

CONFESSIONS OF A FAILED ATHEIST

A Personal Attempt to Embrace Atheism as True

Surely there is much to admire, and even envy, in the man or woman who is born and raised within the cozy cocoon of a secure religious faith, who never doubts the belief system he or she has been taught and then lived in the community, and who lives a life full of comfortable conviction and sense of divine purpose.

For them, the big questions are answered, and life is fairly straightforward.

For many of us, it is not so easy.

Having been raised in a family without any religion whatsoever, my search for truth did not start with a fixed standard, and I find there are always new ways of looking at a question, new ways to examine each new experience.

In our modern culture, atheism is becoming increasingly popular, and in fact is the norm in many circles. Ironically, whereas one used to criticize a religious person for passively accepting the faith they were taught, often it is now the atheist who has absorbed ideas from friends or the culture in general, and accepts them without reflection.

We should not be so easy on ourselves.

Unfortunately, the very idea of standing firm on any position and declaring it as “true,” is considered antiquated, even in bad taste. Now we just have opinions, and mine is as good as yours. We have become so tolerant of every view, that no position is worth defending, no truth worth promoting. In fact, the very idea of “truth” is often dismissed.

This reflection is for those who have not yet gone that far down the slippery slope of relativism. It is for those who think atheism is, or might be, true, and not just convenient. There is no doubt that many hold religious views primarily because they are “just convenient.” They too need to be challenged.

Is atheism true? A part of me wants this to be so.

Does not each one of us, at various times in our lives, wish there was no God? Do we not wish to be free from any power or purpose that demands a response, that imposes a set of moral values, that makes us accountable to something and/or someone outside of ourselves? Are we not correct that being haunted by feelings of guilt and obligation, which are so often associated with religious commitment, are at cross purposes with our innate drive for happiness? And does not the all too frequent violence of those who hold religious beliefs, as well as the chaos of their doctrines, undermine their credibility, or at least their attractiveness, as a source of ultimate truth?

However, is it not equally true that we sometimes yearn for a deeper purpose to our experiences, for a clear understanding of who we are and why we are here? For a sense of belonging to a stable belief system, for at least a sense of context for what we experience? Are we not sometimes envious of those who live wrapped in a sense of loving protection or guidance from a higher power? Does our heart not ache to give thanks, to someone or something, for the wonders and the beauty of this world?

For the purposes of this examination, the question at hand is whether atheism is true, as opposed to a theistic view. Doctrines according to a particular religion or denomination or sect are not part of this consideration. Stated most simply: A theist believes that a transcendent force or divine person created the universe, including man, and that the universe therefore has a direction and a purpose. The atheistic view would hold that the universe does not have any transcendent creator or purpose, but is governed strictly by material forces. It has sometimes been termed “scientific materialism.”

I realize many, if not most people prefer to adopt what could be called “atheism-lite”: rejecting any religious system and the existence of a personal God, but aware there are sometimes spiritual components to reality, without being able to explain them. Similarly, there are those who adopt “theism-lite”: accepting the warm and fuzzy comfort of living in a religious system with clear values and purpose, without really wanting to explore the demands and consequences that such a belief system might entail. Rather interestingly, these two camps are very similar - they both want the convenience of a belief system that does not make demands on them.

If our interest is seeking and finding a truth that is defensible and consistent, I do not see how “atheism-lite” is a viable option (or “theism-lite” for that matter), partly because it does not even try to be consistent, and partly because it leaves the

door wide open to at least some form of theism. Any non-material reality allowed inside the atheistic system is easily re-named as “spiritual,” or “god’s action,” and the moment that is allowed, atheism as a coherent belief system collapses. There cannot be even a little bit of God, even if abstract and remote, in an atheistic belief system.

From the outset it must be acknowledged that how we approach and resolve these questions is likely determined by our upbringing and our cultural environment. If we have been raised in a positive religious environment, we are very likely to embrace a religious view. If raised in a secular, or negative religious environment, an atheist position will likely seem most reasonable. It should be remembered that it cuts both ways: Atheists tend to be condescending and dismissive of religious arguments, while people of faith tend to assume atheistic arguments are shallow and self-serving.

Where does this leave us? Can we ever shed our cultural bias and the presumptions of our upbringing?

The short answer is, alas, no. But we can be more aware of our biases, and more mistrustful of our first reactions when presented with a different view. Hopefully, we make an effort to be more objective, and keep as our goal to find and live the truth about reality, and not just defend our intellectual or emotional turf.

My most recent, and certainly one of my most concerted efforts to embrace atheism occurred when my teenage son declared himself to be an atheist, despite attending a strongly Catholic college. To his credit, he said he reached this conclusion “because it is true.”

Little did he know that his announcement would set off an exploration, spanning well over a year, in which I decided to reflect on atheism more seriously, in fact to give it the benefit of the doubt, and to basically assume my son was right. I would put all religious and theistic views on the defensive, I would start with a bias against all the Christian views that still permeate our Western culture, and see where it led me.

My own journey would take me around the world, to explore other religious traditions, and include reading hundreds of books to see where truth could be unearthed.

Of course I had to read the “new atheists,” so I read a dozen books by Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and Daniel Dennett.

And since science had supposedly debunked many of the myths of religion, I read books by Steven Hawking, Charles Darwin, David Davies, Lawrence Krauss, Thomas Kuhn, William James, Lisa Randall, Paul Robbins, and others.

Or could the truth be clarified by reading non-Christian philosophers? So I read Frederik Nietzsche, Jean-Jacque Rousseau, Plato, Niccolo Machiavelli, John Stuart Mill, Sigmund Freud, and others.

And seeing how great men and women of history had lived was important to see how they handled the questions of truth and religion. So I read biographies of Albert Einstein, Thomas Jefferson, Napoleon Bonaparte, Genghis Khan, Catherine the Great, Galileo, Adolf Hitler, Abraham Lincoln, and George Washington, among others.

Or did the great classics hold a key to a more balanced and wise insight into reality that did not include a theistic view? So I read books by James Joyce, Albert Camus, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Herman Hesse, Marcel Proust, Ernest Hemingway, James Joyce, Charles Dickens, Franz Kafka, Thomas Mann, William Faulkner, Aldous Huxley, Voltaire, John Steinbeck, Joseph Conrad, Johann Wolfgang Goethe, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Gustave Flaubert, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and others.

Or did other religions outside of Christianity hold truths not often considered in the West? So I read numerous books on Islam, including the entire Koran. I read the Old Testament cover to cover, as well as the 13 Principal Upanishads. I read books by the Dalai Lama, and books on Hinduism and Buddhism and Taoism and Judaism, as well as The Tibetan Book of the Dead.

In total I read over 260 books, and am still reading. While it may seem like a prodigious list, reading so much only shows me how little I have covered, and how vast is the territory to uncover. My travels and reading have not been remotely comprehensive, but it is a start. It is an attempt to reach into the deposit of the world’s wisdom, and see if atheism makes sense. I urge you to make your own intellectual journey.

What follows are the stumbling blocks I kept coming up against, as I tried to make atheism “work.”

#1 Free Will

If the universe is nothing but materialistic forces impinging upon one another, I am unable to see how anything like free will can truly exist. Picture the vast expanse of the atoms of the universe as billiard balls, ricocheting off one another in various patterns. The direction and velocity of each ball is determined by the direction and force of the balls acting upon it, which, in turn are behaving in their pattern due to previous forces acting upon them...all the way back to the origin of the universe. Everything must be determined by mechanical forces. Humans are staggeringly complex, but we became so through natural forces of evolution, which is based on random, natural selection. Our brains appear to generate free thoughts, but in fact they are the firing of neurons caused by purely physical forces. In other words, if we were smart enough and could see the pattern of forces that brought any one of us to this exact moment, and even to each thought, we could predict our next thought and our next action based on what had gone before. There simply is no room for authentic free will in a mechanistic universe.

Daniel Dennett was honest enough to admit that we must “pretend” to have free will. Indeed we do, and indeed we must, as otherwise virtues like honesty, integrity, love, truth, hope and every other abstract value that humans treasure, lose their meaning. And the idea of true artistic creativity and inspiration is dead as well.

Of course using the billiard ball analogy is a gross simplification, especially given the new discoveries in the mysterious and quirky world of quantum mechanics. But increased complexity and indeterminacy, does not change the basic premise - free will can only be an illusion in a mechanistic universe. Also, the more I read about quantum mechanics, the more it lead me to conclude the universe has a playful and creative author, rather than the opposite, so the advances in physics at the quantum level seem to lead one towards theism rather than away from it.

I can only conclude, as an honest atheist, that free will is a complete illusion.

#2 Moral Standards / Universals / Value Judgments

Free will is mentioned first because its loss has far reaching consequences. First among them is the loss of our status as moral agents. If I am doing what I do

because I have to, based on material forces acting upon me, no matter how complex, then my apparent decisions are really not independent choices, and they thereby lose all moral weight. I cannot be blamed or praised for what I do, nor can I condemn the actions of anyone else. Machines, after all, cannot be saints or sinners.

We are left in the same position as with free will - we basically have to “pretend” that right and wrong exists. In order to avoid anarchy and chaos, we must impose some set of values on ourselves and others. And we will tend to justify this by saying that evolution created complex beings that need codes of behavior in order to help preserve our species.

But is not the idea of “preserving the species” a moral value in itself? We take it so for granted, but should not. Those ricocheting billiard balls cannot desire a certain combination, there is no constellation of billiards that can be deemed “worth preserving.” It may take real effort to shed our instinctive assumptions of value to see this, but it seems to me to be essential to being a consistent atheist. Animal life, human life, cosmic dust, or empty space are all equal in an atheistic universe. Whether a flow of atoms is at one instant the sexual abuse of a young child or, at another instant, the soaring song of a choir boy in a cathedral - it is still just a flow of atoms. There is no basis to make a moral calculation in favor of one over the other.

Yes, as an atheist I can just decide that some moral values are a good idea. Or I can just decide that evolution somehow created moral codes and we need to respect the ones our particular society developed. But what I am really saying is that, like free will, I am just pretending in order to get along. Further, whatever “code” I have chosen to live by cannot be binding, for me or society, as going forward evolutionary development could take it in an entirely new direction at any time. All action is descriptive, not prescriptive. And this means a government could impose its own idea of right action with impunity, and, on a personal level, nothing prevents me from changing or jettisoning my own moral code as my mood and situation demands. And indeed, I find myself tempted to do this all the time.

Ironically, saying we have no basis for affirming the importance of life, of self-preservation, also means we can’t do the opposite, and maintain our life on earth is *un*important. Take the very common, condescending view of our planet, well conveyed in a quote from Stephen Hawking:

“The human race is just a chemical scum on a moderate-sized planet, orbiting around a very average star in the outer suburb of one among a hundred billion galaxies. We are so insignificant that I can't believe the whole universe exists for our benefit.”

Note how the statement is loaded with judgment words: ”scum”, “moderate”, “average”, ”insignificant”, “benefit,” and “believe”. First, I did not know that theists believe that the universe exists only for our benefit, but thought it was an act of a Creator with his/her own purposes, many mysterious, but which include man. And I am not sure how being the only planet with life in the observed universe makes us *less* important rather than more important (it would seem to me the other way around), but my problem is at a deeper level.

As an atheist, I cannot make any judgment about this universe. It is as inappropriate to say humans are insignificant as to say they are central. If I am a consistent atheist I can only affirm what can be materially observed, and make no further judgments. But atheism leaves me in a quandry, for how do I even maintain the sweeping judgment that atheism is really “true”? Truth only has meaning if we admit to a lasting standard, a value we believe is important, which transcends ourselves.

I can only conclude, as an honest atheist, that moral standards and all value judgements are arbitrary and ultimately meaningless.

#3 Laws of Nature

As an atheist I must believe that the universe is without a cause and without a purpose. Creation develops because of natural forces that generate the diversity we see, with scientific laws of nature governing the direction of change. When it comes to life forms, natural selection determines the outcome, and any random genetic change that occurs that supports the continuation of an organism is likely to be perpetuated, while those that are harmful will be rejected.

These “laws” that drive the universe and the “laws” that allowed the development of life are very complex, very precise, and very steady. They seem to apply to the entire known universe. We take this so for granted it is nearly impossible to see what can only be described as miraculous. Why would the behavior of an electron around an atom in my body behave the exact same way as it will on Mars, or in the sun, or in a distant galaxy, simultaneously, and across billions of years? Why have the laws of nature that allowed life to form and develop been

completely consistent the world over? How could it be that the staggering energy and pattern of activity locked inside every single atom never slows down, going back billions of years to the creation of the universe?

It is indisputable that evolution of planets and of life took billions of years, and was incremental. But complexity would increase only because there are these innumerable, interlocking laws of nature that do not change, do not run down, and do not vary from place to place, and which seem to work in concert to allow life to form and to complexify. These laws had to exist from the instant the Big Bang occurred. How can such orderly laws be embedded in the nature of a lawless, random universe? Such immutable laws do not seem to remove the need for creator, a law-maker, but to suggest one.

Finally, these “laws” of nature seem to be what drives increased complexity and the creation of life, but as an atheist, I do not see how I can value complexity over simplicity.

As a consistent atheist, I cannot find an explanation for the laws of nature.

#4 Life

It could be predicted that the question of the origin of life would come up in this discussion. But I hope to present a somewhat unique angle on the question.

We tend to have rather fuzzy thinking about the origins of life. We imagine that it was so long ago, and took so long, that somehow it just “happened” - beginning very simply, in some kind of primordial pool. And while the once popular theory - that amino acids, the building blocks of life, were zapped into existence when lightning traveled through a methane atmosphere — has been discredited, it seems only a matter of time before a more accurate theory is advanced and at least theoretically verified.

And as an atheist I would sneer at the absurd belief of the some theists, called creationists, who think God just snapped his fingers and a fish appeared that was gently placed in the sea, and then another snap of the divine fingers and a cow appears that was gently placed on land.

There are few creationists left, and most theists now agree that life has grown slowly, over time, following the laws of natural selection. A point of agreement between theists and atheists! But what would a theist say actually happened

when life first appeared on earth? Not a big flash and a big fish appears, but maybe a little flash and a little cluster of amino acids appear? Forgive my teasing, but it seems to me that most theists and atheists should still agree - in the very beginning there was probably not anything magical or sudden - no flashes or snap of the divine fingers.

The truth is that neither side actually knows exactly how life first began. Science appears to have ruled out any idea of a sudden creation of complex life, but it has not come any closer to explaining the ultimate source of life.

Let us consider a thought experiment. Imagine we could place a video camera back in time to the period when life did in fact first begin. OK, run the tape...

What would we see?

As mentioned above, let us assume no sudden flashes. This is a triumph over the creationist, but not over the theist. If you give it real thought, the gap between life and non life is just as enormous, regardless of the scale or the speed of its appearance. You cannot create a few "building blocks" of life and then, somehow, those building blocks decide to coordinate, and remain in steady formation, and, most miraculous, "decide" to replicate. And more miraculous, "decide" to replicate over and over in repeatable ways. All without any plan or preference for life or order, which is a core belief of any respectable atheist.

If the absurdity is not clear, take it back to the atomic level, or level of billion balls knocking against each other. As an atheist, I have to believe that at some point an inanimate atom, or collection of many inanimate atoms (a totally *random* collection), "said" to another random collection of atoms, "let's stay together in a hugely complex pattern, and let's start creating a code so that will allow us to replicate repeatedly." This would be the conversation for even the most primitive forms of life that can be contemplated, which involve billions of atoms. And this is of course billions of years before even the most primitive "language", or chemical communication existed.

I see no way to defeat this thought experiment of imagining a "conversation" between clusters of atoms - unless they had some pre-programmed inclination to begin forming, and then replicating. And pre-programming implies intelligence, which implies purpose, and we are back in the theist camp.

There seems to be no answer about the creation and complexification of life except to say, “that’s just the way it is.” Not a very satisfying or scientific approach in the noble search for Truth! And we would have to say the same about another astounding development: namely the human’s ability to understand and discuss these “laws” at all. A collection of atoms (those of the human) able to decipher and predict the behavior of atoms outside itself, using non-material tools such as calculus, causality, and host of other abstract “laws”. I find it very difficult to fit this ability into a purely mechanistic and random universe.

Finally, nearly all scientific materialists presume the sense of saying organisms mutate in order to increase their chances of survival. Self preservation is an obvious and nearly universal instinct. In fact, many young people today might suggest that nearly all human complexity, with its exalted talk of love and romance, and community values, and moral standards, all just comes down to perpetuation of the species.

As mentioned earlier, why is continuation of a species good? Why would a mechanistic universe care if my genetic code continued? Self preservation is a basic drive, but only valuable or good if something in the universe deems it as a good. But before life began there was no such being, and after it began no such being until the very very recent appearance of human beings. As an atheist I can observe “Life Is,” but I cannot make the moral judgment “Life is Good.”

This also seems to challenge the edifice of natural selection. Being honest, there really is no “selection,” as there is no agent making that decision, just random change. And if the fundamental force at work is continuation of a species, why would any species develop beyond the most basic life form? Isn’t a simple virus or bacteria much more able to survive and proliferate than a life form that requires locomotion, wings, lungs, eyeballs, sex organs, or clothes in winter? Isn’t a lichen or amoeba better adapted to the basic laws of natural selection than any human, with all our needs and complexities? Isn’t in this sense the ant and the cockroach, not to mention a virus or bacteria, “superior” to the human? They certainly have lived much longer and in a broader variety of environments. As a consistent atheist, I think this is what I must conclude.

What about life on other planets? Atheists seem to relish the idea of finding life elsewhere, or showing that life on this planet started from elsewhere, such as David Davies’ suggestion that life was brought here by asteroids from Mars that collided with the earth. But such a theory does not challenge the theist position of

a Creator creating life - it shifts the source, not the cause. Doesn't it do the Creator more credit to create many forms of life all over the universe, instead of on just one planet? The puzzle is not that life exists on only one planet, or on a billion, it is the fact that it exists at all.

The anthropic principle, the idea that science appears to have uncovered laws of nature that are very finely and delicately balanced to create life, seems to me to create another legitimate challenge to the atheist position. One current and popular atheist response is to say that there are an infinitude of universes, so ours is not special at all, just the one that happens to have life as we experience it. Again, this shifts the scale of life and creation, but not its ultimate cause. How does adding theoretical universes solve the riddle of this real one we actually experience? How is a creator of infinite universes less credible than the creator of one? And isn't atheism supposed to be grounded in scientific observation and fact? Yet by definition we cannot know or experience or prove the existence of anything truly outside our own universe.

There have been various arguments to prove that life or intelligence of some kind can occur at random, as long as enough time is added to the equation. One is reminded of the very famous example of putting a thousand monkeys at a thousand typewriters for a thousand years - would it be mathematically possible for even one, short Shakespeare poem to arise spontaneously? Atheists might say yes, theists would likely say no. But both miss the point. We are taking one of the most highly organized life forms in the known universe (a monkey), and combining him with a typewriter (which is the creation of the *most* developed creature in the known universe, the human), and adding a hypothetical that those two supremely developed creations could stay in an organized relationship (monkeys-typing) for a thousand years. In other words, the thought experiment *starts* at a point that is at the very end of the evolutionary chain, in order to try to answer how the chain began. Finally, at the deepest level, even if those monkeys did type even a short poem, there was nothing in the universe that would consider a poem valuable, or beautiful, or intelligent, or poetic. It is only humans who would recognize a poem as a poem. We have again projected our values and standards backward in time.

The most common defense of the complexification of life through random selection, is that it takes a very very long time. Assuming natural selection is accurate in describing the development of life (it is certainly accurate in describing the development within species), we overlook difficulties in the theory by wrapping them in the thick mists of "millenia." Of course we don't see half evolved

eyes and wings all around us, any more than half humans/half apes, but it is all because developments happen at such a staggeringly slow pace.

Why does slowness (or speed) prove something to be purely materialistic? Let us again set up that hypothetical video camera in a primordial pool 3.5 to 4 billion years ago. Suppose in one case a fish develops before our eyes in 10 years, but in the second case the exact same fish appears in 10 million years. Same location, same material forces at work, same fish produced, same development - only one thing is different - TIME. But time is fundamentally neutral, it does not add material, or intelligence, or direction, to the situation at hand. Yes, from our human experience development of complex organisms takes a great deal of time, but is there an a priori reason this must be so? We again project our current experience back upon creation as a whole, adding in intelligence and purpose all along the way.

As an atheist, I remain stumped in trying to explain how something came from nothing, in this case, how life (and the intelligence and order it displays) can really spring from non-life (assuming the universe did not have some ordered or intelligent force behind its creation).

The dilemma I find myself in as an atheist is this: if my atheistic universe allows only blind material forces, then how can I account for the intelligence and purpose that seems to lie behind the existence of life? Here it seems the theist is at an advantage, as he or she can theorize material AND non-material realities are at play in the universe, and thus at least in theory can account for the existence of planets (pure matter), plants (simple life), animals humans (conscious life), angels (pure spirits), and even a God or gods (uncreated spirit).

#5 Consciousness

Trying to explain how life came to be is one thing, and at least with fuzzy thinking and talk of billions of years of incremental change, it can seem plausible. But how, or more important, why, would a collection of inanimate atoms combine to create consciousness, a sense of "I-ness", an ability to reflect on ones own self and the world around us?

We most likely imagine our brains as a kind of hologram - atoms collected in such a way that they can project a sense of "me-ness." This projection remains stable every time we wake up, and regardless of the fact that all the cells in our body completely replace themselves every seven years or so. And the sense of self

remains completely intact even if we lose a limb, or two, or three, or four, or lose our sense of sight, sound, and so on.

Looking backwards we may be able to see the value to such a creature, but again, try to conceive of random mutations resulting in choosing to create such a being. Sorry, random mutations can't "choose," so it must have just been a random mutation?

We will again invoke the trick of time, as if it somehow adds to the equation. I cannot see how it does, nor can I fit a self-conscious being in a purely materialist universe. Billiard balls can't think. And even trillions of them in fancy structures are not one step closer to creating one thought or any sense of consciousness. Yet here we are.

One can try to say that, again through blind evolution, the universe has created immaterial things like thoughts and concepts and consciousness. But if I do that, I appear to be returning to some form of theism, because a stone *can't* produce a thought....there must have been that "thought potential" hidden in the stone, or in the universe somewhere, which is exactly what a theist would argue.

So my atheist side feels boxed into a corner. Either I maintain that consciousness, thoughts, the sense of "I", and concepts like beauty and truth and love are purely and only physical things, which directly contradicts my experience, or I concede that there may be something beyond the material, but that is not allowed in the atheistic system I am trying to defend.

Using an analogy, the atheist position is like stating that this universe is made of only black marbles (physical matter). Discovering even one white, or gray marble would prove such a theory is wrong. Now an theist would not argue against the existence of the black marbles, in fact they could be predominant in the observable universe, but would maintain there are also white marbles (spiritual, non-physical realities). It seems to me this puts the theist at a great advantage, because the exact ratio of black and white is not known, and if one is honest, the mix of black and white is rather perplexing, and open to endless debate. As a pure atheist, I have only my black marbles, and evidence to the contrary has to be dismissed as fantasy.

#6 Spiritual/Religious Experiences

The analogy with the marbles relates well to the consideration of spiritual experiences. If atheism is true, then all the religious and spiritual experiences of all people in all times, are 100% illusions. Every one. Even one valid spiritual experience would dissolve the atheist position; the stakes are all or nothing.

We must be prepared to have all churches, mosques, synagogues, temples, and shrines torn down, every book on spiritual or religious topics burned, every mention of the non-material world banned from school and public discourse. I am not trying to encourage violence or just be inflammatory and intolerant - most of us would agree to leave all these things but only out of a desire to avoid unpleasantness, not because we thought they had anything of substance. If I was consistent in wanting humanity to embrace truth, I would think I should prefer they all be dissolved rather than encouraged.

Theists are able to take a much more tolerant position. One could reject some experiences as auto-suggestions, some visions as mere chemical imbalances in the brain due to, say, poor diet, some prophecies as fabrications to meet emotional needs, etc. but *some* experiences might be deemed true encounters with the spiritual, non-material world. Nor does theism conflict with scientific progress and the theory of evolution - it would only affirm that science does not have the means to measure or pass judgment on the spiritual world.

We could plausibly conclude theism is a confused mess, given the plethora of conflicting religious experiences and dogmas. And we can charge that the variety of religious experience proves that none can be true, as they seem to make claims that cancel each other out. And we are almost certainly right that some experiences claimed to be spiritual are nothing but fabrications of an excited mind or heart.

Yet the blizzard of spiritual experiences and religious traditions spanning all of human history seem to suggest evidence for at least something beyond the material.

Then there is the disturbing evidence of natural selection. If natural selection is what determines what attributes a given organism keeps or rejects, then how could natural selection so constantly produce humans that so adamantly insist there is a non-material component to existence? Put even more starkly: How could something that does not exist and never has, be so consistently experienced (at least subjectively) within a materialist universe? Religious faith and practice ap-

appears to be a deeply seated instinct - how or why did it get there, and why is it usually at the core of every civilization? Are we going to reject the results of natural selection, the process which we say shapes all of human development and progress?

Atheism can be very attractive, but I hesitate to suggest my grasp on reality is so certain and so superior that I can condemn every spiritual experience in human history, as well as every religious system.

Again, for the theist it is not an all or nothing game - they can pick and choose their version of spiritual truth. But as a consistent atheist, I must reject every spiritual experience, within myself and down through history.

#7 Death

I have trouble reconciling the human reaction to death with the atheistic position. Look anywhere in human history, or within your circle of friends and family, and death is treated with horror, shock, outrage, deep sorrow, bewilderment, a sense of betrayal, and so on. This, for a process that comes to every single living thing. - always has, always will.

Nearly all the great literature of the world deals with death in some way. So do cheap novels and shallow movies. Death is a really, really big deal, and when it comes unexpectedly, or to an innocent child, those who experience the loss of a loved one can be destroyed by depression, hopelessness, and despair.

Why is life so cherished? We are merely random creatures thrown up on the beach of this planet, generated by the blind workings of mechanical forces. And any reading of history makes plain that large swaths of humanity have lived lives full of suffering. Yet suicide is almost always considered a crime or a profound mental disorder. Why would this be? Why do we not respect the decision of people to find, on balance, that their life is no longer worth living and have the ability to end it when and as they choose? Given the track record of suffering across history, why wouldn't we see life as more of a curse than a blessing, and celebrate death? Shouldn't suicide - dying on your own terms with no prolonged suffering - be the most common form of death, and welcomed by most cultures?

Belief in life after death is another persistent and inexplicable fixation throughout history. Why would we hope for a different life, or a better one, or a

longer one, or a resurrected one? With so little evidence such a thing exists, and with so little evidence life is anything other than a rather miserable and short affair, why do we not more gladly exit this life? Why is death not as natural and simple as seeing a leaf fall from the tree?

#8 Beauty

Beauty is one of the great intangibles of life. Everyone is attracted to it, everyone sees it around them, whether in people, music, art, or nature. It is a quality equally valued by the atheist and the theist. But what it is is very hard to define.

One thing for sure, it is a sum that is greater than its parts. Music, beloved by all, and of endless variety, is, from a physical point of view, just patterns of vibrations in the air, hitting our eardrums at various intervals. Not unlike poetry - ink on a page or spoken vibrations in the air. Landscapes are just piles of dirt and rock, a sleeping child is just an collection of cells at rest.

But no one really buys this reductionist approach. There is much more to it. What? As an atheist, I feel that I have to “look the other way” — enjoy beauty without really being able to understand it or praise it. Once again, “it just is.” Beauty seems to be a kind of truth, but it is not of the shape that can fit intellectually into the framework of my atheistic beliefs.

#9 Suffering

This reflection is not intended to highlight weaknesses in the theist position, but there is little doubt that one of the aces in the argument against theism is the existence of evil and of suffering. And not just that it exists, but is rampant, that injustice and cruelty and intense suffering saturate human history.

But doesn't this charge have a double edge, for the simple reason that it presupposes a moral standard that we intuitively know we have the right to impose on raw experience? As an atheist, I cannot really explain why seeing a six year girl raped and then murdered is evil. Do not all organisms die? Do not some die younger than others? And all of existence is just the march of blind, physical forces, so an early death, by my standards, cannot be called “evil” or “unjust” or even “untimely.” What is, is.

And what of the suffering and pain brought on by injustice and cruelty?

Most religions offer some kind of resolution, often by proposing there is an after-life (as clearly ultimate justice is not in this one!), or by pointing out that real free-will could result in the possibility of choosing evil, but as an atheist I have rejected free will and any after-life, so I must say there is no chance for final justice, no final peace, no offer of hope. When you die, you die, and if your life was full of horrendous suffering, too bad. Your first-born child is horrifically deformed and requires a life of constant care? Too bad.

So the human is born with an innate sense of justice, but can never see it realized. Then how did we develop this sense? We must suffer what fate dishes out to us and those we love, and there is no hope whatsoever of anything different. The human seems to be the most badly developed organism, as its core hopes and beliefs are completely out of step with the reality of the universe it inhabits.

All through history religions struggle to explain the mysterious reality of evil and suffering, but from an atheist perspective it seems I cannot even account for calling suffering wrong or evil evil.

Conclusion

One of the attractions to atheism is the belief that it is more honest in confronting life as we find it. I do not have to theorize a future life to balance the scales of justice, or create a personal God who had a purpose in creating life, consciousness, and beauty. I accept life as I actually experience it.

Or do I? The more stumbling blocks I encountered, the more it seemed atheism was mired in faith: faith that the addition of massive amounts of time is all that is needed to allowed life to spring from non-life, faith that life exists on other planets, and faith in an infinitude of hypothetical universes. I want rational answers based on this planet, the one place we have real, physical, scientific experience. I am uncomfortable with a “faith-based” atheism - I want to embrace an atheism that is true to its own principles.

Yet the core principal of scientific materialism does not seem to square with my daily experience or with the experience I had read about in all those books or saw during my travels. I am uncomfortable “pretending” that free will exists, tolerating the illusions about spirituality most people believe, or faking the hand-wringing over death that I know, as an atheist, should not be a big deal. Saying that universal laws of nature “just happened,” that consciousness “just happened”, that life itself “just happened”, leaves me feeling less than scientific. Science uses

observable data, and then tests a theory to see if the data behaves in the way the theory predicted. But the data of my own experience, and what I see of the human experience through history, does not seem to fit the theory of atheism.

Another attraction to atheism is that it is broad minded and open-minded, whereas religious people are often portrayed as fixated on a particular set of dogmas and want to impose them on others. Yet my atheistic ideas seem to lead me to very intolerant positions. Whereas most people can reasonably argue about which religious experiences are authentic or which religious system is superior, I have to declare all as complete illusions. Whereas many can reasonably argue on just how many human decisions are really free, and under what conditions, I have to declare free will is impossible. Whereas people can reasonably argue about which truths are universal or what constitutes a proper theory of beauty, I must declare all these abstractions are just physical forces. Whereas most people can reasonably argue about how humans can best cope with issues of suffering, injustice, and death, I must declare there is no possibility for ultimate resolution or redemption — that life, death, suffering, or, for that matter, nothingness, are all of equal value.

It seems clear that for many who call themselves an atheist, what they mean is they reject a particular version or versions of theism. That is easy to do, as many religious beliefs seem contradictory, or primitive, or absurd. But to be a true atheist, it seems I must reject all that is non-material. I cannot pick and choose, keeping the non-material values and experiences I like, and rejecting those, say in a particular religious systems, that I do not.

Perhaps the point that brought me to “failing” as an atheist, was the realization that whereas a theist could answer the above nine points in a variety of ways, perhaps answering some very competently and others with less surety, as an atheist I had to be 100% correct in rejecting every point. A theist could be right about their view on just 4 or 5 of the above points, but I would have to be 9-0. In other words, as mentioned previously, one single spiritual experience that is proven as legitimate, demolishes atheism. A theist can propose a variety of attributes to their god or gods, saying their god is distant, impersonal, loving, vengeful, domineering, capricious and so on, and in varying degrees according to their theistic system. But I am left in a very tight corner indeed, accepting nothing that is non-material.

And the things humans of all ages cherish, things like friendship, honesty, integrity, love, loyalty, kindness, service, compassion, joy, hope, gratitude, beauty,

humor — of what precise collection of atoms are each of these concepts? How are they explained within my atheistic framework?

In discussions with others, it is clear that very few people really try to be “pure” atheists, or to carefully lay out the principles that underly an atheistic position. More often I find people rejecting some version of the theism of Christianity, Judaism, or Islam, but retaining an acknowledgment of at least some spiritual realities. As mentioned above, this strikes me as quite dangerous, because once we accept the Trojan horse of any spiritual reality, we are already lost to the Theist camp, feeling comfortable only because our “spirituality” is less personal and thus seemingly less threatening.

My search is for an atheism that is consistent, and accepts the consequences of its own principles. I do know that atheists can be more admirable and noble and compassionate than a devoutly religious person, but in this case they seem to be living in a way they cannot explain, out of step with their own core beliefs, almost “in spite” of them. My hope has always been for a system of thought that supports, and is consistent with, ones behavior.

In the end, it is not my family tradition or cultural formation that leads me to confess I am a “failed” atheist, but experience itself, both within my mind and heart, in my experience of the outer world, and in my understanding of history and science. Some would say atheism is grounded in direct experience, theism in beliefs that cannot be proven. For me it seems the opposite. As much as I might sometimes like for the theory of atheism to be true, that theory is pounded at relentlessly, like waves of the sea, by daily, lived experience. My atheistic aspirations are ground down, moment by moment, by the concrete experience of daily life. Every moment of every day I experience free will, belief in right and wrong, consciousness, beauty, sorrow over death and suffering, as well as hope, but find for these realities no place in the atheistic framework.

Where have I gone wrong in my attempt to embrace the atheist view as true?