

# Atheism—Part Two

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## Tenets of Atheism

Atheists do not have identical beliefs, any more than do all theists. However, there is a core of beliefs common to most atheists. So while not all atheists believe all of the following, all of the following are believed by some atheists. And most atheists believe most of the following:

**About God.** True atheists believe that only the cosmos exists. God did not create man; people created God.

**About the World.** The universe is eternal. If it is not eternal, then it came into existence “out of nothing and by nothing.” It is self-sustaining and self-perpetuating. As astronomer Carl Sagan put it, “The Cosmos is all there is, all there was, and all there ever will be” (Sagan, *Cosmos*, 4). If asked “what caused the world?” most atheists would reply with Bertrand Russell that it was not caused; it is just there. Only the parts of the universe need a cause. They all depend on the whole, but the whole needs no cause. If we ask for a cause for the universe, then we must ask for a cause for God. And if we do not need a cause for God, then neither do we need one for the universe.

If one insists that *everything* needs a cause, the atheist simply suggests an infinite regress of causes that never arrives at a first cause (i.e., God). For if everything must have a cause, then so does this “first cause.” In that case it really isn’t first at all, nor is anything else (see Sagan, *Broca’s Brain*, 287).

**About Evil.** Unlike pantheists who deny the reality of evil, atheists strongly affirm it. In fact, while pantheists affirm the reality of God and deny the reality of evil, atheists, on the other hand, affirm the reality of evil and deny the reality of God. They believe theists are inconsistent in trying to hold to both realities.

**About Human Beings.** A human being is matter in motion with no immortal soul. There is no mind apart from brain. Nor is there a soul independent of body. While not all atheists are strict materialists who identify soul and body, most do believe that the soul is dependent on the body. The soul in fact dies when the body dies. The soul (and mind) may be more than the body, the way a thought is more than words or symbols. But as the shadow of a tree ceases to exist when the tree does, so the soul does not survive the body’s death.

**About Ethics.** No moral absolutes exist, certainly no divinely authorized absolutes. There may be some widely accepted and long enduring values. But absolutely binding laws would seem to imply an absolute Law Giver, which is not an option.

Since values are not *discovered* from some revelation of God, they must be *created*. Many atheists believe values emerge by trial and error the way traffic laws developed. Often the right action is described in terms of what will bring the greatest good in the long run. Some frankly acknowledge that relative and changing situations determine what is right or wrong. Others speak about the expedient behavior (what “works”), and some work out their whole ethic in terms of self-interest. But virtually all atheists recognize that each person must determine personal values, since there is no God to reveal what is right and

wrong. As the *Humanist Manifesto* put it, "Humanism asserts that the nature of the universe depicted by modern science makes unacceptable any supernatural or cosmic guarantees of human values" (Kurtz, 8).

**About Human Destiny.** Most atheists see no eternal destiny for individual persons, though some speak of a kind of collective immortality of the race. But the denial of individual immortality notwithstanding, many atheists are Utopians. They believe in an earthly paradise to come. Skinner proposed a behaviorally controlled Utopia in *Walden Two*. Marx believed an economic dialectic of history would inevitably produce a communist paradise. Others, such as Rand, believe that pure capitalism can produce a more perfect society. Still others believe human reason and science can produce a social Utopia. Virtually all, however, recognize the ultimate mortality of the human race but console themselves in the belief that its destruction is millions of years away.

## Evaluation

**Positive Contributions of Atheism.** Even from a theistic point of view, not all views expressed by atheists lack truth. Atheists have provided many insights into the nature of reality.

**The reality of evil.** Unlike pantheists, atheists do not close their eyes to the reality of evil. In fact, most atheists have a keen sensitivity to evil and injustice. They rightly point to the imperfection of this world and to the need for adjudication of injustice. In this regard they are surely right that an all-loving, all-powerful God would certainly do something about the situation.

**Contradictory concepts of God.** In contending that God is not caused by another, some have spoken of God as though he were a self-caused being (*causa sui*). Atheists rightly point out this contradiction, for no being can cause its own existence. To do this it would have to exist and not exist at the same time. For to cause existence is to move from nonexistence to existence. But nonexistence cannot cause existence. Nothing cannot cause something. On this point atheists are surely right.

**Positive human values.** Many atheists are humanists. With others they affirm the value of humanity and human culture. They earnestly pursue both the arts and the sciences and express deep concern in ethical issues. Most atheists believe that racism, hatred, and bigotry are wrong. Most atheists commend freedom and tolerance and have other positive moral values.

**The Loyal Opposition.** Atheists are the loyal opposition to theists. It is difficult to see the fallacies in one's own thinking. Atheists serve as a corrective to invalid theistic reasoning. Their arguments against theism should give pause to dogmatism and temper the zeal with which many believers glibly dismiss unbelief. In fact, atheists serve a significant corrective role for theistic thinking. Monologues seldom produce refined thought. Without atheists, theists would lack significant opposition with which to dialogue and clarify their concepts of God.

## A Critique of Atheism

Still, the position that God does not exist lacks adequate rational support. The atheist's arguments against God are insufficient. Further, there are good arguments for the existence of God. For many things, atheism provides no satisfactory answer.

**Why is there something rather than nothing?** Atheism does not provide an adequate

answer as to why anything exists when it is not necessary for anything at all to exist. Non-existence of everything in the world is possible, yet the world does exist. Why? If there is no cause for its existence, there is no reason why the world exists.

**What is the basis for morality?** Atheists can believe in morality, but they cannot *justify* this belief. Why should anyone be good unless there is a Definer of goodness who holds people accountable? It is one thing to say that hate, racism, genocide, and rape are wrong. But if there is no ultimate standard of morality (i.e., God), then how can these things be wrong? A moral prescription implies a Moral Prescriber.

**What is the basis for meaning?** Most atheists believe life is meaningful and worth living. But how can it be if there is no purpose for life, nor destiny after this life? Purpose implies a Purposer. But if there is no God, there is no objective or ultimate meaning. Yet most atheists live as if there were.

**What is the basis for truth?** Most atheists believe that atheism is true and theism is false. But to state that atheism is true implies that there is such a thing as objective truth. Most atheists do not believe that atheism is true only for them. But if atheism is true, there must be a basis for objective truth. Truth is a characteristic of a mind, and objective truth implies an objective Mind beyond our finite minds.

**What is the basis for reason?** Most atheists pride themselves on being rational. But why be rational if the universe is the result of irrational chance? There is no reason to be reasonable in a random universe. Hence, the very thing in which atheists most pride themselves is not possible apart from God.

**What is the basis for beauty?** Atheists also marvel at a beautiful sunset and are awe-struck by the starry heavens. They enjoy the beauty of nature as though it were meaningful. Yet if atheism is true, it is all accidental, not purposeful. Atheists enjoy natural beauty as though it were meant for them, and yet they believe no Designer exists to mean it for them.

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