

# CONTENTS

Introduction	9
1. Atheistic Arguments, Errors, and Insights	19
2. The Irrationality of Atheism	41
3. The Causes of Atheism	61
4. The Obstinacy of Atheism	89
5. The Blessings of Theism	115
Acknowledgments	129
Notes	131

## ATHEISTIC ARGUMENTS, ERRORS, AND INSIGHTS

**IN JANUARY 2009** some unique ads began to appear on buses and taxis all over Great Britain. The banners did not pitch a product, promote a new film, or make a public health announcement. No, these were commercials for a worldview:

There's Probably No God.  
Now Stop Worrying and Enjoy Your Life.

With major contributions coming from the British Humanist Association and Richard Dawkins, organizers raised over £140,000 to place this slogan on hundreds of vehicles in England, Scotland, and Wales. The campaign was the brainchild of Ariane Sherine,

## THE MAKING OF AN ATHEIST

whose initial aim was to counter the negativity of a religious ad she once saw that declared that unbelievers would spend eternity in hell. Sherine, a comedy writer by trade, said, "I thought it would be a really positive thing to counter that by putting forward a much happier and more upbeat advert."<sup>1</sup> Dawkins's statement in support of the cause was more acerbic: "This campaign . . . will make people think, and thinking is anathema to religion."<sup>2</sup>

A similar campaign was launched across the Atlantic by the American Humanist Association. Inspired by the original British project, these ads were rushed out in time to mingle with Christmas holiday festivities:

Why believe in a god?  
Just be good for goodness' sake.

This clever twist on the "Santa Claus Is Coming to Town" lyric appeared on buses in the Washington, D.C., area. According to AHA spokesperson Fred Edwards, the goal was to make "agnostics, atheists and other types of non-theists . . . feel a little [less] alone during the holidays because of its association with traditional religion."<sup>3</sup> But, echoing Dawkins's comments, Edwards added, "We are trying to plant a seed of rational thought and critical thinking and questioning in people's minds."<sup>4</sup>

Whatever else these ad campaigns might accom-

plish, they clearly demonstrate the rise of atheism in public consciousness as well as a certain level of boldness among religious skeptics. Evidently, the new atheist movement will not remain contentedly bound to bookshelves and academic environs.

We'll return to these atheist advertising slogans later. But first we need to clarify just what atheism is and review the main arguments used by atheists to defend their position.

## WHAT IS ATHEISM?

Some non-believers don't like the term "atheist." As Edwards's comments suggest, there are different ways *not* to believe in God, just as there are many orientations of belief *in* God. While the new atheists wear the moniker proudly, others prefer the slightly less coarse term "non-theist." Still others just aren't sure about it all and prefer the tag "agnostic" or, more generally, "religious skeptic."

Since this is a book about atheism, it's a good idea to clarify some of these terms before going any further. A *theist* is someone who believes in a personal God—an almighty, all-good, all-knowing Spirit who created and sustains the universe. Theists sometimes call God "infinite" because this denotes a lack of limits, and if God created everything (besides Himself), then He can't be limited by anything. Theists call God "transcendent" for similar reasons. Since space and time

## THE MAKING OF AN ATHEIST

are aspects of the physical universe, the Creator must transcend both.

The term “supernatural” is sometimes used to refer to anything that transcends the physical world, including God, human souls, and angelic beings. And *naturalism* is the view that denies the existence of any such beings. All that is real can be fully described in terms of matter, says the naturalist. Not only is there no God, there are no angels, nor human souls, nor anything else transcending the physical. There is only matter/energy in space. That’s it.

This brings us to *atheism*, which literally means a rejection of theism. That is, an atheist is someone who disbelieves in God. However, the term is usually intended in the broader sense of rejecting all forms of belief in the divine, including deism (belief in an impersonal god), polytheism (belief in many finite gods), and pantheism (belief that all is divine). Atheists almost always reject belief in the supernatural (including angels and human souls). This means that atheists are almost always naturalists. I say “almost” here for the sake of precision. But the truth is, I’ve never met an atheist who is not also a naturalist (and I know and have read plenty of atheists). Still, for all I know, there could be atheists who are not naturalists. But for our purposes here, I will use the terms synonymously.

Proponents of any of these views claim to know their perspective about God (or the gods) is the cor-

rect one. However, those who take a skeptical posture toward the issue are *agnostics*. The word derives from the Greek terms that together (*a + gnosis*) mean “no knowledge.” So an agnostic is someone who simply does not know if there is a God. In its literal sense the term doesn’t specify God as the object of belief (e.g., one could be agnostic about whether there is a highest prime number or whether the Red Wings will win the Stanley Cup). But this is the usual intention of the term. So an agnostic refrains from either affirming or denying the existence of God. For just this reason, the agnostic is partner to the atheist as a fellow *non-theist*.

To simplify my language in this book, I will use the term “atheist” to refer broadly to anyone who does not believe in God. This allows me to just use the term “atheist” rather than repeatedly referring to “atheists and other non-theists” throughout our discussion.<sup>5</sup> And, as noted earlier, I will also regard atheism as equivalent to naturalism. Given the above clarifications, hopefully even philosophically persnickety readers will not be too annoyed.

While I’m in caveat mode, let me make one more disclaimer. My purpose in this book is not to prove the existence of God or even to show that theism is more rational than atheism. I will note along the way some reasons why I believe atheism *is* irrational, but the ultimate point will be to encourage us *to look elsewhere besides appraisal of the evidence for the real explanation*

## THE MAKING OF AN ATHEIST

*of atheism.* My concern is to explain why some people don't believe in God, whether they deny God's existence outright or simply confess to not knowing whether God exists. How does such unbelief arise? My answer, as I made clear in the introduction, is that the rejection of God is a matter of will, not of intellect.

### THE USUAL SUSPECTS— EVIL AND THE POSITIVIST PIPE DREAM

How do leading atheists account for their unbelief? As one reads Dawkins, Dennett, Harris, and Hitchens, two principal lines of argument emerge: the problem of evil and the scientific irrelevancy of God. It is important to consider these concerns, and in doing so we will gain a better understanding of the atheist mind-set and the rational props with which they mask their rebellion. Again, I will subject these arguments to criticism not because I think the theism/atheism debate really boils down to a contention over evidence, but rather to show that something other than the quest for truth drives the atheist.<sup>6</sup>

The great novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky declared that “the earth is soaked from its crust to its center” with the tears of humanity.<sup>7</sup> Anyone who follows the news very closely is likely to agree. Indeed, even the happiest of human lives is marked by plenty of sorrow. Human suffering is generally regarded as “evil” because it is, as Augustine put it, a “privation of good” or, in other

words, a departure from the way things ought to be. As such, evil includes both sin and suffering—immoral behaviors (e.g., lying, theft, rape, murder, etc.) as well as painful experiences (e.g., diseases, emotional disorders, natural disasters, and the like). Respectively, these are known as “moral evil” and “natural evil.”

The classical problem of evil was first formally presented by the ancient philosopher Epicurus, and religious skeptics have offered it ever since as evidence against God’s existence. Essentially, the complaint is that an all-powerful, all-good God would not allow evil to exist. But evil does exist, so there cannot be a being who is both all-powerful and all-good. Thus, the presence of evil seems to disprove theism.

The theist has two potential routes of escape here: either deny the reality of evil or explain why God might permit evil to exist. The first approach is really no option at all for anyone with moral sense. Who can deny that pedophilia and ethnic cleansing are really evil? Well, of course, some folks do, but this only shows they are as irrational as they are dangerous. For devotees of the major theisms—Judaism, Islam, and Christianity—scriptural affirmations of the reality of evil also rule out this approach.

This leaves the theist with the task of making sense of divine permission of evil, which is known as *theodicy*. Why does God allow the world to go so wrong—where people suffer under the terrors of hurricanes, cancers, and one another? Probably the most

## THE MAKING OF AN ATHEIST

popular theodicy appeals to free will and the notion that we human beings have no one to blame but ourselves for our sin and suffering. God endowed us with moral autonomy that we might genuinely relate to Him, but we have tragically abused this freedom. So evil is our fault, not our Creator's. We act immorally of our own volition, and all of our suffering (from human malice to natural disasters) is the consequence of those choices—if not our own, then someone else's—ultimately tracing back to the first humans who brought about the fall.

Another major theodicy focuses on the greater goods that God achieves by permitting evil—significant virtues such as patience, forgiveness, compassion, and perseverance, which cannot exist without the substrate of some sin or suffering. One cannot be compassionate where there is no pain, and one cannot forgive where there is no transgression. Both natural and moral evils provide opportunities for growth in virtue and the building of a mature character. Still other theodicies appeal to such things as the laws of nature, divine punishment, aesthetic considerations, and the supposed need for evil to exist in order for good to be known.<sup>8</sup>

The objection from evil does pack some punch, and it is a genuine problem for theists. But it could never count as grounds for atheism. Even if successful, it only undermines certain beliefs about the *nature* of God. It does not—nor could any argument—

disprove the existence of a world creator and designer. This is because one cannot—whether by appeals to evil or anything else—eliminate the need to explain the existence of the universe. Nor does the problem of evil eradicate the abundant physical and biological evidence for design, as will be discussed in the next chapter. At most, evil should prompt us to reconsider what *kind* of God exists, not *whether* God exists. To give up belief in a world creator because of the existence of evil is a blatant *non sequitur*.

Secondly, and more fundamentally, from a naturalist standpoint the objection from evil is incoherent. This is because naturalists have no grounds to call anything evil. Why? Recall that evil is a privation of *good*, a departure from the way things *ought* to be. “Good” and “ought” are values, not physical facts. But naturalists *only* believe in physical facts. They have no foundation for a standard of goodness, without which the naturalist cannot judge any state of affairs, even the Nazi Holocaust, to be “wrong” or “evil.”<sup>9</sup> And without a standard for goodness, the problem of evil cannot be posed.

Richard Dawkins sums up the naturalist perspective well when he says, “The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no *evil* and no *good*, nothing but blind, pitiless indifference. . . . DNA neither knows nor cares. DNA just is. And we dance to its music.”<sup>10</sup> Here at least Dawkins is consistent with

## THE MAKING OF AN ATHEIST

his own principles. He is, after all, a *positivist*. That is, for him, all knowledge must be scientifically verifiable. But, of course, science in itself knows nothing of values; you'll never find "good" or "evil" at the end of an equation or as the product of an experiment. While other naturalists attempt to sneak values in through appeals to intuition or the evolutionary concept of fitness, Dawkins rightly recognizes in this passage that this move is logically illicit.<sup>11</sup> He stands by his sworn devotion to science as the final arbiter of all truth. And here we arrive at the second pillar of support for atheism—the notion that science is sufficient to account for all of human knowledge and experience.

God and other concepts of the supernatural are not necessary for a complete worldview, says the naturalist. In defense of their view, naturalists often appeal to an important rational guideline called *Ockham's razor*. Also known as the principle of parsimony, Ockham's razor says that when attempting to account for some phenomenon, the simplest hypothesis, other things being equal, should be preferred. Well, says the naturalist, theism is more complicated than naturalism. Theists needlessly add God and other supernatural entities to their worldview, so it should be rejected in favor of naturalism, which is more simple and elegant (not to mention more intellectually fashionable).

Initial appearances notwithstanding, Ockham's razor does not favor naturalism. Other things, as it

turns out, are *not* equal. Naturalism can explain neither the existence of the cosmos nor its vast instances of design (again, to be discussed in the next chapter). Nor, as we've already seen, can naturalism account for values of any kind. But it's not only naturalism as a worldview that fails here. The methodology driving naturalism, positivism, is also a bust. Positivists like Dawkins maintain that all knowledge must be scientifically verifiable. Admittedly, if that were the case, then we would all have to be naturalists. The trouble is that the positivist thesis is actually self-refuting. The notion that all beliefs must be scientifically verifiable is, well, not scientifically verifiable. So by the positivist's own standard, positivism must be rejected as unknowable. This simple logical point essentially defeated the positivist movement of the early twentieth century, though not before scads of scholars and their impressionable students fell under its spell. Dawkins and many others are living proof that, despite its embarrassing flaws, positivism is still wreaking worldview havoc.

As if self-refutation were not enough of a problem for positivism, the notion that science must confirm all truths faces another difficulty. Alas, all of us have many beliefs that fall outside the realm of science. And these are not trivial beliefs but some of the most important convictions we hold, from moral beliefs to judgments about love and the meaning of life. Holmes Rolston sums it up well: "Science is never the end of

## THE MAKING OF AN ATHEIST

the story, because science cannot teach humans what they most need to know: the meaning of life and how to value it. . . . After science, we still need help deciding what to value; what is right and wrong, good and evil, how to behave as we cope. The end of life still lies in its meaning, the domain of religion and ethics.”<sup>12</sup>

## QUESTIONABLE SLOGANS

Let’s return to those atheist ad campaigns. Crude as they are, the slogans actually raise interesting questions that have been the subject of considerable debate among philosophers. Aside from the obvious issues as to the existence and nature of God and whether or how God’s existence is knowable, there are other questions lurking here that deserve our attention. First, is it really possible, as the first ad implies, to “enjoy your life” in the absence of God? Is genuine happiness feasible in a godless universe? Given the atheist’s belief that there is no afterlife and, therefore, no enduring value or meaning to anything we do in this world, it is difficult to see how any person’s life could be truly “happy.” If only utter destruction and loss of all conscious existence awaits us, then this is grounds for despair, not happiness.

Although many atheists deny this gloomy implication of their worldview, some have dared to look this truth squarely in the eye. The distinguished British atheist Bertrand Russell provides a striking example:

That man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving; that his origin, his growth, his hopes, and fears, his loves and his beliefs are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms; that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve the individual life beyond the grave; that all the labors of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system. . . . Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul's habitation henceforth be safely built.<sup>13</sup>

Richard Dawkins recognizes these implications of his perspective. His response: "I don't feel depressed about it. But if somebody does, that's their problem. Maybe the logic is deeply pessimistic; the universe is bleak, cold, and empty. But so what?"<sup>14</sup> So what? Indeed, that is the question. Pessimism? Bleakness? Despair? Those don't sound like descriptors of an enjoyable life, which the British Humanist Association and other contemporary atheists encourage us to pursue.

The American atheist ad slogan, which enjoins us to "be good for goodness' sake," raises another crucial question. Can any sense of "goodness" be salvaged in the absence of God? This question, in turn, can be further broken down in terms of two other questions, one

## THE MAKING OF AN ATHEIST

practical and the other theoretical: Can human beings find sufficient motivation to live morally without religious belief? And even more fundamentally, does the concept of goodness even make sense in the absence of God? Though we have already briefly discussed the latter question, it deserves more attention. But let us consider the former, practical issue first.

Since Augustine, many philosophers have strenuously denied the possibility of ethics without God. One of the more influential arguments for this view was proposed by Immanuel Kant, who maintained that there can be no genuine moral responsibility in God's absence.<sup>15</sup> Without a divine judge—not to mention moral legislator and executor—there can be no final accounting of our conduct in this life. And without a system of rewards and punishments whereby we experience the lasting effects of our behavior, there can be no adequate motivation to live a truly virtuous life, complete with all of the self-control this requires.

So what about the other question, whether we can even make sense of the concept of goodness without God? The answer to this question is well illustrated by another German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche. However, in this case the philosopher is not so much our teacher as an object lesson. In his book *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche declares,

No one gives man his qualities—neither God, nor society, nor his parents and ancestors, nor he himself.

. . . No one is responsible for man's being there at all.  
. . . Man is not the effect of some special purpose, of a will, and end. . . It is absurd to wish to devolve one's essence on some end or other. We have invented the concept of "end": in reality there is no end.<sup>16</sup>

By "end" here Nietzsche essentially means purpose, aim, or goal, perhaps best captured in the Greek term *telos*. Now so far his assertions here are unremarkable as atheistic diatribes go. But look where the logic of his denial of God and human purpose leads him just a few sentences later:

My demand upon the philosopher is known, that he take his stand beyond good and evil and leave the illusion of moral judgment beneath himself. This demand follows from an insight which I was the first to formulate: that *there are altogether no moral facts*. . . . Morality is merely an interpretation of certain phenomena—more precisely, a misinterpretation. . . . Moral judgments are . . . never to be taken literally: so understood, they always contain mere absurdity.<sup>17</sup>

Here the granddaddy of all atheists, Nietzsche himself, makes the point better than anyone else (even better than Dawkins, whose Nietzschean stripes should now be quite apparent). Without God there is no inherent purpose or meaning to human life, and without such meaning there can be no morality or

## THE MAKING OF AN ATHEIST

ethical standards. So “be good for goodness’ sake”? Well, if we are to believe Nietzsche, this is a “mere absurdity.”

The upshot here is that it is a mistake to think that happiness and goodness are possible given an atheistic worldview. Those atheists who propose otherwise, whether in academic journals or on bus banners, are confused. They would do well to heed the words of their more perceptive, if also more grandiloquent, forebears—Russell and Nietzsche.

The truth is that moral values and the belief that life is meaningful are borrowed capital for the atheist, borrowed from the very thing the atheist aims to demolish—belief in God. Meaning and value transcend the physical world and must therefore find their source in the supernatural. Good and evil are real, life is meaningful, and happiness is possible, but only because we have a loving Creator who is the definition of goodness and the source of eternal life. By eschewing all things supernatural, atheists abandon their only possible recourse for a meaningful and happy life.

## WHERE THE ATHEISTS ARE CORRECT

We have seen that the standard atheist arguments are deeply flawed and that, furthermore, atheism undercuts the foundation for goodness and a meaningful life. What could explain the fact that intelligent people appeal to such poor arguments to justify their

rejection of God, especially given the dire implications? As I will show in subsequent chapters, the answer lies in the realm of moral psychology. However, it is important to note that there are aspects of atheists' complaints that *are* reasonable and should be affirmed, even though they fall far short of justifying atheism. Specifically, atheistic objections are correct insofar as they critique many human failures that often occur in the context of religious belief and practice. The new atheists, especially Harris and Hitchens, emphasize these problems with force and eloquence.

First, under the general category of evil, there is the problem of hypocrisy. It is a truism that countless evils have been done in the name of religion. Theists of all kinds have acted in ways inconsistent with their confessed moral standard. In particular, as Sam Harris bluntly observes, "Christians have abused, oppressed, enslaved, insulted, tormented, tortured, and killed people in the name of God for centuries, on the basis of a theologically defensible reading of the Bible."<sup>18</sup> And many others who have not directly perpetrated these evils have been immorally complicit or refused to oppose them. Here we have no excuse and no recourse but repentance and a firm resolve not to repeat such extreme moral failures.

There is also the related problem of moral complacency. Christians—or those of us who so name ourselves—do not practice self-denial as our Lord taught us to. We are often greedy and stingy (only 6 percent

## THE MAKING OF AN ATHEIST

of Christians tithing), slothful (how much television do we watch?), gluttonous (obesity is as much a problem in the church as outside it; and whatever happened to fasting as a basic spiritual discipline?), and lustful (the divorce rate among Christians is comparable to that of unbelievers, and pornography addiction is a problem in the church too). If I were an atheist, these facts certainly wouldn't endear me to religion. So I must ask myself, as should all people of faith: Does my daily conduct constitute a recommendation or denial of the beliefs I profess?

Turning to the general concern about the integrity of science, the atheists are correct in noting that religion has often been used as a pretext for shoddy scientific methodology. We need to avoid the God-of-the-gaps mentality, which is the impulse to appeal to God whenever there is a gap in our scientific understanding. This is sheer intellectual laziness. Inferences to astrophysical or biological design should be made only informedly and cautiously, when the possibility of any naturalistic explanation can be confidently ruled out. Naturalists' exasperation over scholarly failure in this regard is well justified and should prompt greater rigor on the part of theistic scientists.<sup>19</sup>

To these common complaints by the new atheists I will note two more that I have encountered among those who have left the faith. First, there is the matter of dogma and divisiveness about relatively peripheral doctrinal matters, such as the nature and purpose of

baptism, the nature of hell, the question as to exactly who is saved, the practice of spiritual gifts, and views about end times. I have witnessed hurtful narrow-mindedness in the church about such issues, and frankly I can see why some are tempted to walk away from the faith community. At the same time many such faith communities are lazy about addressing practical moral matters, such as consumerism and racism, or the exercise of church discipline for church members who seriously flout biblical moral standards. And many churches fail to provide basic spiritual formation training for their congregants, teaching them to practice spiritual disciplines (e.g., fasting and frugality) that build self-control. Surely Christian obedience is at least as important as doctrinal accuracy. Our actions should clearly reflect this fact.

Another complaint I often hear comes in a variety of forms, but it can be summed up as distaste for some believers' refusal to admit mystery when it is clearly appropriate to do so. Let's admit it—the whole category of the supernatural is very mysterious and beyond our ability to fully grasp. Many of the attributes of God—His eternality, transcendence, and omnipresence—are brain-twisters; and the Christian doctrines of the Trinity and the divine incarnation are even more mind-boggling. We need to confess that we cannot fully explain or comprehend these truths. The failure to admit the mysterious aspects of these doctrines amounts to a certain disingenuousness, arrogance, or,

## THE MAKING OF AN ATHEIST

ironically, even ignorance. There is no place for angrily dismissing atheists for their honest incredulity on these points. Many of these teachings are spiritually discerned and far from being so plainly evident as the existence of God or the Golden Rule. We theists, and Christians in particular, need to humbly admit mystery regarding transcendent theological truths, even as we confidently proclaim the reality of God and basic moral values.

The above complaints should prompt us to reconsider the way we theists engage in our moral, theological, and scientific practice. While they do not constitute reasonable objections to theistic belief *per se*, they are penetrating critiques of certain things people do in the name of God. In other words, these arguments accuse us of *theistic malpractice*. It is unfortunate, though, that the new atheists—and many of the old ones—fail to understand that the proper target of their best complaints is their fellow human beings. They rightly condemn those who abuse belief in God, but then they proceed to reject that belief rather than just its abusers.

It should be duly noted that the fact that there is such a thing as theistic malpractice is, in a sense, a confirmation of the Christian doctrine of sin. That there would be abusers of religion and Christianity in particular is just what we should expect if the Christian worldview is true. But this is no grounds for complacency. To the extent that the above complaints are

accurate, we theists should be grateful for atheists' perceptiveness in pointing them out; we should be willing to repent of these errors, on behalf of the church if not ourselves individually; and we should guard against making the same mistakes in the future. In short, we should resolve to be truly good, for *God's* sake.