

Online Supplement for Brook Ziporyn, *Experiments in Mystical Atheism: Godless Epiphanies from Daoism to Spinoza and Beyond*

Online Appendix A, Supplement 1

A Classic Example of a Misfiring Atheist Argument from the Film *Inherit the Wind*

It is perhaps possible to shame someone into feeling the ridiculousness of his belief in God, by showing the many additional embarrassing conclusions it forces him to accept—embarrassing in the precise sense of conflicting with his usual sense of himself, of his way of regarding things, of his own common sense. We see this attempted, for example, in the film *Inherit the Wind*, when Spencer Tracy, as a fictionalized Clarence Darrow, cross-examines the fictionalized William Jennings Bryant in a fictionalized Scopes Monkey Trial:

DRUMMOND: Now,

I recollect a...a story about Joshua...Joshua making the sun stand still. Uh, as an expert, do you a... tell me that that's a...as right as the Jonah business? That's a pretty neat trick.

BRADY: I do not question or scoff at the miracles of the lord as do ye of little faith.

DRUMMOND: Have you ever pondered what would actually happen to the earth if the sun stood still?

BRADY: You can testify to that if I get you on the stand.

DRUMMOND: If, as they say, "the sun stood still," they must have had some kind of an idea that the... that the sun moved around the earth. Do you think that's the way of things, or don't you believe the earth moves around the sun?

BRADY: I have faith in the bible.

DRUMMOND: You don't have much faith in the solar system.

BRADY: The sun stopped.

DRUMMOND: Good. Now, if what you say actually happened ...if Joshua stopped the sun in the sky...the earth stopped spinning on its axis, continents topped over one another, mountains flew into space, and the earth shriveled to a cinder, crashed into the sun. Now, how come they missed that little tidbit of news?

BRADY: They missed it because it didn't happen.

DRUMMOND: But it had to happen, it must have happened according to natural law, or don't you believe in natural law? Mr. Brady, would you... would you ban Copernicus from the classroom along with Charles Darwin, would you pass a law throwing out all scientific knowledge since Joshua? Revelations, period.

BRADY: Natural law was born in the mind of the Heavenly Father. He can change it, cancel it, use it as he pleases. It constantly amazes me that you apostles of science, for all your supposed wisdom, fail to grasp this simple fact.

All these arguments are good for laughs--and it is somewhat poignant to watch the film nowadays, signaling as it does a time when it seemed that creationism was already becoming an obviously absurd notion that no civilized person would take seriously—but these arguments don't really get the job done. For anyone who has accepted God has already accepted something much much more unlikely and strange than Joshua's stopping of the sun and so on; the Bryant character is a hundred per cent right to give the smugly unruffled reply that he certainly does believe this, because he believes God can do anything. The only question in the cross-examination that has any validity is the last one:

BRADY: A fine Biblical scholar, Bishop Usher, has determined for us the exact date of Creation. It occurred in the year 4004 B.C.

DRUMMOND: That's Bishop Usher's opinion.

BRADY: It is not an opinion. It is a literal fact, which the good Bishop arrived at through careful computation of the ages of the prophets as set down in

the Old Testament. In fact, he determined that the Lord began the Creation on the 23rd of October in Year 4004 B.C. at—uh, at 9 A.M.!

DRUMMOND: That Eastern Standard Time? (Laughter) Or Rocky Mountain Time? (More laughter) It wasn't daylight-saving time, was it? Because the Lord didn't make the sun until the fourth day!

BRADY: (Fidgeting) That is correct.

DRUMMOND: (Sharply) The first day. Was it a twenty-four-hour day?

BRADY: The Bible says it was a day.

DRUMMOND: There wasn't any sun. How do you know how long it was?

BRADY: (Determined) The Bible says it was a day.

DRUMMOND: A normal day, a literal day, a twenty-four-hour day?

BRADY: I do not know.

DRUMMOND: What do you think?

BRADY: (Floundering) I do not think about things that...I do not think about!

DRUMMOND: Do you ever think about the things that you do think about? (There is some laughter. But it is dampened by the knowledge and awareness throughout the courtroom, that the trap is about to be sprung) Isn't it possible that first day was twenty-five hours long? There was no way to measure it, no way to tell! Could it have been twenty-five hours?

(Pause. The entire courtroom seems to lean forward.)

BRADY: (Hesitates—then) It is...possible....

(DRUMMOND'S got him. And he knows it! This is the turning point. From here on, the tempo mounts. DRUMMOND is now fully in the driver's seat. He pounds his questions faster and faster.)

DRUMMOND: Oh. You interpret that the first day recorded in the Book of Genesis could be of indeterminate length.

BRADY: (Wriggling) I mean to state that the day referred to is not necessarily a twenty-four-hour day.

DRUMMOND: It could have been thirty hours! Or a month! Or a year! Or a hundred years! (He brandishes the rock underneath BRADY'S nose) Or ten million years!

Here an entirely new strategy has appeared, with a completely different set of premises. For here the dismantling of theistic belief is done from within, and moreover *without actually having to dismantle it*. That is, a premise accepted by the monotheist—there was no sun yet on the first day—is used as a wedge, *not* to force him to abandon that belief, but to admit that what some of his other beliefs *mean* might be different than he had assumed, without him having to relinquish them. The monotheists own standards are accepted as the standard, and the terms are given a meaning fixed by his own commitments. This method of *thinking through and thereby reinterpreting* the uncontested premises of the monotheist—is this not what we find in Spinoza's doctrine of God? Hegel's? Might we see something of the same in the Daoist use of the term Dao? Even the Mahāyāna doctrines of the transcendental Buddha and the multitudes of cosmic bodhisattvas? For the full strangeness of these *atheist divinities* has yet to be appreciated. Here we have an approach that moves in quite a different direction from that sailed by our modern day atheist propagandists.