

Julian Baggini

# ATHEISM

A Very Short Introduction

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# Chapter 1

## What is atheism?

### A walk on the dark side?

When I was a child I attended a Roman Catholic primary school. It would serve the cause of militant atheism well if I could report beatings by nuns and fondlings in the sacristy by randy priests, but neither gaudy tale would be true. On the contrary, I was raised in what could be seen as a gentle, benign religious environment. Neither of my parents were Bible-thumpers and none of my teachers was anything other than kind. I do not feel I bear any deep scars brought on by the mild form of indoctrination practised there, where beliefs were instilled by constant repetition and reinforcement rather than any overt coercion. Indeed, in many ways the power the Church exerted over me was very weak. When I moved to a non-Catholic secondary school I soon moved over to Methodism, and by the time I left school I had given up religious belief altogether. I had become an atheist, a person who believes there is no God or gods.

Yet even this mild form of religious upbringing has had some long-term effects. Back when I was at primary school, the very word 'atheist' would conjure up dark images of something sinister, evil, and threatening. Belief in God and obedience to his will was constitutive of our conception of goodness, and therefore any belief that rejected God was by definition

opposed to the good. Atheists could only belong to the dark side.

Of course, now I do not subscribe to any of the beliefs that form part of this bleak view of atheism and its dangers. Goodness and belief in God are, to my mind, entirely separate and atheism is, properly understood, a positive world view. Yet when I think of the word 'atheist', something of the dark smudge my Catholic mentors smeared over it remains. On an emotional level, they succeeded in forging an association between atheism and the sinister, the negative, and the evil. This stain is now but a residue, hardly noticeable to my conscious mind. But it cannot be entirely removed, and my attention is often involuntarily drawn towards it, as the eye is to a barely perceptible flaw that, once noticed, cannot be forgotten.

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My experience could be unusual and in its details perhaps there are few who will hear echoes of their own lives. However, I believe there is one respect in which my experience is not at all unusual. We human beings often claim that it is our ability to think which distinguishes us from other animals. We are *homo sapiens* – thinking hominids – our capacity to reason our distinctive and highest feature. Yet we are not purely rational. It is not just that we are often in the grip of irrational or non-rational forces and desires, it is that our thinking is itself infused with emotion. These feelings shape our thought, often without us realizing it.

The reason I draw attention to this fact is that this book is almost entirely about the rational case for atheism. For this I make no apologies. If we are to make the case for any point of view, the best way to do so is always to appeal to reasons and arguments that can command the widest possible support. However, I am also aware that we do not approach such rational discussions with blank, open minds. We come to them with prejudices, fears, and commitments. Some of these are not founded on reason and that confers on them a certain immunity to the power of rational argumentation. So it is

with atheism, on which few readers will have a neutral outlook. It is my guess that many readers, even those who have rejected religion, will have more negative associations for atheism than positive ones.

This is important, because such associations can interfere with clear thinking, leading us to prejudge issues and reject arguments without good grounds. If you have a deep-rooted image of atheists as miserable, pessimistic amoralists, then rational arguments to the contrary may encounter deep psychological resistance.

The grip such feelings have on us can be strong, and we cannot simply will them away. But we can try to become aware of them and compensate for them. In this book I try to show that atheism is, in several respects, not as people think it is. To allow my case as fair a hearing as possible, I would ask that you try to put aside any dark preconceptions you may have about godlessness and try to judge my arguments on their merits.

## Atheism defined

Atheism is in fact extremely simple to define: it is the belief that there is no God or gods. (Henceforth I shall talk simply of belief in God, but the arguments of this book apply equally to monotheistic and polytheistic beliefs.) However, many people think that atheists believe there is no God *and* no morality; or no God *and* no meaning to life; or again no God *and* no human goodness. As we shall see later, there is nothing to stop atheists believing in morality, a meaning for life, or human goodness. Atheism is only intrinsically negative when it comes to belief about God. It is as capable of a positive view of other aspects of life as any other belief.

There is one respect, however, in which the negativity of the atheist's belief does extend beyond God's existence. The atheist's rejection of belief in God is usually accompanied by a broader rejection of any supernatural or transcendental reality. For example, an atheist does not usually believe in the existence of immortal

souls, life after death, ghosts, or supernatural powers. Although strictly speaking an atheist could believe in any of these things and still remain an atheist, for reasons that will become clearer, the arguments and ideas that sustain atheism tend naturally to rule out other beliefs in the supernatural or transcendental.

Atheism contrasts not only with theism and other forms of belief in God, but also with agnosticism – the suspension of belief or disbelief in God. The agnostic claims we cannot know whether God exists and so the only rational option is to reserve judgement. For the agnostic, both the theist and the atheist go too far, in affirming or denying God's existence respectively – we just don't have sufficient evidence or arguments to justify either position. The question of whether people who have no positive belief in God should be agnostics or atheists is an important one, perhaps as important as the question of whether one should positively believe in God or not, and I will discuss it in more detail in the next chapter.

## Atheism, naturalism, and physicalism

Another problem with atheism's image as an essentially negative belief system is that many assume atheists are simple physicalists (sometimes called materialists). Crude physicalism asserts that the only things that exist are material objects. A slightly less crude version is that only the objects of the physical sciences – physics, chemistry, and biology – exist. The importance of this alternative formulation is that some of the fundamental forces of physics don't seem to be 'material objects' in the everyday sense of the word, yet a physicalist would not deny that they exist.

Most atheists are physicalists only in one rather general sense. That is to say, their atheism is motivated at least in part by their naturalism, a belief that there is only the natural world and not any supernatural one. We should call this 'naturalism-with-a-small-n' to distinguish it from certain versions of philosophical Naturalism

which may make stronger and more specific claims. It will be my claim that this form of naturalism lies at the core of atheism.

This kind of naturalism fits comfortably with a form of physicalism which combines the naturalist claims about the world with the further claim that this world is essentially physical in nature. However, since physicalism does require this further claim it cannot be assumed that naturalist atheists must also be physicalists. Even when they are, we have to understand that the phrase 'essentially physical in nature' can be understood in various ways with very different implications.

One way of understanding this claim is to say that it is about substances: the 'stuff' out of which all things are made. This brand of physicalism asserts that the only kind of stuff is physical stuff: there are no non-physical souls, spirits, or ideas. This is a version of physicalism that many, probably most, atheists can sign up to.

However, there is a stronger view, called eliminative materialism. On this view, not only is it true that the only kind of stuff is physical stuff, it is also true that anything that isn't physical stuff doesn't really exist. So, for example, there is no such thing as a thought or an idea. Eliminative materialism is hard to swallow because it requires us to deny the existence of many things it seems we must believe in. How, for instance, are we to deny that minds exist when the fact that we have minds ourselves seems to be such a central feature of our very existence?

Many critics of atheism seem to assume that atheists are physicalists (as a matter of fact mostly true) and that physicalism is the same as eliminative materialism (logically false). They therefore use the apparent absurdity of eliminative materialism as a *reductio ad absurdum* of atheist belief. Put crudely, the atheist is portrayed as a kind of nihilist, who not only denies the existence of God, but also denies the existence of anything other than physical objects. Such an impoverished existence has little to recommend it.

But physicalism does not necessarily entail eliminative materialism. All physicalism says is that the only kind of stuff is physical stuff. That does not mean, for example, that minds do not exist. All it means is that minds, whatever they are, are not lumps of stuff. To think that they are is to make what Gilbert Ryle termed a 'category mistake'. The mistake is to think of mind and matter as two different varieties of the one category, 'stuff'. That is false. In my head there are not two different kinds of stuff – mental (my mind) and physical (my brain) – which somehow work alongside one other. Rather, for the physicalist, there is only one lump of stuff in my head, which is my brain. It is true, in one very important sense, to say I have a mind, in that I am capable of thought or consciousness. However, I make a mistake if I think that the statement 'I have a mind' entails that 'I am in part constituted by a mental, non-material substance'.

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If this seems a little difficult to get a grip on, just consider love. No one thinks that love is a special kind of substance – that there is physical stuff and love-stuff. Nor does anyone think that love is some kind of physical object. Yet many people believe in love, feel love, give love, and so on. Love is real but it is not a substance. If we have no problem with this thought, why do we have a problem with the idea that minds are real but are not a special kind of mental substance? Many things are real that are not things in the sense of being lumps of stuff, and there is no great metaphysical mystery about that.

These are philosophically deep waters which we can but dip our toes into here. For the moment, I just want to stress that the atheist is not a crude denier of all that is not physical, if by 'physical' we mean a physical substance. What most atheists do believe is that although there is only one kind of stuff in the universe and it is physical, out of this stuff come minds, beauty, emotions, moral values – in short the full gamut of phenomena that gives richness to human life.



It should be remembered that most atheism is rooted not in the specific claims of physicalism but the broader claims of naturalism. All we need to remember is that the natural world is home to consciousness, emotion, and beauty and not just atoms and fundamental physical forces. Once more, the moral of the story is that the atheist denies the existence of God, but is not by nature a denier period.

## A positive case for atheism

My main aim in this book is to provide a positive case for atheism, one that is not simply about rubbishing religious belief. In other words, I hope it will be as much about why one should be an atheist as why one should *not* be a theist. Many critics of atheism will say that this is not possible, since atheism is parasitic on religion. This is evident in its very name – atheism is a-theism: the negation of theistic belief. Hence atheism is by its very nature negative and relies for its existence on the religious beliefs it rejects.

I think this view is profoundly mistaken. Its initial plausibility is based on a very crude piece of flawed reasoning we can call the etymological fallacy. This is the mistake of thinking that one can best understand what a word means by understanding its origin. But this is evidently not always true. For example, the etymology of ‘philosophy’ is the Greek for ‘love of wisdom’. Yet one cannot really understand what philosophy means today simply by knowing this etymological fact. Likewise, if you go into an Italian restaurant knowing only that ‘tagliatelle’ literally means ‘little boot laces’, you won’t have much idea what you’re going to end up eating if you order it. So the mere fact that the word ‘atheist’ is constructed as a negation of theism is not enough to show that it is essentially negative.

Etymology aside, we can see how casting atheism in a negative light is no more than a historical accident. Consider this story, which begins as fact and ends as fiction.

In Scotland there is a deep lake called Loch Ness. Many people in Scotland – almost certainly the majority – believe that the lake is like other lochs in the country. Their beliefs about the lake are what we might call normal. But that is not to say they have no particular beliefs. It's just that the beliefs they have are so ordinary that they do not require elucidation. They believe that the lake is a natural phenomenon of a certain size, that certain fish live in it, and so on.

However, some people believe that the loch contains a strange creature, known as the Loch Ness Monster. Many claim to have seen it, although no firm evidence of its existence has ever been presented. So far our story is simple fact. Now imagine how the story could develop.

The number of believers in the monster starts to grow. Soon, a word is coined to describe them: they are part-mockingly called 'N

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(Many names of religions started as mocking nicknames: Methodist, Quaker, and even Christian all started out this way.)

However, the number of Nessies continues to increase and the name ceases to become a joke. Despite the fact that the evidence for the monster's existence is still lacking, soon being a Nessie is the norm and it is the people previously thought of as normal who are in the minority. They soon get their own name, 'A' who don't believe in the monster.

Is it true to say that the beliefs of Anessies are parasitic on those of the Nessies? That can't be true, because the Anessies' beliefs pre-date those of the Nessies. The key point is not one of chronology, however. The key is that the Anessies would believe exactly the same as they do now even if Nessies had never existed. What the rise of the Nessies did was to give a name to a set of beliefs that had always existed but which was considered so unexceptional that it required no special label.

The moral of the story should be clear. Atheists subscribe to a certain world view that includes numerous beliefs about the world



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**1. Are people who don't believe in this creature just being negative?**

and what is in it. Theists say that there is something else that also exists – God. If theists did not exist, atheists still would, but perhaps there would be no special name for them. But since theism has become so dominant in our world, with so many people believing in God or gods, atheism has come to be defined in contrast to theism. That makes it no more parasitic on religion than the beliefs of the Anessies are parasitic on those of the Nessies.

The absurdity of saying that atheism is parasitic on religious belief is perhaps made most clear by considering what would happen if everyone ceased to believe in God. If atheism were parasitic on religion, then surely it could not exist without religion. But in this imagined scenario, what we would have would not be the end of

atheism but its triumph. Atheism no more needs religion than atheists do.

## Honk if you're an atheist

In summary, the aim of this book is to provide a positive view of atheism, one which does not make the mistake of thinking that atheism can only exist as a parasitic rival to theism, or that atheism is essentially negative about a whole range of beliefs other than those concerning God's existence. Atheism is not essentially negative in either of these senses. Atheists can be indifferent rather than hostile to religious belief. They can be more sensitive to aesthetic experience, more moral, or more attuned to natural beauty than many theists. There is no more reason for them to be pessimistic or depressive than there is for the religious to be so.

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However, I would not want to fall into the trap of trying so hard to correct preconceptions that I end up painting an unduly rosy picture of atheism. Most atheists see themselves as realists – their atheism is a part of their willingness to square up to the world as it is and face it without recourse to superstition or comforting fictions about a life to come or a benevolent power looking after us. Being such realists requires us to accept that much of what goes on in this world is unpleasant. Bad things happen, people have miserable lives, and you never know when blind luck (not fate) might intervene to change your own life, for the better or for the worse.

Because of this, atheists tend to find relentless, blind cheeriness anathema. There is a bleak humour for the atheist in evangelical Christians with their bumper stickers asking you to 'honk if you love Jesus'. What is both comic and depressing about the sticker is that it reflects the cheering self-assuredness of believers who need only remind themselves of their religious belief to feel that little bit better about the world. The crass simplicity of this world view can be darkly comic, in that it throws into relief how easy it is for humans to give in to comforting idiocy.

Happy-clappy atheism is just as objectionable, but fortunately atheism's inherent realism provides, on the whole, a kind of immunity to it. That's why you won't see a 'honk if you're an atheist' bumper sticker, at least not an unironic one. However, when seeking to overturn the negative caricature of atheism that is so prevalent, it is tempting to overemphasize how positive it can be. The truth is that there is no *a priori* link between being an atheist and having a positive or negative outlook. In arguing that atheism need not be negative and can be positive, I am not claiming that becoming an atheist is a passport to happiness. Fulfilment in this life is harder work than that, and it is a mark of atheism's realism and optimism that an acceptance of this sober truth still leaves fulfilment within our reach.