

1 **Naturalism/Atheism**

- Module: Worldviews
- Lesson 22

2 **Some Recommended Sources on Naturalism and Atheism**

- James Sire, *The Universe Next Door*
- Frank Turek, *Stealing from God*
- Albert Mohler, *Atheism Remix, A Christian Confronts the New Atheists*
- Alvin Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies*
- Robert Stewart, ed., *The Future of Atheism*, [a “dialogue,” via various authors, between leading Christian and Atheist thinkers]
- Thomas Nagel, (atheist philosopher) *Mind and Cosmos*
- Rick Harvey, *Only a Universe, or a World Too?* (unpublished paper)
(<http://www.persuasivefaith.org/resources/Papers/PRESENTATION.Naturalism.pdf>)

3 **Understanding Atheism**

- Atheism: a (without), theism (belief in God)
- Atheism is distinct from skepticism or agnosticism.
 - Skepticism —“I doubt that God exists.”
 - Agnosticism —“I don't/can't know if God exists.”
- Atheism is the belief that the proposition “God exists” is false. (i. e. God does not exist). (see *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*)
 - Atheism is not simply, as some claim, “lack of belief in God.”
 - Atheism is the affirmation that the claim that God exists is false.
 - As an affirmation, atheism, just as theism, bears a burden of proof. (When something is affirmed or asserted, the one affirming is obliged to provide reasons to believe it is true.)

4 **Thinking About Psalm 14:1 (and 53:1)**

- “The fool has said in his heart there is no God.”
 - In the Old Testament the word fool is used with respect to moral rather than intellectual or cognitive deficiency.
 - The fool is not one who does not reason or is unable to reason, but one who reasons wrongly.
 - He is one who casts off the fear of God and lives independently of him.

5 **Thinking About Psalm 14:1 (and 53:1)**

- Hence, the atheist—
 - Is not one who is mentally deficient, ignorant, or lacking in intellectual or cognitive abilities.

- He is one whose moral choice to be independent of God leads him to reason and live in ways that either practically or intellectually forget or deny God.
- Two kinds of atheists:
 - Metaphysical: One who overtly denies God.
 - Practical: One who, though tacitly acknowledging God's existence, lives his life as though God didn't exist.
 - In our discussion today we will be considering the first kind of atheist.

6 How Does the Atheist Argue for His or Her Position?

- There are few affirmative arguments offered for atheism.
 - The problem of evil: Given the existence of evil, God as defined by theism cannot logically, or probably doesn't exist.
 - Aside from the failure of the problem of evil, as seen in our earlier lessons, there is a strong argument for God based on the existence of evil.
 - The "evolutionary" model of belief in God: Religious belief in God evolved as societies and cultures progressed.
 - Aside from the evidentiary failure of the evolutionary model, this argument commits the genetic fallacy. (How a belief originated is not an argument for its truth or falsehood.)
 - The evil which religious believers do: The evil of religious believers demonstrates the falsehood of religious belief.
 - This argument commits the ad hominem [against the man] fallacy. (An attack on the person does not address the truth or falsehood of what the person believes.)

7 How Does the Atheist Argue for His or Her Position?

- Most atheist arguments are attempts to counter the arguments for theism.
- Be careful not to be misled by two faulty claims atheists frequently make:
 - "If there were a god, he would do [such and such]."
 - Such a statement is a theological assertion (claiming to know the mind of God or what he would do in a particular situation).
 - What basis does the atheist have to make theological affirmations about what God would or would not do in a given situation?
 - Apart from revelation and/or faith, how can a finite being know what an omniscient and perfectly wise being would do in a given situation?

8 How Does the Atheist Argue for His or Her Position?

- "I don't need to provide evidence or reasons for my claim that God does not exist, since you can't prove a negative."
- This is an oft repeated canard which is actually not true.

- It is possible to prove (beyond reasonable doubt) many negatives.
(e. g. There is no elephant in this room. There is no star orbiting the earth.)
- Note: Simply saying “I’m not convinced by your argument” does not constitute a rebuttal or refutation of the argument, or defeat the argument, or prove the counter argument.
 - Hence, for the atheist to say that the arguments for theism are not persuasive is not an argument for atheism, nor is it a refutation of theism.

9 **Atheism and Naturalism, What’s the Difference?**

- Atheism refers to one’s belief specifically about God. (a theological belief)
- Naturalism refers to one’s belief system about reality. (a worldview)
 - Theoretically at least, one might be a naturalist without being an atheist.
 - It does not appear likely that one would be an atheist without being a naturalist.

10 **Three Kinds of Naturalists**

- A student of, or expert in, nature, (e.g. wildlife, botany, biology, etc.) or artist of nature (e.g. photographer, painter, etc.).
- An ontological naturalist: One who believes in the philosophy of naturalism.
 - Philosophical naturalism: “Reality is exhausted by the spatiotemporal world of physical objects accessible in some way to the senses and embraced by our best scientific theories. There is nothing which is not accessible to the senses.”
(Moreland and Craig, Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview, p. 184)
- A methodological naturalist. One who employs only naturalism in his or her method of doing scientific enquiry.
 - Methodological naturalism: A method of practicing science in which one precludes the consideration of any non-material explanations of causation. (The methodological naturalist may, or may not, believe or acknowledge the existence of non-material realities such as God.)

11 **Naturalism’s Formative Historical Events**

- The Renaissance (14-15th centuries)
 - A period of exciting progress and discovery in the natural world. Increased confidence in human reason and rationality.
- The Reformation (16th century)
 - The monolithic authority of the church was successfully challenged. A period of “religious wars” raised doubts regarding the merits of religious beliefs.
 - If Rome could be challenged, why not the Bible itself?
- The Enlightenment (17th-18th centuries)

- A shift in authority, from revelation accompanied with human reason, to autonomous human reason independent of revelation.
- A period of heretofore unseen destabilization.

12 **The Flowering of Naturalism: The Enlightenment (17-18th centuries)**

- Key Enlightenment personalities:
 - Early (typically Christian) thinkers such as—
 - Rene Descartes: (“I think therefore I am.”) A strong influence towards rationalism. Mind a subcategory of matter.
 - John Locke: Elevated reason over revelation. (Though still maintaining that our reasoning capacities were God-given.)
 - Later (frequently deists or atheists) thinkers such as—
 - Voltaire, Rousseau, la Mettrie, the French Philosophes, et. al.
 - Removed Locke’s “God-given” from reason, leaving only human reason.

13 **Key Features of the Enlightenment**

- The conviction that human reason was sufficient to know all things knowable.
- An overt assault (especially in the French Enlightenment) on religion, particularly on Christianity as it was expressed through Catholicism.
 - Criticism of religion’s abuses.
 - Attacks on the bible.
 - A caricature of history. (Many criticisms still leveled at Christian history today are repetitions of old historically discredited Enlightenment canards.)

14 **The “Enlightenment Project”**

- To free humanity from superstition, and to found a philosophy and civilization on rational inquiry, empirical evidence, and scientific discovery.
(This approach to civilization is called modernism.)

15 **Post-Enlightenment Era**

- The fading of the “modernist” experiment.
 - The French revolution.
 - The trenches of World War I.
- The establishment of Naturalism: The belief that the natural world is all there is, and that all can be explained by natural cause and effect.
- The publishing of The Origin of the Species provided a scientific “story” to undergird the naturalist worldview.

16 **Understanding Naturalism**

- What is ultimate reality?
 - The cosmos is all there is.
 - “The cosmos is all that is or ever was or ever will be.” -Carl Sagan-
 - Denies the existence of non-natural reality.
- The external world?
 - The cosmos is a closed system. It is not open to influences by a transcendent being.
- (How could one ever know that there is no reality beyond that which is accessible to the five senses?)

17 Understanding Naturalism

- What is humanness?
 - Humans are merely complex physical matter and energy.
 - Consciousness and thoughts are merely the “secretions” or epiphenomena of the brain.
 - Human significance, such as it is, finds its source in the fact that we are the most advanced in the evolutionary process, possessing self-consciousness and moral awareness.
 - But what happens when we are out-evolved?
 - How does random, undirected change instill significance? What is significance?
- What is death?
 - Death is the extinction of life, annihilation. (No afterlife)
 - Nothing but our molecules and atoms endure past death.

18 Understanding Naturalism

- How do we know?
 - We are capable of knowing all there is to know through our innate autonomous reason. (But how do we know even this?)
 - Consciousness, cognition, and values are evolved, hence they are the product of totally random mutations and natural selection. (How can we have any confidence in what they produce?)
- What is the source of ethics and morals?
 - Ethics and morals are a product of evolutionary processes.
 - Hence, morality is also evolving.
 - The new trends in morality are, by definition, superior to the old, out-evolved beliefs and morals.
 - Subjective rather than objective.
 - Atheism/naturalism cannot justify morals and ethics apart from the autonomous individual.

19 Understanding Naturalism

- What is the meaning of history?
 - History is typically viewed as linear (going somewhere).
 - Change is typically viewed as improvement due to evolution.
 - History has no purpose, no “end” in view. The future entails a cold, dark, dead cosmos.
- What core commitments does naturalism imply?
 - There are no implied core commitments in naturalism. (Other than survival of the fittest.)
 - Each person can choose for himself or herself how they want to live. That is the highest “value.”

20 **Some Christian Responses to Naturalism**

- The problem of causation. (What was the first, non-material cause? How does one account for free will?)
- How can reason and consciousness be trusted? (Our cognitive capacities are evolved for survival, not for truth.)
- What is the source of information and intentionality?
- Are values truly subjective? Are there none that are universally true?
- If evil is real, then it appears atheistic naturalism must be false.
- There can be no science without the non-material assumptions upon which science is conducted. (More on this in our upcoming module on science.)

21 **Next Week:**

- Continuity (Monism)