

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.

Atheism
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

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.

of Atheism defined

1200 words
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

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.

What is atheism?