limited engagement with philosophy and asks:

“Has Dawkins never read any philosophy? Is he not aware of the weaknesses of materialism? Does he really think that Descartes, Leibniz, Spinoza, Kant and Hegel were all unthinking simpletons?”⁸

Kaufman uses this criticism to show that the debate over God's existence cannot be resolved by science alone. Materialism, idealism and theism remain competing philosophical interpretations of reality. The rejection of God is therefore a philosophical judgment rather than a scientific fact.

Having challenged Dawkins' understanding of science, Kaufman presents the positive Jewish response. He begins with Milton Steinberg, who rejects the claim that faith is simply belief without evidence. Steinberg argues that belief in God arises from rational reflection on reality. Kaufman quotes him as saying:

“To believe in God maturely, intelligently, is to believe that reality did not just

‘happen’, that it is no accident, no pointless interplay of matter and energy.”⁹

Kaufman explains that Steinberg understands God as the most reasonable explanation of the order, unity, creativity and rationality of the universe. For Steinberg, the universe is not merely the result of accidental material processes. It points to a creative and sustaining Divine Mind. He also argues that atheism faces its own philosophical questions. It must explain why the universe exists, why natural laws are orderly and how consciousness and purpose emerge within reality.

Kaufman next turns to Abraham Joshua Heschel. Unlike Steinberg, Heschel begins with religious experience rather than rational argument. He argues that awe, wonder and the experience of transcendence awaken an awareness of a reality beyond the physical world. Kaufman summarizes Heschel's position in these words:

“The certainty that there is a meaning beyond the mystery.”¹⁰

Kaufman explains that such experiences do not provide scientific proof of God. They reveal a dimension of reality that cannot be reduced to physical explanation alone. Heschel also maintains that every worldview begins with an ontological¹¹ presupposition.¹² The atheist assumes that ultimate reality is material. The believer assumes that ultimate reality is spiritual. Neither assumption can be demonstrated by science itself.

Kaufman also draws on Martin Buber's existential philosophy. Buber argues that God is not an object among other objects. God is encountered within a living relationship between the Divine and the human person. For this reason, Buber rejects the attempt to investigate belief in God through scientific methods.

“Neither psychology nor any other science is competent to investigate the truth of belief in God.”¹³

Kaufman concludes that neither theism nor atheism possesses absolute certainty. Human knowledge remains limited and ultimate reality cannot be fully explained through empirical investigation alone. He therefore maintains that belief in God remains a genuine philosophical possibility.

“There is, however, the possibility of God.”¹⁴

The discussion shows that Kaufman does not reject science or its methods. His criticism is directed at the assumption that science alone can answer every question about reality. He argues that the existence of God belongs to metaphysics because it concerns the ultimate interpretation of existence rather than observable facts. The debate between theism and atheism therefore remains a philosophical discussion between competing worldviews rather than a scientific dispute.

2.2 Evolution, Creation and Divine Creativity

The New Atheists regard evolution as sufficient to explain the complexity and diversity of life without reference to God. Richard Dawkins argues that natural selection accounts for the appearance of design in living organisms. He therefore rejects the need for a Divine Creator. According to Dawkins, if God is understood as an intelligent designer, then the same question must be asked: Who designed the Designer?¹⁵ William E. Kaufman does not reject evolutionary theory. He rejects the conclusion that evolution necessarily excludes God. In his view, the real issue is not evolution itself but the concept of God behind the debate.¹⁶

Kaufman argues that Dawkins' criticism applies only to one understanding of God. It challenges the idea of a supernatural designer who acts from outside nature. It does not refute every theological interpretation of creation. For this reason, Kaufman turns to contemporary Jewish and philosophical thought to show that belief in God can be understood without rejecting evolutionary science.

Kaufman first refers to the work of Gordon Kaufman. Gordon Kaufman accepts the findings of evolutionary science, but he rejects atheism. Instead of describing God as a supernatural agent he reconstructs the concept of God through creativity. William E. Kaufman explains:

“Unlike Dawkins, who is using the argument to defend atheism, Gordon Kaufman employs the argument to underscore the necessity to reconstruct the idea of God from supernatural agent to what he calls ‘serendipitous creativity.’”¹⁷

According to Kaufman, this understanding allows evolution and belief in God to coexist. Evolution explains the development of life, while creativity points to the deeper reality that makes the emergence of life possible.

Kaufman develops this discussion further through the thought of Mordecai M. Kaplan. Kaplan rejects both supernatural intervention and scientific materialism. He proposes Transnaturalism as a middle position between these two extremes. In this perspective, God is understood as the creative power continuously at work within the natural order. Kaufman therefore argues that evolution does not replace God. It describes one aspect of God's ongoing creative activity. Referring to Kaplan's criticism of atheistic humanism, Kaufman writes:

“The fundamental error of (atheistic) humanism consists in assuming that there can be only one conception of God.”¹⁸

Kaufman strengthens this argument by referring to several contemporary thinkers who understand God in relation to creativity rather than supernatural intervention. Whitehead

distinguishes between God and cosmic creativity. Henry Nelson Wieman speaks of God as the creative event. Robert Neville understands God as the ontologically creative act. Gordon Kaufman develops the idea of serendipitous creativity. Although these thinkers differ in their philosophical approaches, they share the view that creativity is fundamental to reality. After reviewing these perspectives, Kaufman concludes:

“Clearly, the concept of God as creativity has theological possibilities.”¹⁹

Kaufman argues that evolutionary theory explains many biological processes, but it does not answer the deeper philosophical questions of existence. It does not explain why the universe exists, why the laws of nature are intelligible, or why creativity and consciousness continue to emerge. These questions belong to philosophy and theology rather than biology alone.

From Kaufman's perspective, creation should not be understood merely as a past event. It is an ongoing process that reflects the continuous creativity sustaining the universe. Evolution and creation therefore belong to different levels of explanation. Evolution explains how life develops through natural processes. Creation addresses the ultimate source and meaning of those processes. Kaufman's response shows that evolutionary theory does not necessarily lead to atheism. Rather, it invites a broader philosophical understanding of God that remains compatible with contemporary science.

2.3 God and the Problem of Evil

The problem of evil is one of the strongest objections raised by the New Atheists against belief in God. Richard Dawkins argues that the suffering, violence and cruelty found in nature are incompatible with the existence of an all powerful and benevolent Creator. Drawing on Darwin's theory of evolution, he maintains that the natural world reflects struggle and pain rather than purposeful design. Referring to Darwin, Kaufman quotes:

“I cannot persuade myself that a beneficent and omnipotent God would have designedly created the *Ichneumonidae* (wasp like insects) with the express intention of their feeding within the living bodies of caterpillars.”²⁰

Kaufman acknowledges that the problem of evil presents a serious challenge to religious belief. He does not attempt to dismiss the objection. Instead, he argues that it does not by itself disprove the existence of God. The debate remains philosophical rather than scientific.

To develop this response, Kaufman turns to Milton Steinberg. Steinberg accepts that theism must account for suffering, but he argues that atheism faces its own unanswered questions. Kaufman summarizes his position as follows:

“The religious thinker has difficulty explaining evil in God's universe. But the atheist has the greater difficulty in having to account for the existence of the

cosmos and its natural laws.”²¹

According to Kaufman, the existence of evil is only one part of the discussion. The atheist must also explain why the universe exists, why its laws are intelligible and how consciousness and purpose emerge within reality. For this reason, the problem of evil cannot by itself determine whether theism or atheism provides the better explanation of reality.

Kaufman further explains Steinberg's interpretation of evil within the framework of evolution. Human beings have emerged through a long process of natural development. Although moral awareness has advanced, traces of earlier stages of existence remain within human nature. Kaufman expresses Steinberg's view in these words:

“Evil represents the survival into the human condition of other lower stages of reality mineral, vegetable and animal out of which man has emerged.”²²

From this perspective, evil reflects the unfinished condition of humanity rather than evidence against the existence of God. Moral weakness and suffering remain part of the human situation but they do not remove the need to explain the existence and order of the universe itself.

Kaufman therefore concludes that the problem of evil does not provide a final refutation of belief in God. Both theism and atheism must respond to difficult philosophical questions. Theism must explain suffering, while atheism must explain the existence, intelligibility and order of reality. The discussion therefore remains a debate between competing worldviews rather than a question that can be resolved through scientific evidence alone.

2.4 Faith and Rational Justification

Sam Harris argues that faith is irrational because it is based on belief without evidence. Writing in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, he presents faith as a source of intolerance and religious violence. He therefore maintains that reason should replace faith in understanding reality.²³ William E. Kaufman accepts the seriousness of this criticism but argues that Harris reduces a rich religious concept to a single definition. According to Kaufman, faith has never carried one fixed meaning within the Jewish and Christian traditions. Any evaluation of faith must therefore begin by examining its different philosophical meanings.

Kaufman identifies Harris' main weakness in his definition of faith as “belief without evidence.”²⁴ In his view, this definition ignores the diversity of religious thought and assumes that all believers understand faith in the same way. To demonstrate this point, Kaufman turns first to Paul Tillich, who defines faith as:

“The state of being ultimately concerned: the dynamics of faith are the dynamics of man's ultimate concern.”²⁵

Kaufman explains that Tillich understands faith as humanity's search for ultimate reality and

meaning. It is not simply the acceptance of religious doctrines. Harris therefore criticizes only one understanding of faith while overlooking its broader philosophical and existential dimensions.

Kaufman also challenges Harris' distinction between religion and mysticism. Harris accepts mysticism as a rational enterprise but rejects religion itself. Kaufman considers this distinction artificial. Referring to Gershom Scholem, he argues that mysticism is one of the deepest expressions of religious life rather than something separate from it.²⁶ For this reason, Harris' understanding of religion remains incomplete.

Kaufman further argues that the history of philosophy and theology presents several different concepts of faith. Some thinkers understand faith as an act of the intellect. Others describe it as an act of the will. Still others regard it as a comprehensive interpretation of reality. Kaufman also distinguishes between evidence insensitive faith and evidence sensitive faith. Blind faith ignores evidence, whereas rational faith seeks harmony between reason, experience and revelation. The disagreement therefore concerns not the existence of evidence but the meaning of evidence itself.

To develop this argument, Kaufman refers to the contemporary Jewish thinker Milton Steinberg. Steinberg rejects the idea that faith is blind or irrational. Instead, he understands faith as a reasoned interpretation of reality. Kaufman quotes him as saying:

“Faith, far from being blind, arbitrary or merely wishful, is indicated by compelling reasons, intellectual, practical, emotional.”²⁷

According to Kaufman, Steinberg sees the order, unity, creativity and intelligibility of the universe as rational grounds for belief in God. Faith therefore seeks to explain reality as a whole rather than isolated facts. It is neither an emotional reaction nor an alternative to reason.

Kaufman also refers to John Hick, who understands faith as a total interpretation of human experience.²⁸ Both Steinberg and Hick regard faith as a worldview rather than a collection of unsupported beliefs. For this reason, neither the believer nor the atheist possesses absolute certainty. Every worldview involves interpretation and commitment.

Kaufman strengthens this conclusion by referring to Dean Overman. He argues that both theism and atheism require an element of faith because neither can establish complete certainty about ultimate reality. The central question is therefore not whether faith exists but which interpretation of reality provides the more convincing explanation.²⁹

Summarizing his evaluation, Kaufman concludes:

“Harris' characterization of faith as belief without evidence is a narrow definition that does not include the rich varieties of faith in the history of

religion.”³⁰

Kaufman's response shows that Harris rightly criticizes fanaticism and blind belief. However, his definition of faith remains too narrow to account for the wider religious tradition. Within contemporary Jewish philosophy, faith is understood as a thoughtful and rational interpretation of reality. It cannot be reduced to belief without evidence alone.

2.5 Contemporary Jewish Perspectives on God

William E. Kaufman argues that one of the major weaknesses of the New Atheists is their assumption that Judaism presents only one concept of God. Their criticism is directed mainly against a supernatural Being who intervenes in nature. Kaufman rejects this assumption. He argues that contemporary Jewish theology offers a variety of philosophical approaches to God. These approaches differ in method, yet they share the view that the reality of God cannot be reduced to the narrow concept criticized by the New Atheists.

Kaufman illustrates this diversity through several contemporary Jewish thinkers. Abraham Joshua Heschel grounds faith in religious experience and the awareness of the living God. Martin Buber understands God through personal encounter rather than scientific investigation. Mordecai M. Kaplan reconstructs the concept of God through Transnaturalism and divine creativity. Together, these perspectives demonstrate that contemporary Jewish philosophy has developed different ways of understanding God while remaining engaged with the intellectual challenges of the modern world. Kaufman also introduces Emmanuel Levinas, whose response differs from both Heschel and Buber. Levinas approaches the question of God through ethics rather than religious experience or dialogue. He argues that responsibility toward the other person is the starting point of transcendence. Kaufman also notes that Levinas adopts a distinctive attitude toward atheism. Instead of condemning unbelief, he regards the possibility of atheism as an expression of genuine human freedom. Referring to Levinas, Kaufman writes:

“It is certainly a great glory for the creator to have set up a being capable of atheism.”³¹

According to Kaufman, Levinas believes that faith has value only when it arises through free human response. God therefore cannot be reduced to an object of scientific investigation or philosophical speculation. Divine reality always transcends human concepts while calling human beings to ethical responsibility.

Having reviewed these different perspectives, Kaufman argues that contemporary Jewish theology cannot be represented by a single definition of God. This diversity also explains why the New Atheists fail to engage the full range of modern Jewish thought. Their

criticism is directed primarily against one form of supernaturalism, while overlooking other philosophical interpretations that remain compatible with reason and contemporary knowledge. Kaufman concludes by presenting his own understanding of God. He writes:

“I view God as the self-existent, transcendent and conserving source of existence and value in the universe.”³²

This statement summarizes Kaufman's own position. God is the ultimate source of existence, value and order. Divine activity is reflected in the harmony of nature as well as in humanity's search for truth, goodness, beauty and moral responsibility. The diversity of contemporary Jewish thought therefore supports Kaufman's central argument that belief in God remains a living philosophical tradition rather than a single fixed doctrine.

3. Conclusion

This article examined William E. Kaufman's Jewish philosophical response to the New Atheists' arguments against the existence of God. It focused on four major issues discussed by Kaufman: God as a scientific hypothesis, evolution and creation, the problem of evil and the nature of faith. The analysis shows that Kaufman does not reject science or deny the importance of rational inquiry. Instead, he challenges the philosophical assumptions that shape the arguments of the New Atheists.

Kaufman's central argument is that the existence of God is a metaphysical rather than a scientific question. He argues that empirical science investigates the natural world, while the question of God concerns the ultimate ground and meaning of reality. For this reason, scientific investigation alone cannot determine whether God exists. The debate between theism and atheism therefore remains a discussion between competing worldviews rather than a dispute that can be settled through scientific evidence.

The study also shows that Kaufman rejects the claim that evolution necessarily leads to atheism. He argues that evolutionary theory explains the development of life but it does not explain the existence of the universe, the origin of natural laws or the reality of creativity and consciousness. Drawing on contemporary Jewish thought, particularly the ideas of Mordecai M. Kaplan, he presents divine creativity as a meaningful way of understanding God's continuing relationship with the natural world.

Kaufman's discussion of faith further demonstrates that the New Atheists criticize only one understanding of religious belief. By engaging thinkers such as Paul Tillich and Milton Steinberg, he argues that faith is not merely belief without evidence. Rather, it is a rational and comprehensive interpretation of reality. In the same way, his treatment of the problem of evil shows that suffering remains a serious challenge for theism, but it does not remove the

philosophical questions that atheism must also answer concerning the existence, order and intelligibility of the universe.

Finally, Kaufman argues that contemporary Jewish theology cannot be reduced to a single concept of God. The perspectives of Heschel, Buber, Levinas and Kaplan demonstrate the richness and diversity of modern Jewish philosophy. Together, these approaches provide alternative ways of understanding God that extend beyond the supernatural model criticized by the New Atheists.

The present study concludes that Kaufman's contribution is significant because it shifts the discussion from confrontation to philosophical analysis. Rather than defending traditional theism through dogmatic claims, he examines the assumptions underlying both theism and atheism. His response shows that belief in God remains a philosophically defensible position and that contemporary Jewish philosophy continues to offer important insights to the ongoing debate on the existence of God.

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