

# Atheism and Spirituality

One Person's View  
(Building Your Own Theology)



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This morning, I want to cover what I mean by atheism. I will then try to explain my concept of spirituality. I will try to explain why I do not consider spirituality as such incompatible with atheism.

Let's start with a quote from Gerrard Winstanley, from his "1The Law of Freedom", published in 1652:

"While men are gazing up to Heaven, imagining after a happiness, or fearing a Hell after they are dead, their eyes are put out, that they see not what is their birthright."

Gerrard was quite an unorthodox character and organized the "Digger Communists" an early attempt at land reform.

The following is from the Skeptics Dictionary, an on-line web source:

*Atheism is traditionally defined as disbelief in the existence of God. As such, atheism involves active rejection of belief in the existence of God.*

*However, since there are many concepts of God and these concepts are usually rooted in some culture or tradition, atheism might be defined as the belief that a particular word used to refer to a particular god is a word that has no reference. Thus, there are as many different kinds of atheism as there are names of gods.*

*Some atheists may know of many gods and reject belief in the existence of all of them. Such a person might be called a polytheist. But most people who consider themselves atheists probably mean that they do not believe in the existence of the local god. For example, most people who call themselves atheists in a culture where the Judeo-Christian-Islamic God (JCIG) dominates would mean, at the very least, that they deny that there is an Omnipotent and Omniscient Providential Personal Creator of the universe. On the other hand, people who believe in the JCIG would consider such denial tantamount to atheism.<sup>2</sup> Baruch de Spinoza (1632-1677), for example, defined God as being identical to Nature and as a substance with infinite attributes. Many Jews and Christians considered him an atheist because he rejected both the traditional JCIG and the belief in personal immortality. Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) was also considered an athe-*

*ist because he believed that all substances are material and that God must therefore be material. Yet, neither Spinoza nor Hobbes called themselves atheists.*

To the extent that religion entails belief in a supernatural power, atheism is not a religion. Atheism is a religion in that it is based on a set of beliefs. Specifically, belief that there is no sentient being behind creation.

Why did I become an atheist?

Let's consider some of the traditional arguments against atheism:

The first I want to look at is Pascal's wager:

Blaise Pascal was a mathematician in the mid 1600's. Following a carriage accident in 1654 he became quite religious and at some point posed his famous wager:

“Pascal's reasoning was that since nothing is known for certainty, the christian faith may be as good as any other belief, and since the possible gain from belief is so much greater than the possible gain from unbelief, christianity was the bet that gave the highest gain.” or as commonly rephrased “if you are wrong, you will not lose anything from being a theist, while atheists who are wrong will go to hell”

The wager has been refuted from many points, however, my two favourite counter-arguments are:

1. The fallacy of bifurcation: Pascal assumes that there are only two choices: atheism vs christianity. If this be true then the odds are 50/50. Throughout history and the world, however, there have been countless different variations of god and gods and even many Christian variants consider all other variations heresies. Even the first commandment, “Thou shalt have no other god before me” seems to be quite explicit that it's much better to have no god than to choose the wrong one.
2. The error of no loss in belief: Pascal make the assumption that there is zero cost in religious belief. This neglects the time consumed in following religious

practice, or the loss of harmless pleasures if you take up one of the more intolerant variants that reject so much. An even greater loss occurs if one finds oneself with an otherwise harmless predisposition that the bible condemns as an abomination. There are deep troubles that follow when one represses a part of themselves. The costs of following an intolerant and incompatible religion can be very high.

A common argument for the existence of god is that of the “watchmaker” wherein it is argued that as the existence of the watch implies the necessity of a watchmaker, so too does the existence of creation imply the necessity of a creator. The problem is that this argument of necessity can not be stopped and if it be true, then the existence of a creator would necessitate the existence of a creator-maker. And the creator-maker of a maker of creator makers and so forth. If necessity be true, then the implication is of the necessity of an infinite chain of ever more powerful and/or complex “Über-creators”. It becomes a *reductio ad absurdum*. At some point you reach an end with something that can exist “a priori” with no need of a maker. My argument that you can stop with some multi-dimensional fabric out of which virtual universes are continually emerging and occasionally reaching reality is as valid as the argument of the creationist who insists that you must take one more step and have a god to start it all.

How do I deal with all the evidence, often personal experiences, that, on the surface, is difficult to reconcile with pure chance or that demands a supernatural explanation?

I am sure that most of these stories are sincere. Cases of outright fraud exist but are probably the minority.

The human observer is an extremely unreliable instrument. There are many studies of the accuracy of eye witnesses. The classic is having a number of people observe a video of a crime re-enactment. The scene will include a person of african extraction who is not associated at all with the act but is simple a by-stander while the crime is committed by an otherwise unremarkable person. In a depressingly high fraction of the cases, the witnesses will remember the person who stands out from the rest of the people in the scene then associate that person with the crime itself. All the facts may be present, but the after the fact assemblage of these in recollecting the

event becomes jumbled.

Scientific American had an interesting article on “False Memory Syndrome”. The article explained how our memories are extremely sensitive to suggestion. Specifically it went into detail about how police interrogations in which hypothetical alternative scenarios to a witness’s initial recollection of an event will become confused with the original and in short order the witness will be unable to distinguish between the real event and the hypothetical events. Once more the human memory is very unreliable.

Let us consider the inevitability of the extremely improbable. Unless something is actually physically impossible, it will happen. The population of Canada is on the order of 30 million so we should expect on the order of 30 one in a million events to occur in Canada at what ever rate the odds are based on. Let’s assume that people do things at a rate of once every five minutes during the typical sixteen hours of waking a day. This actually depends on what we mean by doing a thing, of course. As I type this, I am probably entering characters at a rate more like 5/second so if I’m looking for odd events following from entering key strokes, my event rate is much higher. If you’re sitting on a couch idly changing channels on TV then the rate might be much lower but the sort of synchronicity you’re looking for might be an odd juxtaposition of scenes as you move across the channels. My rate of an event every five minutes is purely artificial. Even at that, we’re talking on the order of 1.3 trillion events/year in Canada. Or we should expect 1.3 million once in a million events to occur across Canada in the run of a year and the occasional once in a trillion event to occur.

Our memories are extremely effective filters. We quickly forget the common events. There are just too many of them. The unusual makes an impression. We remember events that re-inforce our prejudices. If profound enough, we remember the events that confound our prejudices. The life changing paradigm shifting events. Enough of these happen that some happen to people inclined to write books or to appear on talk shows. The media look for and feed on the unusual. The unusual becomes self-fulfilling.

For example, the cottage that we rented in PEI this last summer was cottage number

42. The other day I went to the hospital for blood work and the number that I took for my position in line was, forty-two. All the time, the number forty-two keeps popping up as I go about living. Perhaps it really is the answer to life, the universe and everything! Possibly, I just deal with a lot of numbers and whenever forty-two pops up I notice.

In short, unless personal recollection is accompanied by hard evidence that can not be tainted the way human memory can be tainted, I tend to discount it. I have no doubt that the people recounting the stories are sincere and that their reality is shaped by the reality that those stories represent. I simply do not regard personal recollection as evidence strong enough to change my view of the world. Even hard evidence of the simply improbable is insufficient to change my world view.

Mind you, and I will stress now, but you should bear in mind through all that I say, that I can not prove that there is no god. In general, it is not possible to prove the non-existence of anything. Proving the existence of something is trivial. You only have to produce the object whose existence you are trying to prove. To date, theists have never brought god in substantial indisputable form to the table for examination. This, of course, does not prove that god does not exist. What has happened is that various incarnations of god have been shown to be non-existent. When gods were perceived to be like us but immortal and omnipotent living on the top of mount Olympus, it was only necessary to scale Olympus and observe that no gods resided there. Modern rockets and flight in general have banished the concept of a heaven sitting on the clouds. Each advance in our capability to observe and demonstrate that a particular perception of god is demonstrably non-existent has resulted in a re-definition of god. By moving god to an alternate plane of existence, outside our space and time, we can no longer demonstrate that god simply does not exist where and when we should expect to find it. God may very well exist, however, as when Napoleon reviewed the great work of Laplace, the "*Mechanique Celeste*" and commented to Laplace that in the massive volume about the universe there was not a single mention of God, its creator, Laplace replied: "Sire, I had no need of that hypothesis".

As an atheist, I believe that the Universe is fundamentally understandable. There

is much we do not yet understand and much that we will be unable to prove, at least until we have the technology capable of repeating the moment of creation or of being able to step outside our current universe and seeing how other universes form. The net belief I hold is that there is no need for the super natural. Whatever is responsible for creation is neither sentient nor deserving of worship. It was almost certainly awe inspiring, but not magic.

Contrast my belief with this sentiment from Milton, writing in *Paradise Lost* in 1667:

And Raphael now to Adam's doubt proposed Benevolent and facile thus replied:

“To ask or search I blame thee not; for Heaven Is as the Book of God before thee set, Wherein to read his wondrous works, and learn His seasons, hours, or days, or months, or years. This to attain, whether Heaven move or Earth Imports not, if thou reckon right; the rest From Man or Angel the great Architect Did wisely to conceal, and not divulge His secrets, to be scanned by them who ought Rather admire.”

Nailing down a definition of spirituality is much more difficult. For some, the spirit is just another name for the soul. As an atheist, of course, I reject the notion of a soul. I do not believe that there is some incorporeal essence that survives the break down of our neural system. Memories of me will linger in the minds of family, friends, and acquaintances; but that is all.

The dictionary was particularly unhelpful. My compact edition of the Oxford dictionary listed six entries for spirituality: from deprecated historical usage through usage which is more typical of the modern usage. The first reference to the word dates from 1441 while the introduction of the most modern usage dates from 1681. The earliest meaning relates to ecclesiastical powers and, as I said is of historical use only now, the modern meaning is “the fact of condition of being spirit or of consisting of an incorporeal essence”. Looking to spirit, the dictionary lists 24 separate meanings as an adjective or noun and another six as a verb. Everything from kidnapping (spiriting away), to ghosts, to alcohol. Most of the meaningful meanings

in our context apply to the intangible aspects of people responsible for character and personality.

All in all, the dictionary search was fun but a little unsatisfying.

Let us look at a couple of quotes related to spirituality then continue from there.

Susan Quinn, *The Deepest Spiritual Life*

”Spiritual life helps us find our meaning and purpose within existence, reminds us of our calling to elevate, or to save, or to liberate ourselves and others from the illusions of how we wish life could be, and celebrate and rejoice in the experience that is right in front of us. A religious/spiritual life shows us that although the Divine may seem distant and inexplicable, It is also available to us in every moment.”

Peter Carroll, *PsyberMagick*

”In selecting beliefs we might as well try to go for maximum entertainment value and capability enhancement, regardless of the so-called “facts”; for if a human really wants something, statistics count for nothing.”

From the Hindu or at least Indian tradition:

Namaste is the most respectful term of greeting which I know. It functions on all levels of mind, body and spirit. The word is Sanskrit. It roughly means, ”the universal spirit within me bows to the universal spirit within you in oneness”.

Spirituality is being of the spirit. The spirit is one part of the triad forming reality. The others are mentality (being of the mind) and sensuality [being of the senses (body)]. Together these three create reality. To achieve harmony a delicate balance must be maintained. For with harmony we find contentment in unity with the universe.

I like this last one. The spirit is one part of the triad forming reality. Considered distinct from the intellect and the senses. But even so, it does not really say what



it is. A little like saying forty-two when asked for the answer to life, the universe, everything.

Let us look a little at the real life implications of our spiritual nature and see if I can convince you a little of my thesis.

There is something in human nature that makes most people feel good for what might seem no good reason. Why do we feel a glow of rightness, with ourselves and with the world, when we do a significant good deed? What is responsible for that twinge of conscience when we know we have not done all we could? What is it in us that lifts the weight of worry when we view a magnificent sunset or just the vast expanse of clear blue sky? The sense of disappointment or oppression from a dull overcast. What is the source of the intense pleasure as a loved one nestles close? The intense grief that follows the loss of a loved one?

These emotional reactions are aspects of our spiritual nature.

Consider altruism. The act of making a personal sacrifice for the benefit of another with no anticipation of reward. There was an interesting article in Scientific American a few years back about altruism in vampire bats. The vampire bats of central and northern South America feed by making small nicks in the skin of cattle or other large mammals and licking the blood that seeps out. Surprisingly, blood is a very poor food source being mostly water, plasma and red blood cells. Vampire bats which fail in finding a meal during their nightly outing are in trouble because they have little reserve to fall back on. They roost during the day, however, in relatively large colonies and usually most will have fed and a few fed well. A bat who has failed to find an evening meal will approach one which has fed and essentially beg for food. Usually the satiated bat will regurgitate enough so that the hungry bat will at least not starve. The authors of the article observed that when the tables were reversed, as was frequently the case, a bat would remember those individuals who had refused them help and be less likely to help in turn. A remarkably human response and indicating that more than blind instinct is at work.

Why do I raise this?

I am trying to make a case that despite our arrogance, homo (self-styled) sapiens

sapiens is not that different from the other members of the web of all existence of which we are a part. It makes sense, after all, if the results of animal experiments are useful in studying our own physiologies and psyches, then the animal models can not be that different from us.

Humans are social animals. In a “state of nature” we tend to live in small tribal or extended family groups. Trust becomes critical as we become dependent on the activities of others to complement and support our own activities. We specialize, usually taking advantage of individual characteristics. Individual variation is the fuel that powers evolution, however, a successful tribe depends on a good balance of individual skills. Patience and fine motor skills are required to craft a high quality spear point, but brute force and cunning are required to use the spear to advantage and bring home the kill. The skill set needed for the clan mother is significantly different from those needed for the shaman. But between them all is needed a level of cooperation on an on-going basis. Feeling a common spirit and a natural tendency to feel that things are right when one works in cooperation with others is a far surer way to get such cooperation than any intellectual argument.

There is the spiritual oneness that we feel with nature. We have a natural harmony with our planet. We feel peace and tranquility in a quiet woodland or gliding over a mirror smooth lake in a canoe. We feel an exhilaration in scaling Khatadin or driving the canoe into the chop from a fresh North West breeze. We sense beauty in vistas that range from soaring mountain peaks to windswept oceans. Even such stark landscapes as the ice plains of the poles and the vast deserts of the world evoke responses of awe and beauty that belie the deadly danger of these lands.

I recall a time snowshoeing in the woodlot with my son’s dog, peerless. The snow was falling fairly heavily and the flakes were stinging my face made hot with the exertion of working our way up a steep hill in quite deep snow. Peerless was having quite a heavy go of it struggling behind me in the trail. At the top of the hill we came to a road that had been ploughed sometime before the current snow fall and the snow was only up to peerless’s belly and as she felt solid ground under the snow she began to bound in what, if she were human, we would call pure joy from one side of the road to the other then back towards me. It was bitter cold, we were

wet and tired, but as she jumped towards me and I touseled her fur we both felt an exhilaration and companionship and a sense that this was right. We were up to the challenge and were revelling in it.

And what of the spirituality of music. As I write this paragraph, I am listening to a broadcast of Beethoven's violin concerto from the New York Philharmonic. It is beautiful and enchanting. Music is uniquely human. Birds sing to establish territory and as courting ritual. Bird songs may seem music like, however, they are purely functional. We have language for communication. Why is it universal across all human societies to add music to our repertory of expressive media.

So how do I explain spirituality in the absence of god?

A lot has been learned about brain function and chemistry since I was a formal student and a lot is still to be learned, however, we now know that much of what we might call spirituality results from brain chemistry. Various signalling chemicals are present in the brain or are manufactured in response to stimuli and elicit responses when they lock into the appropriate receptors. The proof comes almost daily in new medicines that can effect profound changes in behaviour. There is an accumulation of evidence from studying the effects of trauma or disease on various sections of the brain that almost all of what we call spirituality has roots in specific areas of the brain. The brain functions through extremely complex electro-chemical interactions when viewed holistically but beneath it all it is reducable to relatively simple chemistry. Molecules lock into neural receptors, channels open and ions flow into or out of the cells in a part of the brain and we feel right with the world. The molecules might be endorphins generated by a hard run in the early morning or they might be drugs carried from the first cigarette inhaled after sleep's forced withdrawal.

Most conversations with god take place only after the appropriate preparation. It's no surprise that Judaism, Christianity and Islam all originated in the middle east. A few days without food or water in the heat of the desert and prophets are very likely to see and hear visions. North american aboriginals used the sweat lodge for much the same purpose. Fasting followed by heat possibly mixed with mushrooms or other plant products known to help one with spirit walks. Read the book of revelations. Your response will be likely as mine which was to ask: "man, what

was he smoking?” There is a good reason that Christians often caution not to read Revelations until they are “ready”.

Almost certainly we have a spiritual dimension because it has evolutionary advantages. We are more likely to bring children into a world that we find pleasurable and to which we are adapted. I also suspect that when we are behaving from spiritual motivation we are coming as close as we can to experiencing what we call instinctive behaviour in other animals. We behave in certain ways because it feels right and typically that behaviour is in some way good for the collective. It is what adapts us to live in a family unit within our society. When it is also advantageous to allow for innovation, it would not be an advantage to hard wire into our brain all the sets of behaviour that are needed. You can hard wire behaviour when the organism is something as simple as a sea slug. With something as complex as a primate, the brain has to be flexible but on top of that flexibility is imposed heuristics to influence behaviour appropriate for the life style of the animal. Altruism is a fairly straight forward result of this mechanism. A tribe in which individuals are willing to sacrifice for the greater good will have advantages over tribes in which they are not.

Music can be pursued by one in solitude but groups can produce far more complex works, especially when the instruments are limited to simple percussion, and possible primitive wind and string instruments behind the harmony of a chorus of human voices. The musician also draws inspiration from an admiring audience. The interaction between audience and musicians draws people into the social structures that can support the interaction. We can see an evolutionary advantage from the love of music and the development of society. Perhaps groupies are naturally drawn to musicians from a deep inner instinctive feeling, a spiritual feeling, that a superior performer on the stage will be superior in other ways.

Some might feel that this vision of spirituality robs it of the mystery needed for one to fully appreciate spirituality. That life must be empty if robbed of a greater purpose. I would disagree. Understanding something does not lessen its beauty. Knowing that love is an adaptive evolutionary mechanism to encourage one to form a pair bond with a mate, to bear and raise offspring does not lessen any the deep

intense enjoyment of that mechanism.

In summation and in brief, we, as a species, are spiritual because the characteristics which we ascribe to the spiritual, are advantageous to our survival as a species. Our spiritual nature allows us to live in harmony within societies in which cooperation provides the competitive edge for the society and allows members of the society a greater probability of success in reproduction. As individuals we are in spiritual harmony with our environment because those individuals who were not in harmony with our earth would not have expended the same effort or made the same sacrifices to raise children and would leave fewer descendants.

Blessed Be.