

ANSWERING
THE OBJECTIONS
OF Atheists,
Agnostics,
& Skeptics

RON RHODES

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ANSWERING THE OBJECTIONS OF ATHEISTS, AGNOSTICS, AND SKEPTICS

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UNDERSTANDING ATHEISM, AGNOSTICISM, AND SKEPTICISM

There have been quite a number of famous atheists throughout history. These include such luminaries as English poets Percy Shelley and Lord Byron, French philosophers Voltaire and Jean-Paul Sartre, German philosophers Karl Marx and Friedrich Nietzsche, Austrian psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud, and American writers Mark Twain and Upton Sinclair.¹ Many other people, in turn, have become atheists as a result of the influence of such luminaries.

Atheism received a significant shot in the arm during the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. During this time, a thoroughly secularized worldview emerged. Empirical knowledge (knowledge that comes only through the five senses), reason, and the scientific

method became the *modus operandi* of the day. There developed a widespread faith in rationality. Many people came to believe in and trust only that which could be tested and studied. Eventually this methodology was applied to religious matters, including the foundational issue of God's existence. Many concluded that the evidence for a divine Creator-God was insufficient, and hence many became skeptics and atheists. Many of those who did not become skeptics or atheists became deists, embracing the idea that God initially created the world but has since been uninvolved in it.

Atheists have always constituted a relatively small percentage of the population. In 1994, 240 million people worldwide claimed to be atheists. That is roughly four percent of the world's population. A recent Gallup poll indicates that less than two-fifths of one percent of Americans (a little over 900,000) say, or were willing to admit to pollsters, that they are atheists.² Agnosticism, the view that one cannot be certain about the existence of God, is more widespread, comprising about 16 percent of the world's population.

As of this writing (2005), a number of respected scholars have suggested that atheism is on the decline. In March 2005, noted theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg told United Press International that "atheism as a theoretical position is in decline worldwide." Oxford scholar Alister McGrath agrees, suggesting that atheism's "future seems increasingly to lie in the private beliefs of individuals rather than in the great public domain it once regarded as its habitat." The Reverend Paul M. Zulehner, dean of Vienna University's divinity school, commented that "true atheists in Europe have become an infinitesimally small group. There are not enough of them to be used for sociological research."³

One reason suggested for the decline of atheism is that modern science seems to be pointing away from atheism. Professor Antony Flew is cited as one example of a long-time atheist who has now

come to believe in the existence of a deistic God as a result of evidence from the intelligent design movement.⁴ (We will examine intelligent design in detail in chapter 6.)

For now, my goal is simply to define atheism and differentiate it from agnosticism and skepticism. I think you will come to agree with me that the three are quite closely related.

WHAT IS ATHEISM?

The word *atheism* comes from two Greek words: the prefix *a*, meaning “no” or “without,” and *theos*, meaning “God” or “deity.” An atheist is a person who does not believe in God or any deity.

I find it interesting that the term *atheism* was once used among the Greeks and Romans in regard to Christians, who denied the gods of pagan religions. It was only much later that the term *atheist* came to be used in regard to a denial of the personal Creator-God of the Christian Bible.⁵ As scholar Michael Martin said, “In Western society the term atheism has been used more narrowly to refer to the denial of theism, in particular Judeo-Christian theism, which asserts the existence of an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-good personal being.”⁶

There have been various kinds of atheists throughout history. Some have argued that the idea of God is mythological, and there is no need for such mythology in modern times. Others say there once was a God but He died. Others have argued that because of the finitude and limitations of “God-talk” (that is, language about God), we really cannot know anything about such a being. Still others come right out and dogmatically assert that there never has been and never will be a God.⁷

Some atheists argue that atheism is the default position of all human beings. David Eller, in his book *Natural Atheism*, wrote:

I was born an atheist. All humans are born atheists. No baby born into the world arrives with specific religious beliefs or knowledge. Such beliefs and knowledge must be acquired, which means that they must first exist before and apart from the new life and that they must be presented to and impressed on the new suggestible mind—one that has no critical apparatus and no alternative views of its own. Human infants are like sponges, soaking up (not completely uncritically, but eagerly and effectively) whatever is there to be soaked up from their social environment. Small children in particular instinctively imitate the models that they observe in their childhood, but I was not compelled to attend or practice any particular religion, and as I grew I never saw any reason to “convert” to any particular religion. I have thus been an atheist all my life. I am a natural atheist.⁸

Eller is aware that Christian critics challenge the idea that one can be a “natural atheist.” He says his critics

claim that atheism requires an active rejection of religious belief, which cannot occur without prior exposure or even commitment to religion. So, a newborn is not yet an “atheist” but something other than atheist or theist, they maintain—a “pre-theist” maybe. Atheism must be a choice. I see this argument as spurious and actually negatively motivated. Theists do not want to admit that they were once atheists too and that they gave it up not by any choice they made but by the forces imposed on them by a religious world.⁹

Reacting against the claim by Christian apologists that atheism itself constitutes a religious belief, prominent atheist George Smith argues that atheism, in its most basic form, is not a belief, but rather is the *absence* of a belief.¹⁰ Atheism is said to be “no more a religion than bald is a hair color or health is a disease.”¹¹ “The definition for atheism that we use, put simply, says that atheism is the lack of a god-belief, the absence of theism, to whatever degree and for whatever reason.”¹²

The problem with this line of argumentation, Christian theists point out, is that once you say “I lack a belief in God,” you have in fact affirmed a religious “belief.” Further, this line of argumentation fails to recognize that atheism is in fact a faith system. After all, atheists cannot offer definitive proofs that God does not exist, and hence there must be an element of faith in their viewpoint. The late science fiction writer Isaac Asimov, one of the more prominent signers of the Humanist Manifesto II, was being intellectually honest when he stated, “Emotionally I am an atheist. I don’t have the evidence to prove that God doesn’t exist, but I so strongly suspect he doesn’t that I don’t want to waste my time.”¹³ The lack of evidence to prove God does not exist—to merely suspect that God does not exist—is a position that quite obviously involves a level of faith. Atheism is a *faith system*.

TYPICAL ATHEISTIC BELIEFS

Atheism Is Man-centered. The American Atheists creed affirms:

An atheist loves himself and his fellow man instead of a god. An atheist accepts that heaven is something for which we should work now—here on earth—for all men together to enjoy. An atheist accepts that he can get no help through prayer, but that he must find

in himself the inner conviction and strength to meet life, to grapple with it, to subdue it and to enjoy it. An atheist accepts that only in a knowledge of himself and a knowledge of his fellow man can he find the understanding that will help to a life of fulfillment.¹⁴

Atheism Denies the Existence of God. God did not create human beings. Rather, human beings created God. God is a myth. While Christians argue that all things need a cause, and therefore the universe must have been caused by God, one must logically proceed to ask, “Who caused God?” While Christians point to the entire Bible as a revelation from God, atheists claim that the God of Old Testament “revelation” is vicious and cruel, ordering His people to murder women and children. While Christians argue for the love of God, the Bible portrays God as sending people to hell to suffer for all eternity. In view of such problems, it is more reasonable, atheists say, to believe that God does not exist.

Atheism Affirms that the Universe Is Eternal. God is not the creator of the universe. The universe can be explained in terms of the philosophy of naturalism. The universe is eternal. The late famous scientist Carl Sagan, in his popular PBS television show *Cosmos*, said that “the cosmos is all that is or ever was or ever will be.”¹⁵ More than one scholar has noted that Sagan’s comment seems to be a purposeful substitution for the *Gloria Patri*: “Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost. As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end.” Of course, Sagan did not believe in the existence of God or a Creator. To him, the universe is infinitely old and self-existing. The universe alone gave birth to life on this planet. We are literally children of the cosmos.¹⁶

Atheism Espouses Human Evolution. We need not appeal to the existence of a Creator-God to account for human beings. Rather,

human beings evolved via Darwinistic natural selection. “Once we accept the theory of evolution by natural selection, the traditional idea of God really does go out of the window.”¹⁷ We are told that “living creatures on earth are a direct product of the earth. There is every reason to believe that living things owe their origin entirely to certain physical and chemical properties of the ancient earth.” Indeed, “nothing supernatural appeared to be involved—only time and natural physical and chemical laws operating within the peculiarly suitable environment.”¹⁸

Atheism Affirms the Reality of Evil. Evil truly exists, and it constitutes a powerful argument against the existence of God. As scholar Alvin Plantinga stated, “Many believe that the existence of evil (or at least the amount and kinds of evil we actually find) makes belief in God unreasonable or rationally unacceptable.”¹⁹ Theologians William Hamilton and Thomas Altizer have flat-out concluded that God is dead. British empiricist David Hume asked in regard to God, “Is he willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing: whence then is evil?”²⁰ If there *is* a God—and He is all-good and all-powerful—then, atheists argue, such atrocities as Hitler’s murder of six million Jews should never have happened. It is more reasonable to conclude that such evil disproves the existence of God.

Atheism Denies an Afterlife. Human beings do not have an immortal soul. Most atheists consider humans to be strictly material beings. “There is no mind apart from brain. Nor is there a soul independent of body.”²¹ Hence, when a human dies, that is the end of him.

Atheism Denies Moral Absolutes. Ethical guidelines emerge in human societies by trial and error—much in the way traffic laws emerged after the invention of the car. “Right” actions are those

that bring the greatest good in the long run.²² Changing situations bring about the need for new or adjusted ethical guidelines.

Atheism Is Anti-religion. Atheists can be quite vitriolic in their condemnation of organized religion. Scholar Alister McGrath comments, “What propels people toward atheism is above all a sense of revulsion against the excesses and failures of organized religion. Atheism is ultimately a worldview of fear—a fear, often merited, of what might happen if religious maniacs were to take over the world.”²³

WHAT IS AGNOSTICISM?

The word *agnosticism* comes from two Greek words: *a*, meaning “no” or “without,” and *gnosis*, meaning “knowledge.” Agnosticism literally means “no knowledge” or “without knowledge.” More specifically, an agnostic is a person who claims he is unsure (having “no knowledge”) about the existence of God. One scholar suggests that an agnostic is “a person who believes that something is inherently unknowable by the human mind. When applied to the sphere of theistic belief, an agnostic is one who maintains that some aspect of the supernatural is forever closed to human knowledge.”²⁴

There are two forms of agnosticism. “Soft agnosticism,” also called “weak agnosticism,” says we *do not* know if God exists. “Hard agnosticism,” also called “strong agnosticism,” says we *cannot* know if God exists.²⁵ Soft agnosticism says the existence and nature of God are not known, while hard agnosticism says that God is unknowable, that He cannot be known.²⁶

Logically, agnosticism is a self-defeating belief system. To say “one cannot know about reality” is a statement that presumes knowledge about reality. Hence, the statement is self-falsifying. The statement amounts to saying, “One knows enough about reality to

affirm that nothing can be known about reality.”²⁷ One must possess knowledge of reality in order to deny knowledge of reality. As Christian scholar J. Budziszewski put it, “To say that we cannot know anything about God is to say something about God; it is to say that if there is a God, he is unknowable. But in that case, he is not entirely unknowable, for the agnostic certainly thinks that we can know one thing about him: That nothing else can be known about him.”²⁸ In the end, then, agnosticism is an illogical position to hold to.

WHAT IS SKEPTICISM?

The word *skepticism* comes from the Latin word *scepticus*, which means “inquiring,” “reflective,” or “doubting.” This Latin word, in turn, comes from the Greek word *scepsis*, which means “inquiry,” “hesitation,” or “doubt.”²⁹ A skeptic is a person who is tentative in his or her beliefs, neither denying nor affirming God’s existence. He or she is hesitant, doubtful, and unsure as to whether there is a God. Even if there is a God, a skeptic is unsure as to whether a person can really know Him.

An obvious philosophical problem with this viewpoint is that the skeptic is certainly not skeptical that his worldview of skepticism is correct. He is certainly not doubtful that his worldview of doubt is correct. In fact, the skeptic is quite sure that his viewpoint must be correct.

FREEDOM AND RESPONSIBILITY

Every American is guaranteed the free exercise of religion. This right is one of the things that makes America so great. The First Amendment, ratified in 1791, affirmed that “Congress shall make

no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.”³⁰

In keeping with this, James Madison, the fourth president of the United States (1809–17), wrote, “The religion...of every man must be left to the conviction and conscience of every man....We maintain, therefore, that in matters of religion no man’s right is [to be] abridged by the institution of civil society.”³¹ Such religious freedom is cherished by every American.

U.S. Supreme Court Justice Hugo Black expressed the majority opinion of the court in saying that the “establishment of religion” clause of the First Amendment includes the fact that neither a state nor the federal government “can force nor influence a person to go to or remain away from church against his will or force him to profess a belief or disbelief in any religion.” As well, “No person can be punished for entertaining or professing religious beliefs or disbeliefs, for church attendance or nonattendance.”³²

What this means for atheists, agnostics, and skeptics is that they have the full support of the U.S. Constitution to believe as they do. Human judges at the highest court in the land say they are safe. A person cannot be forced to attend a church or to profess belief in any religion.

My greater concern is with the divine Judge who, understandably, is much less sympathetic to the cause of atheism. Indeed, the one who denies God’s existence is labeled a “fool” (Psalm 14:1; 53:1). The Hebrew word for “fool,” *nabal*, literally means “stupid,” “wicked (especially impious),” and “vile person.” Interestingly, Psalm 14:1 ties atheism to immoral behavior: “The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God.’ They are corrupt, their deeds are vile; there is no one who does good.” Theologian Charles Ryrie thus comments that the fool “is described as to his belief (*no God*) and behavior (*no one...good*).”³³

This highlights a point we will examine later in the book—that is, many people become atheists because doing so relieves them from having to pay attention to the moral commandments made by a holy God. The problem is, though human beings are absolutely free to believe as they wish during their short mortal lives, *all* will face God at a future judgment, and *all* will be held responsible. Those who enter eternity without Christ will spend eternity apart from Christ. That is why I have a sense of urgency in my heart in seeking to answer the objections of atheists, agnostics, and skeptics.

ANSWERING THE OBJECTIONS OF ATHEISTS, AGNOSTICS, AND SKEPTICS

We have seen that atheists believe there is no God; agnostics claim to be unsure about the existence of God; skeptics neither deny nor affirm God's existence but express great doubt. Practically speaking, many of the arguments raised by these three groups are similar if not entirely the same. It therefore makes great sense to deal with their primary objections collectively in a single book.

This book is divided into topical chapters. In each, I list common objections raised by atheists, agnostics, and skeptics, and then provide answers to each of these objections. This question-answer format makes it easy for you to obtain the information you are looking for.

Because of space limitations, I had to be selective regarding which objections to answer. Based on many years of experience in dealing with atheists, agnostics, and skeptics, I chose those topics most likely to surface in the course of a typical dialogue. The bibliography at the end of the book lists recommended resources that will further benefit you.