Apologetics Series, Podcast #2:
How to be an Atheist

# Introduction

After having seen the metaphysical argument for the existence of the God, we are going to look at objections to that argument. Effectively, we are going to see what perspective you have to take in order to be an atheist.

There are two main objections to theism; really, these are the only two that have any force to them. They are the same ones that appear in the most famous article in the Summa, “Does God exist?”. We are going to cover them in this podcast.

# The problem of evil

This is an ancient objection. Here is how the Greek philosopher Epicurus (342-270 BC) put it:

God either wishes to take away evils, and is unable; or he is able, and is unwilling; or he is neither willing nor able; or he is both willing and able. If he is willing and able, he is feeble, which is not in accordance with the character of God; if he is able and unwilling, he is malicious, which is equally at variance with God; if he is neither willing nor able, he is both malicious and feeble and therefore not God; if he is both willing and able, which is alone suitable to God, from what source then are evils? Or why does he not remove them?

## Definition of good and evil

Thomas Aquinas’s answer: “God neither wills evil to be done, nor wills it not to be done, but wills to permit evil to be done; and this is a good.” I, q.19, a.9 But this needs to be unpacked!

We have to be clear on what goodness and evil are before we can ascribe them to God, or to see to what degree they should be ascribed to Him.

Evil is not something in itself but it is parasitical on the good. It is a mere absence of good. We always say that something is bad when there is not something there that should be there. Evil is the gap of what is there and what should be there. “What is bad is not anything actually existing. It consists of what is not there in something that is there.”

For example:

* Blindness is the absence of sight.
* Adultery is relations between people who are married but *not* to one another.

## God’s causality

In the first podcast, we saw that God, as Creator, gives being to all things. Since evil is not its own being, it cannot be ascribed to God as such. God cannot create evil. The only thing that He could do is create beings that have the possibility of failing. God only creates good, and evil exists only when those good things fall short to some degree.

When things fall short, should God step in?If God is not directly responsible for evil, can we then blame Him for not stepping in when things fail? Should we expect Him to trump the causality of His creatures, when necessary to preserve the good?

Well, I think that here is a good place to make a distinction between different types of evil:

* Pain and suffering, otherwise known as natural evil, malum naturalis
* Morally wrong behavior, or malum culpae

One concerns physical suffering; the other concerns a willful agent choosing to do what is wrong. For both of these, we have to consider whether God could prevent them and if there is a scenario in which it might be better to allow them for a greater good.

Something that must be understood is that to be omnipotent is not the same as being able to do all things. There are some things that we can think about, but are impossible to be realized, even for an omnipotent being. I gave the example of the square circle in the previous podcast. Even God cannot make one of those.

This consideration will be important when we are thinking about the constraints under which God must operate as Creator of the universe.

The fact is that, if God were to eliminate all evils, He would also have to eliminate certain goods as well. There is just no way for there to be all of the goods possible and no negative side effects. So, God eliminating all evil also means eliminating good. As such, He has to allow some evil for there to be some goods. This is what St. Thomas means when he says, “God wills to permit evil to be done; and this is a good.”

*Let us apply this firstly to the reality of pain and suffering.*

## Malum naturalis

When there is pain and suffering,

* There is a scientific reason for what happens, i.e. we are able to explain what happens in terms of the way that the natural order works.
* One thing in the natural order thrives at the expense of another thing.
* The thing that is thriving is simply acting in the way that it acts. If we don’t want one thing to thrive on another thing, we don’t want it to exist.
* The thriving is contributing to the overall natural order of things.

“When a lamb is eaten by a lion, the damage to the lamb amounts to a set of privations – for example, the absence of a limb, flesh, or skin that is torn away.  Though bad considered in itself, the damage also plays a necessary part of a larger good, namely the flourishing of the lion.  Lions of their nature can’t be the kinds of things they are without hunting prey like lambs, so that having the good of there being lions presupposes the bad of lambs being killed.  In causing a world in which lambs are eaten by lions, then, God does not cause evil as such.  Rather, he causes a world in which certain goods (namely the good of lambs having all their limbs, flesh, etc. unmolested) are absent, and these privations are not willed by him for their own sake, but rather as a concomitant of the good of there being lions in existence.” (Edward Feser, https://edwardfeser.blogspot.com/2017/05/davies-on-evil-suffered.html)

God has a choice: either have a world where there are lambs that have no predators but there are no lions; or have a world where lambs do have predators but we get to have lions. We know what God chose, but we can see that He had to allow the “evil” of lambs being eaten for there to be lions.

Inevitably, there is going to be some conflict when there are multiple things in reality. If snow melts and causes an avalanche, that is just snow being snow and gravity being gravity. If lives are lost in the village below, that is simply an effect of snow acting according to its nature. Is God to intervene to stop nature from acting? No. The avalanche is not evil in itself; it is its effects that are evil.

In short, for anyone creating a material world where things behave in a certain way and interact with other things, there are always going to be situations where one thing profits at the expense of another, just by doing what it does. “Some evil exists as a necessary concomitant to goods of various kinds.” Davies, p. 214

## What about moral evil?

When moral evil happens, it is not the case of one agent profiting at the expense of another agent. Rather, it is a lose-lose situation. There is only failure, because the sinner hurts himself as well as his victim, if there is one.

Why would God allow moral evil, when He could (possibly) make it such that humans only do what is good? Well, we have to recognize that the situation is the same as with physical evil. Even with God making it that humans always do the right thing, there are going to be some goods that will not be able to exist.

“Acts of forgiveness and mercy are not possible unless there are people who actually do evil things for which they can be forgiven, and therefore deserve punishments which we might mercifully refrain from inflicting. For people freely to choose to act in a forgiving or merciful way, then, is possible only in a world in which other people have actually chosen to do evil.

Then there are moral virtues which do not presuppose that some people choose to carry out evil actions, but which still presuppose that there exists evil of other sorts. For example, you cannot have courage unless there is danger in the face of which you are tempted to avoid doing your duty, but choose to do it anyway. You cannot show compassion unless there are people who have suffered misfortunes of some sort (whether it be illness, the death of a loved one, unemployment, or whatever) and toward whom you can act compassionately. You cannot choose to sacrifice something for the sake of either your own moral improvement or the good of another person without thereby losing the good thing that you are sacrificing. And so forth.” Five Proofs, p. 296.

## Difficult Examples

What about the suffering of the innocent? For God to allow miscarriages or sudden infant death, for babies to lose their lives before they have a chance to live them, seems unfair. Or for people to be cheated in this life, for them to suffer the sudden loss of loved ones, for someone who is innocent to be jailed for life. Shouldn’t God prevent the accomplishment of certain types of evil?

To answer these objections, one has to understand a more specifically Catholic perspective on God. We have to imagine a scenario for God, which happens to be the same as the Catholic one, and see if God would still be good under such a scenario. I will explain it briefly here.

* God created man for a life after this world, as man’s supreme good. Thus, this life is not the final story.
* God originally placed man in a paradise, while leaving room for man to either follow the good or choose evil. If man had remained in the good, there would have been no physical suffering for him. However, he chose evil and fell from his painless, paradisaical state.
* The suffering that man now has is not an obstacle to him attaining his afterlife goal. On the contrary, it is often a helpful means towards that goal. Moreover, God helps man to use the sufferings of his life for his own good.
* Those who are cut off from life before they are able to live this life, such as those who are miscarried, are given a life of natural happiness in the next life.
* Though this life is not fair, yet God will give to all what they deserve after this life is over. There will be reward and punishment according to how we behaved. All the evils of this world will be righted.

In the end, the Catholic God is completely fair. If this scenario is true, I don’t think that we could find fault in the way that God behaves towards man.

Besides this, we have to understand that it does not even make sense to speak of good or evil if there is no God. There has to be someone to define the natures of things and set standards for the universe for there to be any morality whatsoever. If the universe, and us, are just the long-term result of random processes, then there is no good or evil. So, the objection from evil really has to assume the existence of God in order to critique God.

# Nature Explains itself

The second objection claims that, basically, nature explains itself. There is no room for a divine being to exercise any causality in this world, because our world is self-explanatory. This is the position of materialists, who reduce all reality to matter. Materialism is “the philosophical view that the material world is the only reality that exists”.

If you want to be an atheist, you have to simplify or reduce reality drastically. You have to make the claim that it has no purpose, that it has not been directed in any way by a higher cause, that everything runs on chance. The universe is just a composition of random stuff that has no order and just happened to have come together in the way that we see.

Atheists who are consistent with their own position will deny that there is any meaning to the world around them. The reason why they do this is because all purpose implies some higher cause that sets a direction to things. The atheist Lawrence Krauss affirms he believes that the universe has no purpose and that belief is very fulfilling for him!

Some atheists logically also deny the existence of free will, because they clearly see that free will is a spiritual power. Here is atheist Jerry Coyne on free will:

Free will is ruled out, simply and decisively, by the laws of physics. Your brain and body, the vehicles that make "choices," are composed of molecules, and the arrangement of those molecules is entirely determined by your genes and your environment. Your decisions result from molecular-based electrical impulses and chemical substances transmitted from one brain cell to another. These molecules must obey the laws of physics, so the outputs of our brain -- our "choices" -- are dictated by those laws… And deliberating about your choices in advance doesn't help matters, for that deliberation also reflects brain activity that must obey physical laws.

I mention these things to show that, for atheists to try to convince themselves, and others, that there is no higher power and that only matter exists, they have to claim that all of the complexities that we experience in life and which lead us towards a higher cause are, in fact, only illusions. Richard Dawkins famously said, “Biology is the study of complicated things that give the appearance of having been designed for a purpose.”

What I would like to do is take a brief look at the world of physics and the world of biology, to show how atheists try to explain away complexity, but how science continually frustrates their attempts, because both the inanimate and animate world have been created by God.

## The Physical World

The story of science in the past century is fascinating, because man has been able to discover an incredible complexity in the universe.

What materialists have typically done, in order to say that the universe explains itself, is to attribute to the universe the attributes of God

* Infinite in size
* Unchanging
* Eternal
* Uncaused

If the universe had these properties, then it might *seem* to be a total explanation for itself. Of course, it would still be a contingent being. But atheists are not into metaphysical thought and they do not accept metaphysical arguments for God’s existence. Because of this, you often have to argue with them on scientific grounds.

Modern science has revealed abundant evidence for an intricately designed universe. It has made it clear that the universe is:

* Finite in size – for Einstein’s General Theory of Relativity to be true, the mass of the universe must be finite. Since that theory has been confirmed in many ways, scientists today believe that the universe is finite in size.
* Changing – the universe is expanding at an incredible rate, as shown by the red-shifting of stars. This has led scientists to propose a smaller and smaller universe as we go back in time. This is why Catholic priest Fr. Georges Lemaitre came up with the Big Bang Theory. It was atheist Fred Hoyle who held on to a Steady State theory until the evidence against it was overwhelming.
* Beginning in time – with the acceptance of the Big Bang Theory by the scientific world, scientists have also had to accept that the universe began in time
* Caused – if the universe had a beginning in time, then it clearly had a cause, according to the kalam cosmological argument that I mentioned in the last podcast:
Everything that begins to exist requires a cause for its origin.
The world began to exist.
Therefore, the world had a cause for its origin.

It is even more obvious today than it has ever been that the universe needs a divine cause to explain its existence. This is all the more true because of what is called *fine-tuning* or a study of the physical constants of the universe and why their values had to be precisely what they are in order for atoms, molecules, elements, stars and galaxies to form over time.

In short, physics has shown us very clearly that the inanimate world is not an adequate explanation for its own existence! It has an extreme level of order and dependence.

In our next podcast, we will talk about Darwinian Evolution.

## Biology

When we come to the animate world, the world of lifeforms, we see the same tendency on the part of atheists to explain away a higher cause. They have to explain away all complexity in the world. They even have to say that, basically, living is the same as non-living! This would be true if life comes from non-life by a merely natural process.

The discovery of DNA has made belief in abiogenesis ridiculous. DNA works on a coded language that is interpreted by the cell. All living things have DNA.

## Evolutionary theory

I go to a lot of trouble in my book to show how Darwin’s theory of evolution attempts to do away with purpose and form in the biological world. In other words, he tries to reduce the production of lifeforms to mere chance and the differences between lifeforms to be merely accidental. Yes, I know, it is strange that Darwin writes a book to explain the origin of species when, fundamentally, he does not believe that there is any substantial difference between things.

This does not mean that God could not have implanted some ability into nature for it to produce new lifeforms; not at all! The Church is not against evolution, as such. At the same time, however, the more that nature is able to do, the more it might have the appearance of not needing to be designed.

To find what God has done, we have to consult nature itself. What do we find?

## Evidence for common descent

There is certain evidence for common descent, which is a plus for Darwin’s theory.

1. **morphology:** all mammals have the same basic body type, e.g. they have seven cervical vertebrae.
2. **fossil record:** it shows a progression from less complex to more complex. Initially, there are only plants, then simple animals appear, followed by more complex animals, until man appears last in the animal record. The first animals to appear are invertebrates, then vertebrate fish, then reptiles, then birds, then non-placental mammals, then placental mammals, then man. See the diagram to the right.
3. **DNA analysis:** all living things—plants and animals—have DNA encoded in them, and the coding is more similar according to the closeness of the plants and animals in the hierarchy of complexity.

## Evidence against random mutation and natural selection

In theory, random mutation and natural selection could account for the totality of the differences spanning between microbes and man. In practice, it seems that the Darwinian mechanism can only account for very small, accidental changes in living things.

### Assumption 1: Gradualness

**Assumption:** The biological world is a continuum wherein only little differences separate individual lifeforms one from another. It is only when populations are isolated that they are able to accumulate differences that will separate them from the rest of the biological world and so become new species, genera, and so on.

**Testing:** this assumption can be tested by inspecting nature. If the assumption is true, we would expect to find a great fluidity in biological lifeforms, such that it is easy to change them in small ways that bring in new functions and so accumulate those small changes that they eventually develop into vastly different lifeforms. We would also expect them to be composed of interchangeable parts, such that if one part is substituted for another, the plant or animal still functions. We would further expect to find great continuity in the fossil record, with there being smooth and gradual changes throughout the history of life.

**Evidence 1:** irreducible complexity

Instead of finding a great plasticity among things in the biological world, we rather find a great rigidity, such that lifeforms are quite sensitive to any changes. The notion of irreducible complexity highlights this fact. It exists whenever some organ or function of a plant or animal has multiple interacting parts and the removal of any part causes the system to effectively cease functioning.

Almost everything that we find in the biological world is irreducibly complex, both at the macro level and the micro level. Lifeforms are not gooey, amorphous stuff that can be shaped and reshaped willy-nilly. Rather, they are very delicate and intricate constructions wherein all of the parts have to be in place for them to function.

**Evidence 2:** the fossil record

While the fossil record shows great evidence of a progression from less complex to more complex, in a single direction, it also shows that the progression has happened abruptly, not gradually. There are huge gaps of complexity between one layer and another in the fossil record.

*Example:* the Cambrian explosion. The most famous example of this is the so-called Cambrian explosion. After hundreds of millions of years seeing only very basic sea sponges in the fossil record, suddenly a vast array of complex animals with completely new body plans appear at the beginning of what is classified as the Cambrian period. The appearance is so sudden that it looks like a pulse to the geologists, an instantaneous interjection of life.

Darwin predicted that the fossil record would manifest a bottom-up tree of life, with more specific taxonomical groupings appearing first and slowly increasing—groupings like species, genera, and families—and then over time, a differentiation of the more universal categories, such as orders, phyla and kingdoms. But the fossil record shows the opposite of this, especially in the Cambrian explosion. All of a sudden, vastly different body plans—vastly different phyla, a very generic taxonomical category—appear without any preparatory species, genera, families, classes, and so on of those phyla.

**Evidence 3:** fixation in species

Plants and animals do not allow for unlimited change. They have fixed boundaries beyond which they cannot be pushed. Here is some of the evidence cited by Augros and Stanciu:[[1]](#footnote-1)

Between 1800 and 1878, crossbreeding increased the sugar content of sugar beets from 6 percent to 17 percent. But fifty years of subsequent experiments produced no further increases. All experienced breeders recognize the constraints. Luther Burbank: “I know from my experience that I can develop a plum half an inch long or one two and a half inches long, with every possible length in between, but I am willing to admit that it is hopeless to try to get a plum the size of a small pea, or one as big as a grapefruit.”

*Saturation Mutagenesis:* this is a method of experimentation by which one seeks to explore the complete limits of a species for genetic modification. These experiments indicate that animals simply cannot sustain any major changes, a fact that leads us to be sceptical about the very possibility of macroevolution with biological species as we know them.

### Assumption 2: Competition

**Assumption:** There is a ruthless competition for resources of food, water, and living space among plants and animals. This competition drives stronger lifeforms to develop survival strategies that make them evolve while weaker lifeforms die out.

### Assumption 3: Evolution

**Assumption:** The random mutations that occur in genetic code, that are then preserved by natural selection, are advantageous to their organisms.

We don’t have time to go into these assumptions (those interested can read the pdf that will go with this podcast?). The bottom line is that the biological world shows itself to be

Let me take an example given in *The Reality of God and the Problem of Evil.* I wake up in the morning and have a terrible headache. I go to the doctor and ask him why. He says, “Well, it was that fifth shot of whiskey that you took last night.” What has happened? Well, it was whiskey behaving in the way that whiskey behaves, in the way that it is expected to behave. It is simply the natural course of things.

In this case, whiskey is doing what it is meant to do when it is assimilated in the body in a certain quantity. Whiskey is doing what is good for it. Something that we have to notice in these cases of physical evil is that it is always a case of one thing thriving at the expense of another.

“We have evil suffered when we have something which is good to a certain degree while thwarted by what is also good to a certain degree… Evil suffered only occurs when something thrives at the expense of something else.” p. 181

“Similarly with my cancer or my influenza – always there is a natural explanation and always the explanation is in terms of some things, cells or germs or whatever doing what comes naturally, being good. Sometimes of course and rather more often than he admits, the doctor is baffled. But he puts this down to his own ignorance; he says: ‘Well, eventually we may hope to find out what is causing this, what things are bring it about simply by being their good selves, but for the moment we don’t know.’ What he does *not* say is this: there is no explanation in nature for this, it is an anti-miracle worked by a malignant God.”

“In the government of States it is not forbidden to imitate the Ruler of the world; and, as the authority of man is powerless to prevent every evil, it has (as St. Augustine says) to overlook and leave unpunished many things which are punished, and rightly, by Divine Providence.” Libertas, n. 33

My Quora answer: <https://www.quora.com/If-God-is-in-control-and-causes-all-things-to-work-for-the-good-in-believers-how-do-things-like-the-Holocaust-happen/answer/Paul-Robinson-410>

1. *The New Biology: Discovering the Wisdom of Nature* (Boston and London: New Science Library, 1987), p. 159. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)