

ATHEISM AS A POSITIVE
SOCIAL FORCE

Raymond W. Converse

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INTRODUCTION

The common definition of an atheist is pretty perfunctory: “one who denies or disbelieves in the existence of God.” But atheism has its own value as a way of life; it is not only significant as a philosophical position held in opposition to religion. Without a doubt the most important concern of atheism is: What would atheism propose to replace the existence of God? The simple, usual definition is actually of very little use.

The majority of this work will be an attempt to set forth the major lines of philosophical argument that support the position of atheism in a world which still believes, and lives as if, God exists and directs the workings of the world. In the course of this presentation it will also be necessary to set forth the major philosophical arguments of those who rely upon religion as the support of their belief in the existence of God. As the two counter positions are presented, it is hoped that the contrast between them will open the doors to debate.

A few introductory remarks concerning the position of atheism will set the stage for this dialectic. Atheism as it exists today consists of three major schools. The first school consists of people (and they seem to be in the majority) who accept the position that God does not exist. They do not, however, give much more thought to this acceptance. They continue to live their lives as if God does

exist. This position does not require much thought or conviction; and if pressed, those who stand on this acceptance would be unable to justify their belief.

The second school consists of those who accept the fact that God does not exist and who are also capable of setting forth a fully thought-out statement of their position. The second school, however, does not take a public stance on their beliefs or convictions. They have replaced God, as the effective author of the world, with human reason. Human reason is equated with the results that have been set forth in the fields of science and technology. This position is based upon a philosophical system of thought known as materialism. This position came into existence, as concerns Western European civilization, within a time period of a few hundred years. The important point here is that the holders of this position do not tend to take a public stance with their position. Science over the last couple of centuries has proposed a series of theories based upon material facts that would argue against the necessity for the existence of God. The theory of evolution, the Big Bang theory, the Theory of Relativity, and the findings of scientific psychology would all fall in this category. Taken together, these theories can be seen as offering an alternative explanation for the beginning of the universe, the continued operation of the universe, and an explanation for each individual member of the universe. Should those theories be proven to a point of certainty, then the need for God and the supernatural generally would be completely negated.

The problem is that most of the theories offered by science have not been proven to that point of certainty. It must also be remembered that belief in the existence of God and the supernatural is only one part of the role that is played by what we know as organized religion. In fact, belief in the explanations of science are seen by those who wish to impugn them as requiring just as great a leap of faith as a belief in God. We will look at this claim later.

In the third category are those (relatively few!) people who not only claim to be atheists and are able to offer fully developed explanations for their atheism,

but who also structure their lives to fit their atheism. They are able to, and do, attempt to teach the philosophical position of atheism to those who care to listen. This is, of course, the most difficult position to maintain of the three. It requires not only a working knowledge of religion, but also of science and technology. It is my position that individuals can truly be considered atheist only if they have gotten to this stage; and I hope that this work will bring those who are interested to the point at which such a decision can be made in earnest.

The methodology of atheism is important in our consideration of the position, and the reader is invited as we go through the following chapters to return periodically and review the methodology. The method chosen will consist of three parts. First, it must be understood that the denial found in atheism is not just the denial of God and religion, but is in addition the denial of the supernatural in any form. Second, it will be assumed that anyone who wishes to consider himself or herself an atheist will be ready to do the research necessary to fully support his or her position. Third, an atheist, based on the knowledge gained in that phase, will structure his or her life in a manner consistent with that knowledge. An index is provided at the end of the book from which readers will be able to follow the research available to whatever degree of certainty they require. This will allow readers to answer questions that might arise from those who challenge a belief in atheism.

The road to atheism begins with the premise that the supernatural does not exist in any form. Accepting the fact that the supernatural does not exist, what is left for an atheist to rely upon? The answer is human reason. The first step that one must take, in order for human reason to stand as the foundation of atheism, is to define human reason or the rational.

For our purposes, the first requirement of reason begins with the sensations that are received by our sense organs and are then transmitted to our brains. Modern science presents us with a theory that states that the physical

sensations, light waves, sound waves, tastes, odors and touch, produce effects upon our sense organs that are then converted into electrical and chemical impulses. These impulses are then conducted to our brains where they are converted into images, either verbal or visual. While this theory has not yet been proven to absolute certainty, it is the most widely accepted theory of the physical process by which reason begins. The actual composition of the impulses that convey the sensations to the brain and their formation into images has still to be fully traced. However, the theory of electrical and chemical conversion from physical data to mental activity is the most widely accepted, and it represents the greatest degree of certainty that can be obtained in our current stage of knowledge. The sense organs are constantly bombarded with sensations of every type. The sense organs, however, are each limited to a small range of physical data that they can “read.” Initially, therefore, the physical data that can be apprehended is strictly narrowed or filtered to leave only the data that falls within the receptivity capability of the sense organ affected. It is understood that there are small variations between individuals as to how wide this range may be, but essentially we all can “read” the same physical data with our sense organs. For the purpose of this definition, we will also accept as a given that the information received by the sense organs is identical with that which left the object under consideration. This is not to say that the objects which we “observe” through our senses are identical with the actual object; but only that what we received as physical data is exactly what is represented by the object. Thus, we accept that our only knowledge of the world outside of our minds and bodies is that which is represented to us by our sense organs and, in addition to what our sense organs can perceive directly, we must also take into consideration the technologies that have been created by modern science. These technologies allow us to extend the range of sensations that we are able to obtain from the outside world. For example, the microscope allows us to view objects with our sense of sight that would be beyond the natural capacity of our

eyes to see. This set of technologies will be considered to be a sort of sixth sense. It must be remembered, however, that these technologies still rely upon our sense organs to get the data to our brains.

The second requirement in defining human reason, or the rational, will involve the process that occurs once the data has reached the brain. Modern science again presents us with a theory as to what happens at that point. The physical data, whether of an electrical or chemical nature, is processed by the brain into either thoughts (ideas), which consist of verbal or visual images, or physical responses. It is not fully understood how this is accomplished. It is also not known exactly how the brain decides which of the physical data received it will acknowledge. As psychology would teach us, some of the data is repressed and thereby removed from our conscious attention, while other data is converted to either images or physical reaction. The index lists sources of scientific research that set forth in detail the theories that we can only touch upon briefly in these pages. For the purposes of this discussion, it is enough to understand that the data received is converted to images by a natural process. All of our mental activity, therefore, is a direct result of the data received and its conversion into images. Once again, there appear to be rather wide variations between individuals concerning the process of converting physical data to thought. The process itself, however, appears to be basically the same in all humans.

There appear to be two different types of mental activity. The one is conscious, that is to say, the individual is aware of the activity produced by the brain. The other is not conscious, that is, the individual is not aware of the activity carried on by the brain. For example, the brain is constantly receiving sensations from the autonomic nervous system and is constantly responding to those sensations. This is what keeps our heart beating, our lungs breathing, etc., without our normally being aware of it. On the other hand, the sensations of hunger that are received from the stomach are brought to consciousness and

then the individual hunts for food. This is a very simplistic view of what happens to sensations in the brain, but it will at least be suitable for our definition. Our second requirement, therefore, is to understand that all we know of the world, and ourselves, is the result of the conversion of physical data into visual or verbal images.

Our third requirement involves the development of each individual's understanding of what is brought to consciousness by the brain. Although the thoughts created by the brain appear to be totally random, and totally dependent upon the data received, the brain seems to be capable of making judgments about the thoughts. The brain, through another process that is not totally understood, is capable of putting ideas together through association and producing a judgment about the importance of the information. If it is important enough it will be brought to the individual's attention through a verbal or visual image. The individual is then capable of making further decisions concerning these thoughts with yet further thought. This process does not seem to be totally foolproof, as we are all aware of times in which our responses, or the thoughts produced, were nothing short of inappropriate. Our third requirement, therefore, is that each individual is capable of making judgments concerning the value and importance of the data brought to his or her consciousness by means of a conscious manipulation of the data.

Therefore as a working definition of rational (human reason) we understand the process by which raw data is collected by the individual sense organs, the process by which this data is converted into mental activity, and the conscious reaction of the individual to this mental activity. As the individual develops more control over these processes, they are able to reorganize them into ever more complex systems of thought. The child is capable of recognizing mental activity and responding, but is not capable of reorganizing that information into complex systems. It is through the process of reorganization that the individual becomes aware of the regularity of some sensations and the

uniqueness of others. This is the process that makes it possible for a young person to learn to speak, to recognize significant others, to determine what is food and what is not and many other things. At a later level the capability to reorganize information is used to educate the individual. This education can come from any source that is available often enough to create regularity in the data received. This is usually parents, siblings, friends, schools, etc. In this connection the education can be either of high or low quality and quantity. For primitive man it was absolutely essential for survival, as it still is for most of the animal world.

Individually, we come to recognize ourselves as distinct from all other objects early in life. As the reorganization process becomes a regular part of mental activity, individuals become capable of making choices as to how they will react to these objects and the thoughts or the ideas associated with them. The more capable a person becomes in reorganizing data, the more complex become the choices. There seems to be a direct correlation between the amount of knowledge and the complexity of the reorganization process. There is, at the highest level, a limit on the amount of knowledge that can be obtained both as individuals and as a species. For this reason there also may be certain types of data that cannot be completely reorganized, i.e., there may be questions that cannot be answered to any degree of certainty. The individual, however, is not limited to the knowledge that can be obtained individually. As with the senses, the community of knowledge held by the whole of mankind can be used as an extension of the individual's knowledge. Modern society abounds with sources for this knowledge, that is, computers, books, television and many others. Even with all of these sources, the amount of knowledge available to the individual tends to be severely limited.

In contrast to the position set forth above is the alternative position taken by those who believe in God (religion) and the supernatural generally. This position starts from the basic foundation that human reason, or the rational, if it

exists at all, exists solely as the means by which man can understand the knowledge given by the supernatural. This knowledge may be in several different forms, i.e., it may be given by a supernatural being directly to man. Hence the belief that the various “bibles,” e.g., the Christian Bible, the Talmud, the Qur’an, the Avesta, etc., are the actual “words” of the supernatural and not just the words of man. This notion forms the basis of the argument that one must heed these words, to the letter. The tenets that are contained in those books, and others like them, are not the product of human reason based upon the experience of man reorganized by the human brain into ever larger more complex structures but, rather, are merely delivered to man as eternally true statements of divine fact.

The supernatural being which provides mankind with such eternal truth can be seen to take on many forms. It can be of a type normally found in modern religions, i.e., an omnipotent, omnipresent spirit designated as God, Mithra, Allah, etc. and is usually seen as a “good” spirit. Others can also be known as “evil” spirits, such as the devil, Ahriman, and others. These spirits are normally portrayed as totally bodiless and truly spiritual in nature. The supernatural can also be seen, and has been portrayed in history, as human in form and disposition but equipped with more than human power and ability and immortal life. The delivery of the revelations of the supernatural can also be found in different forms, i.e., they can be delivered by men who have been instructed by the divine, such as the prophets of the Christian Bible, or they may be delivered directly by a disembodied spirit as was the case when contact was made with Moses through clouds and burning bushes. They may also be found in the contact of human beings through a disciplined control of the body, as is found in Hindu asceticism.

All of these forms that have been used by mankind to describe the supernatural have one common feature: the source of this knowledge is beyond the ability of mankind to understand solely by the use of his natural reasoning

powers. In other words, if the knowledge that is given by the supernatural had not been given, then mankind would not have this knowledge. The knowledge itself, however, has been given to mankind by this incomprehensible being with the specific intent that it will not only be understood by human reason but that it will be acted upon specifically by human beings. It has been most widely accepted, historically speaking, that the method through which this knowledge came to be understood was through the services of what we now call organized religion. This system consists of many different schools, i.e., Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Toa, and many others. In each of these schools the knowledge given by the supernatural is reorganized by selected individuals (those normally appointed by the supernatural or those claiming special powers of understanding) into a form that is capable of being understood by all mankind. The reorganized or interpreted knowledge is then codified in some manner and stands as the basis of religious belief.

We will see later in what forms this interpreted knowledge has been organized and the differences that are apparent in the various interpretations. In general, however, the system of beliefs that surrounds the interpretation of the original knowledge given by the supernatural represents the differences in the existing organized religions.

In looking at the three religions that have had the most effect on the development of Western European civilization, the scenario holds that the divine knowledge was transmitted to individuals who were chosen directly by the supernatural and who have come to be known as prophets. The main function of the prophets was to deliver the knowledge imparted by the supernatural in a form that could be understood by the reason of ordinary men. This knowledge was then codified into a system by various means, all of which resulted in them being put into written form, hence the Bible, the Talmud and the Qur'an. The knowledge contained in those books has, ever since they were written, been subjected to a great deal of commentary by learned men and some

of this commentary has become part of the expansion of the books themselves or has been generally confused with the knowledge contained in the original books. This ongoing commentary, which in essence is additional interpretation of the original knowledge given by the prophets, represents in large part the theology, ritual, and content of the actual organized religions and their “churches.”

The last step is the presentation of these organized constructs to the individual adherents of the Church. It is at this point that the knowledge given by the supernatural becomes solidified into an unchanging system of eternal truth. Here the position is taken that the individual believer must accept without question the tenets set forth in the theology of the Church. These tenets usually include an unquestioning belief in the supernatural being that delivered the knowledge, an unquestioning belief in the unerring accuracy of the interpreters of this knowledge, i.e., the prophets, mystics, priests, magic or whatever system is used to originally interpret this knowledge, and the unquestioning belief that the Church has incorporated, by means of faithful interpretation, this knowledge and that it is the sole repository and authority for this knowledge.

The alternative approach to atheism bases all relevant knowledge on the condition of the existence of a supernatural being or a force of some type who (for whatever reason) imparts this knowledge to mankind. The understanding and judgments that are made on the knowledge so received are seen to be the sole responsibility of those either directly chosen by the supernatural or those who can show that they have some special power to understand and make judgments concerning this knowledge. The individual is expected to suspend his own judgment and accept without question that the individuals chosen have interpreted this knowledge accurately and that they should be granted the status of an unchanging authority. That is to say, the individual is not responsible for what he or she believes, or for the actions required by these beliefs, as they represent the will of a supernatural being and are to be accorded

the status of universal, eternal truth. In summary, we can distinguish the basic differences between the two alternative approaches. In the atheistic approach, all knowledge is based upon the natural processes by which each individual obtains the data of the senses, the method by which the data is converted to energy and transported to the brain, and the method by which that converted data is reorganized into visual and verbal images. Knowledge is the result of these processes and the further natural process by which the brain is capable of reorganizing these images into ever more complex systems or patterns. This type of knowledge is only limited by the individual's exposure to the raw data available for processing, and by the individual ability to organize this data into complex systems upon which a judgment can be delivered. The natural processes in question can also be seen to be extended in some degree by the modern technologies that expand the ability of the senses to collect raw data. These technologies, such as the ability to write, have also allowed the ability of each individual to be expanded to a community of knowledge potentially embracing the judgment of all men. Under the atheistic position, the individual is expected to take responsibility for the knowledge he or she has and the judgments that he or she makes in regard to that knowledge.

Part One of the following book will concentrate on how today's major religions were founded. It is, of course, impossible in just a few pages to do justice to such a huge swath of human history; yet a bold attempt will be made, for we need some grounding in the basic facts of the religious view if we are to appreciate and evaluate the alternative position, atheism. (Hopefully, the sketch presented will interest readers to seek further information.) A detailed consideration will also be given of the actual content of the various systems that were developed to foster a better understanding of the position of religion — or the supernatural in general. When possible, the position of atheism will be contrasted to the position of religion. In most cases, this can be seen as the

author's attempt to set forth the position of atheism if it had actually existed at the time.

Part Two will set forth the position of atheism as a potential force in modern society and how it relates to the issues that seem to be the most salient in the United States. The two sections are intended to stand alone, i.e., they are not intended to be dependent upon each other, but the author wishes to stress his belief that one cannot truly comprehend the atheistic position presented in Part two without knowing at least the basic beliefs of the alternative position.

The most that any individual can hope for is a level of knowledge that will allow him or her enough certainty to support the necessary choices in life. For people to be considered rational, they must be able to explain the positions that they take based upon the knowledge that they actually have available, either personally or through the collected knowledge of mankind. In relation to what follows, an attempt will be made to present the knowledge necessary to become an informed atheist, or at least, a guideline as to what type of knowledge is important to such a decision. The actual decisions and the actions taken by the individual are totally up to the individual.