

The answer of atheism: „There is no god“

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I became an atheist when I was studying theology. By the time I completed my studies and obtained my doctorate in theology, I was already an atheist. Immediately afterwards I followed my reason and conscience and left the Protestant Church, which I had intended to serve as a priest. The atheism which I am writing about in this essay is a personal account and is the result of thirty years of my own reflection. The essence of the argument feeds on thousands of years of recorded religious criticism from the beginnings of philosophy up to the present.

It is an uninformed abridgement to claim religious criticism and atheism began with the European Enlightenment of the 18th century. The critical stimulus which led to philosophy – astonished and doubtful – put the priests’ offerings and oracles, the prophets’ words and demands into proportion. Ever since, intellectual culture has been branded by a rivalry between knowledge and belief, reason and revelation, philosophy and theology, world wisdom and fear of god.

Definitions of viewpoints:

Atheism is the denial of a god and has to be clearly distinguished from blasphemy, anti-theism, neo-paganism and agnosticism: blasphemy which is almost as old as the belief in a god itself is a rash and emotional form of religious criticism. A blasphemer remains set in his religious thinking. Instead of loving god he curses him because he feels his hopes have been let down. Atheism on the other hand is a more developed stage of religious criticism beyond the praise of god or blasphemy.

Anti-theism is related to the fanaticism of blasphemy in its psychology and contents, it is a militant kind of fight against god. Whilst the atheist simply denies god – i.e. he/she denies the existence of god by reasoned argument and reveals god as an illusion and product of the imagination – the anti-theist tries to actively fight „god“. For this reason anti-theism is associated with the fanatical hatred of god, with malicious bitching about the clerics. The main example for this wrong kind of religious criticism is the short text „The pest of god“ written by the German-American anarchist John Most at the end of the 19th century.

The atheism discussed in this essay also distinguishes itself from any form of neo-paganism. Neo-paganism artificially warms up older stages of religious history, which have become intellectually and culturally outdated as the result of the development of monotheism. Current varieties include the colourful mixtures of Celtic, Germanic, Indian, East-Asian elements often combined with bizarre rituals from witch and Satan worships. These drifting forms of „alternative religiousness“, existing mainly in urban subcultures, are sometimes called patchwork religiousness by religious scholars.

Another concept should be also clarified by distinguishing atheism from agnosticism. An agnostic leaves the question of the existence of god open, he/she thinks this question cannot be answered in theory, it cannot rationally be decided upon. He/she usually has a negative view of a religious concept, he/she will however not commit himself/herself to a clearly atheist view. For this reason, agnosticism – which is not to be mixed up with scepticism – represents an ideological laxity which is very wide spread today. This ideology of mental laziness revels in the rash accusation that even the convinced atheist is a victim of belief, because one can neither prove that god exists nor that god does not exist.

In contrast to this, the atheism outlined here claims to be a theoretical view based solely on argument, a rational philosophical world-view. It is based on generally comprehensible and thus compelling reasons, on evidence if you like. Belief on the other hand supports itself on inspiration, revelations, Holy Spirits or Holy Scripts. Admittedly, these are beyond universal

comprehension and this is why another element – which is just as incomprehensible – has to be added: divine mercy.

Atheism is a historically reflective, post-religious form of awareness which mentally and emotionally goes beyond monotheism by logically concluding its original logic of deifying, desecration, deprivation of mystique and secularisation and thus turning it against itself.

Looking for the meaning of life is part of the human nature insofar that the human being as a creature with few instincts has to find his/her way around the world; mentally orient him/herself independently. However, not everybody who is looking for the meaning of life is looking for god, and people's spiritual needs must not be simply equated with religious needs. It is true that questions about the meaning of life are traditionally answered with religious replies, but it is also possible to give non-religious, secular-humanist, atheist answers. Spiritual needs, too, can be fulfilled by both religious and non-religious experiences. It is not right to swiftly claim that emotional needs embracing intellect and sentiment – such as the desire to find out the meaning of life, the desire for security, for comfort and for courage in one's life – can only be met by religion. We simply have to acknowledge that all spiritual activities and occurrences such as inspiration and reflection, meditation and contemplation, even mystique itself, are not the exclusive domain of religion, but also have secular-philosophical varieties which can play a perfectly important role in an atheist concept of life.

The two pillars of atheism

The undogmatic atheism elaborated in this essay, claims to dissolve the belief in god from inside, to let it fail because of its internal contradictions and inconsistencies. Thus the key task of religious criticism is overcome because the term „god“ ultimately embodies all further doctrines

The two pillars of atheism are:

1. There is no god who created the world. The world is no creation, it has not been created, it is un-creatable, undestroyable, in short: it is eternal and infinite. It is in the process of constant development governed by its own natural laws combining both the inevitable and chance.
2. There is no divine saviour. The world is unsaved and unsavable, it is full of flaws and structural inconsistencies stemming from the unawareness of its natural laws.

Having realised the above, we can draw the following conclusions for an atheist world wisdom and way of life: the human is not the image of an immaterial and supernatural divinity but a creature of nature without a model, subject to the laws of nature. In a world not made for him, the human must make his own way and has to learn to renounce any delusion of omnipotence and immortality. Atheism is the farewell to any doctrine and hope of salvation but also from any doctrine of disaster and prophecy of doom no matter whether these are related to an illusionary hereafter or this world. Human life means: to adapt one's life on a fleck of dust in the universe for a short time in a tolerable way – with dignity and decency and humour. Perhaps one day we will succeed in turning this globe into a habitable place!? Social conditions can certainly be improved step by step. Universal justice and the reconciliation of humankind and nature on the other hand will remain beyond reach. Heaven and hell, paradise and damnation are religious illusions, and not the guiding ideas of an atheist.

The two pillars of atheism have the same theoretical rank, they characterise two different types of critical analysis providing both a metaphysical and an empirical refutation of the belief in god.

The empirical evidence aims at the unsaved miserable condition of the world, the heart-rending, innocent suffering and dying of animals and humans which is not compatible with the belief in an all-gracious all-knowing all-effective and all-mighty god. The real reasons for atheism are found in reality itself, in the bloody and tearful history of the world of animals

and humans. How can an allegedly loving god to whom nothing is impossible let those he has created himself suffer in such unspeakable ways? He is either not all-mighty and cannot prevent the sufferings, or he is not all-gracious and does not want to prevent the sufferings. This dilemma in all its conceptual vividness was first noted by the Greek philosopher Epicurus approximately 300 BC. Much later the German poet Georg Büchner took up Epicurus' religious criticism by effectively calling the suffering the „rock of atheism“. His famous „Conversation amongst Philosophers“ in his drama „The death of Danton“ reads: „Get rid of the imperfect, only then you will be able to demonstrate god ... You can deny evil, but not pain ... Why do I suffer? This is the rock of atheism. The slightest flinch of pain even stirring in an atom, tears creation apart from top to bottom.“

But even assuming that one day there really will be a condition of bliss, as promised by John in the New Testament (21,4), that god will wipe every tear from their eyes and there shall be an end to death, and to mourning and crying and pain: will this prove that the infamous atheism was wrong after all and would this make god look right? No, because redemption in the next world is always too late. It cannot undo what has happened before. The irreversibility of time is the insurmountable border of any concept of omnipotence. No victim of earthquake, war, torture, murder, cancer or traffic will be prevented by religious redemption. In which acceptable sense can the experience of suffering be put right? The endearing image of those who long for perfect justice, for universal reconciliation remains unattainable, because even if there is compensation in the beyond, that which has happened before can never be undone.

In addition, according to the New Testament (to remain in the Christian sphere) only a minority of people will be blessed with redemption: „For many are invited, but few are chosen“, says the Gospel according to Matthew (22,14). Immediately after the quoted word from the Revelation of John, the „faithless“, „idolaters“ and „fornicators“ are threatened with eternal torture in „sulphurous flames“ (21,8).

And: If god is at all able to create a condition without pain and suffering, why does it have to be so late and not right from the beginning? Why let his own creatures first wade through a sea of blood and tears? The rational answer can only be: Instead of mystifying reality and take refuge into the „unfathomable will of God“ it is time to admit honestly: there is no god. Without the belief in god, reality is bitter, but with the belief in god, reality is bitter and absurd.

The second pillar of atheism does not deny god the saviour, but god the creator. It does not argue empirically, but metaphysically, i.e.: it goes beyond the sphere of the experience and spreads into that part of reality which is accessible only to the abstract mind. The here assumed metaphysics is a metaphysics without a golden ground, a non-religious philosophical theory of the world as a whole. According to the above explanation it inevitably leaves the sphere of empirical facts, without leaving the ground of rationality. It does not disappear into a „higher world“, but conceives that which cannot be grasped by the senses, but which is mentally imperative: the world in its entire coherence, the combination of parts and the whole, the relative and the absolute. The belief that the world has been created by a god can be refuted from within by considering the following:

The first question would be: What did god do before he created the world, if being a creator is supposed to be one of his eternal and inalienable characteristics? Did his creative powers lie waste? Why were they suddenly activated? Obviously, god must have changed: his unmutability, however, is one of this classical attributes. If he has changed, though, he is subject to time. There must have been a phase then in which god was no creator. The idea of the eternal creator who is supposed to have at some time created a world which is limited in time, cannot be conceived logically without contradicting itself. This caused the philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte to make his brusque remark that „the assumption of a creation“ is „the absolute and basic error of all false metaphysics“. This assumption „turns all thinking into wistful fantasies“ („Instructions to a blissful life“, sixth reading).

The second critical point stems from the question: why did god create the world at all, if he is supposed to be a perfect being in himself which in his majesty does not require anybody else? The biblical answer – god created the world as his counterpart and the human in his image – provokes the inevitable objection: if god does not do anything which does not make sense, he must previously have had a lack of something. But if he needed a counterpart, if he had a lack of something, he was not perfect in himself. Creationism and perfection are mutually exclusive. The same arises from the permanent religious-liturgical appeal that the creatures should praise and glorify their god, pray to him, thank him and fall on their knees before him. These admonitions which cannot deny their patriarchal-despotic origin – the absolute ruler on one side, the humble subjects on the other side – show again: god the creator does not like to be without his creatures' hallelujah. This is hardly a sign of internal and external independence or even perfection.

In order to prove himself as the creator, god needs the world; the world does not need god. It exists of its own accord, without having turned into anything, without being about to change into anything, and also absolutely indifferent towards its creatures' wellbeing and suffering.

One last consideration concerns the relation of spirit and matter. The belief in creation claims a pure spirit has produced something non-spiritual, something material. With this, we are again expected to sacrifice reason, to believe in a miracle. In fact, it is the other way round: the spirit is a product which has purely developed through a series of lengthy material events under favourable circumstances. The spirit is tied to highly complex brain structures. If these are damaged, the spirit will be damaged, too, if they die, the spirit will die, too.

The poetry of atheism

The process of depriving the world of its mystique which is in deed caused by atheism, frees the world of all false magic, but does not touch the real magic which is inherent in this world. After the poet Gottfried Keller had met the atheist thinker Ludwig Feuerbach he wrote the following: „How trivial the opinion currently seems to me that by abandoning the so-called religious ideas all poetry and elevated spirits disappear from this world! On the contrary! It seems to me that the world has become so immeasurably more beautiful and deeper, life more valuable and intensive, death more serious, giving much more cause for concern, really challenging me with all its might to fulfil my duties and to cleanse and satisfy my awareness, because I have no prospect to make up what I have failed to do anywhere in the world.“

To defy the distorted image of atheism being an enlightened world view lacking in feeling, I would like to conclude by quoting a poem. It is also by Gottfried Keller:

**During the cold days of winter time
Feeling life's gloom and finality
I've banned you completely from my mind,
Mirage of immorality.**

**Now that summer is aglow and gay
Now I can see I have done well.
I have crowned my head with a wreath today,
Delusion, though, lies in its shell.**

**I'm travelling on the stream so clear
Feeling its coolness on my hand.
And I look up to the bluest sphere
And search – no better fatherland.**

**Blooming lily, only now I know
The meaning of your soft-hued hail.
How ever much my heart aglow,
I know, like you, I'll pass away.**

**You lovely roses, I'm greeting thee,
In fleeting bliss of your life here.
Back from the boundless I turn with glee
Towards your gracefulness so dear!**

**Live life to the utmost, bloom and glow
Is what your scent and light teach me,
And then willing and gracefully bestow
Your life never again to be.**

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