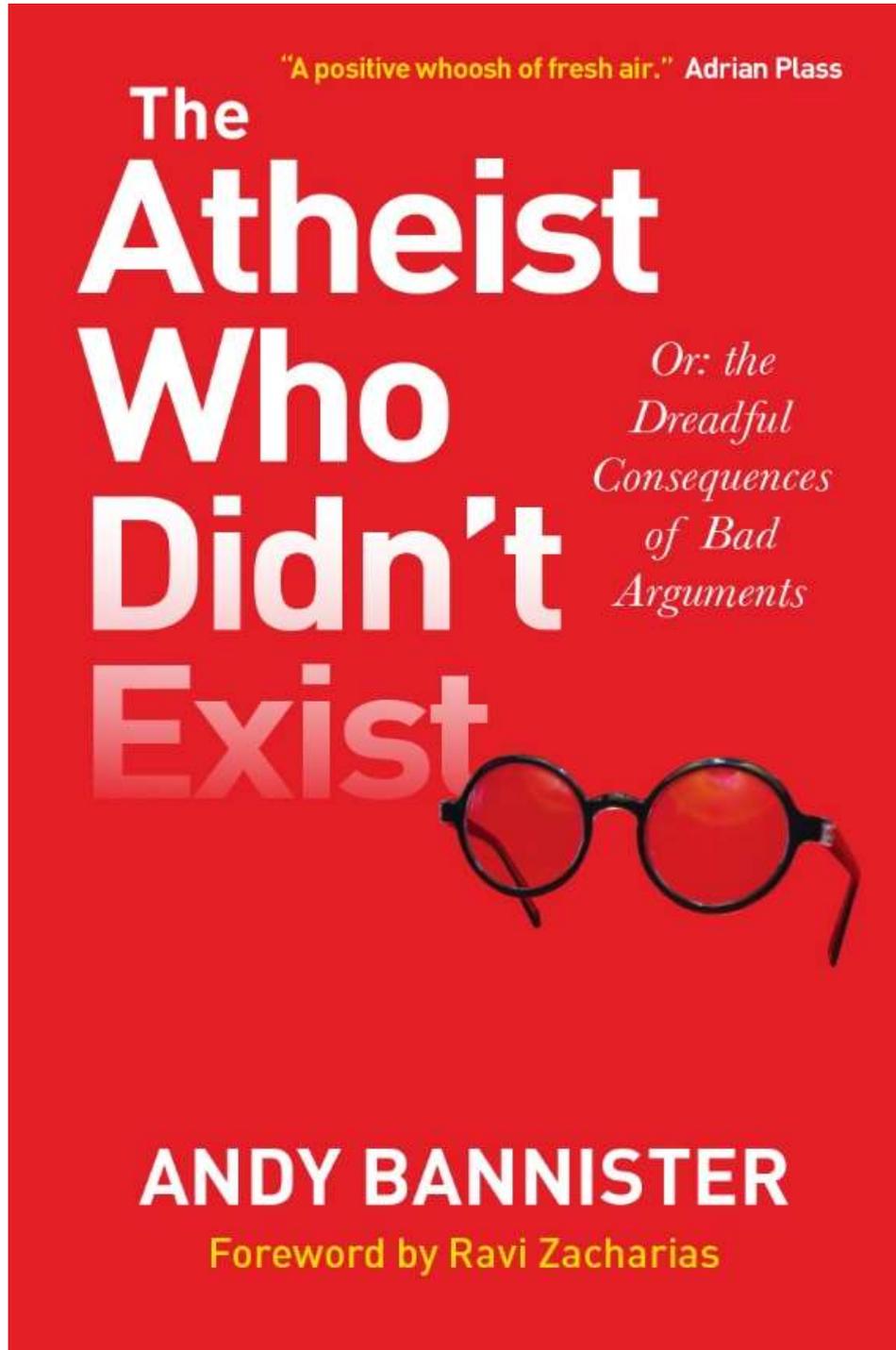


بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

## The Atheist Who Didn't Exist

Or: The Dreadful Consequences of Bad Arguments



By: Andy Bannister

الكتاب من تأليف «أندي بانيستر» الحاصل على درجة الدكتوراه في الدراسات الإسلامية! الذي يعمل في مؤسسة «رافي زكارايوس» التنصيرية، ولمن لا يعلم، فإن «رافي زكارايوس» من أشهر المنصرين في العالم، يكاد يكون بشهرة الشيخ «أحمد ديدات» عند المسلمين، إذ أن نشأتهم مشابهة!

الكتاب يبدأ بالكلام عن «أوتويس الملحدين» الذي يسير في شوارع بريطانيا وعليه إعلان مكتوب عليه: "من المحتمل أنه لا يوجد إله، كُفَّ عن القلق واستمتع بحياتك!" ومنها يتحدث الكاتب عن الحُجج الواهية التي يطرحها أئمة «الإلحاد الجديد» بهدف الترويج لإلحادهم!

أول حُجَّة واهية يُناقشها الكتاب هي العلاقة بين عدم وجود الإله والاستمتاع بالحياة، ثم ينطلق منها إلى فكرة أن الإلحاد في حد ذاته يُعتبر «نظام إيماني» أو بالأحرى «دين» يهدف إلى أن يكون النظام الأمثل الذي يجب أن يعيش الإنسان وفقه، وهُنا نجد أن المؤلف يلفت الأنظار إلى ما يُسميه «عقائد نشطة» و «عقائد خاملة»، ويُشير إلى أنه يجب تقديم الدليل على صحة «العقائد النشطة»، وهي النَّاتجة عن قرار واعٍ، وتشغل عُقولنا وتفكيرنا، وتنعكس على تصرفاتنا وأفعالنا وتعاملاتنا، بعكس الأفكار التي نتبناها بشكل غير واعٍ، ولا تشغل بالنا، وغالباً ما تكون بديهية ولا تحتاج إلى إثبات، مثل: عدم وجود فيل في الثلاجة!

يُشير المؤلف أيضاً على أن الإلحاد كـ «نظام إيماني» ليس مجرد عدم الاعتقاد السلبي بعدم وجود إله، وإنما يتكوّن الإلحاد من عقائد كثيرة مُركّبة، مثل الاعتقاد بصحة «المذهب الطبيعي» naturalism، وكذلك الاعتقاد بصحة «المذهب العلموي» scientism، وكذلك الاعتقاد بصحة نظرية «التطوّر الدارويني» Darwinism مما يُبين أن الإلحاد له «أركان إيمان» كأي نظام إيماني! وفي النهاية يُبين المؤلف أن المنتسبين لـ «دين الإلحاد» يُكوّنون مجتمع ديني له نفس خصائص أي مجتمع ديني آخر!

المؤلف يُشير إلى «فطرية التدين»، وأن الإنسان بطبيعته وفطرته مُتدين ويؤمن بمعتقدات مختلفة، وأنه يجب على كل إنسان أن يُبرهن على صحة معتقداته وإيمانه، ويتناول المؤلف أيضاً موضوع الطفولة، والأفكار التي تُبث في عُقول

الأطفال، وقام المؤلف بالرد على شبهة استغلال الأطفال وإقناعهم بالخرافات والأساطير والأوهام، ويتناول أيضاً فكرة أن الدين مجرد ظاهرة نفسية مع اختراع الإنسان ليشعر بالأمان والطمأنينة!

المؤلف تناول أيضاً الشبهة الشهيرة التي تقول إن الدين يُسمم كل شيء (عبارة «كريستوفر هيتشنز» الشهيرة والتي كررها عنه «سام هاريس» كثيراً، وفي المقابل هناك كتاب للدكتور «هيثم طلعت» بعنوان: «الإلحاد يُسمم كل شيء» وسلسلة مرئية على «قناة البيئية» أيضاً بنفس العنوان)، ثم تناول موضوع فلسفة العلوم والحدود العلم وقدرتها على إعطاء الإجابات، ثم تطرق إلى البرهان الأخلاقي كدليل على وجود الله، أو بالأصح، توضيح أن وجود الله هو التفسير الوحيد لوجود الأخلاق، وفي النهاية يتناول المؤلف موضوع الهدف والغاية من الحياة، وإثبات أنه لا بد من الاعتقاد بوجود الله لإعطاء هذه الحياة قيمة وغاية لنعيش من أجلها، ثم الكلام عن مدى موثوقية الأدلة التاريخية (في سياق إثبات وجود يسوع المسيح تاريخياً انتصاراً للمسيحية).

المؤلف الذي يدعي أنه قضى عشرين عاماً في دراسة الإسلام والحُصول على درجة الدكتوراه في الدراسات القرآنية يذكر الإسلام أحياناً سواء بالصواب أو بالخطأ، والعجيب أن أخطئه لا يمكن أن تقع من شخص قرأ القرآن الكريم ولو مرة واحدة، فضلاً عن شخص حاصل على الدكتوراه في الدراسات القرآنية، مما يجعلني أشك في أن هناك مشكلة حقيقية عند أهل السنة في توصيل «اللاهوت الإسلامي» للغرب بلغة إنجليزية واضحة! (أو أن المؤلف كعادة المنصرين مجرد كذاب أشر لا يختلف كثيراً عن أستاذه «رافي زكارايوس» الذي له في قلبي بغض خاص!)

شكر خاص للأخ أحمد عيسى الذي أعطاني الكتاب!

الكتاب يستحق تقدير جيد جداً لمحتواه المميز ونقده الرائع، بالإضافة إلى وجود إشارات لقراءات إثرائية في نهاية كل فصل، مع الإشارة إلى أن المؤلف في أحيان كثيرة يقول كلاماً كثيراً بدون أي فائدة، وله أسلوب سخيف ومُستفز في سرد بعض الحكايات في بداية كل فصل ويظن أنه خفيف الظل ويستطيع إضحاك الناس (تجاهل هذه الحكايات المستفزة لن يؤثر على فهمك للكتاب)! لكنه عندما ينتقد يضع النقد في محله!

## 1 The Loch Ness Monster's Moustache (or: The Terrible Consequences of Bad Arguments)

- And then, at last, a bus rounded the corner. A big, red London bus sporting a huge advertisement on the side, which announced in large friendly letters: “There’s Probably No God. Now Stop Worrying and Enjoy Your Life.” [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 127-128). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- First, because the slogan, despite its friendly pink letters, is a perfect example of a really bad argument. An argument so bad, so disastrous, in fact, that one has to wonder what its sponsors were thinking. [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 134-135). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- See e.g. Julian Baggini, “Yes, life without God can be bleak. Atheism is about facing up to that”, *The Guardian*, 9 March 2012 (<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/mar/09/life-without-god-bleak-atheism>).
- The bus advertisement typifies what’s come to be termed the “New Atheism”, a phrase coined back in 2006 by *Wired* magazine to describe the group of media-savvy atheists – men such as Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett, and the late Christopher Hitchens – whose books attacking religion in general and Christianity in particular have sold by the truckload. [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 139-142). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- Indeed, the full gamut of human emotions spans the alphabet. To be fully, authentically human is to have experienced anger, boredom, compassion, delight, expectation, fear, guilt, hope, insecurity, joy, kindness, love, malice, nonchalance, obligation, peace, queasiness, relief, sensuality, thankfulness, uneasiness, vulnerability, wistfulness, yearning, and zealousness. [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 188-191). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- I stress you, second person singular, had better pull yourself together, because, if the atheist bus slogan is right and there is no God, there’s nobody out there who is ultimately going to help with any pulling. You’re alone in a universe that cares as little about you (and your enjoyment) as it does about the fate

of the amoeba, the ant or the aardvark. There's no hope, there's no justice, and there's certainly nothing inherently wrong with poverty, incidentally, so quit protesting. Life favours the winners; some get the breaks, and others get the sticky end of the stick. Still others get to make millions selling books on atheism, enough for a lifetime of lattes. Enjoy your life? Nice work if you can get it. [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 199-205). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]

- It's easy to sloganize lazily, to try to reduce complex arguments to something that fits on the side of a bus or sounds good on Twitter, but in so doing you usually lose nuance and depth. In fact, it's worse than that: the temptation to sloganize can result in arguments that are not merely wrong but are utterly bizarre and have some terrible consequences when you turn them around. [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 207-210). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- It's awfully easy, for example, to tap out something like this quickly on one's smartphone: Stalin, Hitler and Saddam Hussein were evil, murdering dictators. All had moustaches. Therefore moustaches are evil. [Richard Dawkins (@RichardDawkins), 2 March 2014, 5:14 p.m., <https://twitter.com/RichardDawkins/status/440233751965364224>.] [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 214-216). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- Hitler is a somewhat unique case. Christians and atheist apologists are both occasionally guilty of suggesting Hitler was a card-carrying member of the opposite side, but the truth is that Hitler seems to have cobbled together a unique set of beliefs, drawn from religion and science and mashed up to produce a toxic nationalistic myth. When you read the history of the Third Reich, what you discover is that nobody comes off well. Too many Christians and atheists stood by and did nothing, while there were also brave men and women of all beliefs who took a stand. One famous Christian example is the German pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer, whose stance against the Third Reich ultimately led to his death. See Eric Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy*, Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2010. [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 2950-2956). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]

- Yet if Dawkins is right, we can ignore all of this. We can lay aside what Stalin did and said – ignore Stalin’s very own reasons – and instead offer a random explanation of our own making, one that suits our own purposes. Look, Stalin had a moustache! Don’t look at his atheism; look at his facial hair! [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 245-247). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- Listen to these words from another atheist writer, the philosopher Patricia Churchland: Boiled down to the essentials, a nervous system enables the organism to succeed at four things: feeding, fleeing, fighting and reproducing ... Truth, whatever that is, definitely takes the hindmost. [Patricia Churchland, “Epistemology in the Age of Neuroscience”, *Journal of Philosophy* 84.10, 1987, pp. 544–553, citing 548.] [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 255-257). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- And, finally, what about reproducing? Well, one can easily imagine how “I’m a famous author, don’t you know?” could open many a hotel-room door at the kind of secular conferences frequented by pretty young sceptics. [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 269-271). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- Because here’s the thing: the “God Question” is arguably the most important question that anybody can think about. [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 289-290). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- (It has been remarked that the difference between a doubter and a sceptic is that a doubter is somebody who hopes there might be an answer; a sceptic hopes that there isn’t). [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 302-304). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- What the world needs more than ever is a reasonable dialogue between those who believe in God and those who have questions or doubts (however deeply held), not a clash of fundamentalisms. [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 308-310). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]

## **2 The Scandinavian Sceptic (or: Why Atheism Really is a Belief System)**

- The argument goes this way: atheism is a disbelief in God, and therefore one does not need to give reasons for it. The idea lying behind this is that atheism

is purely negative, the mere absence of belief, and it is only positive beliefs for which we need to provide reasons. [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 345-347). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]

- So is atheism purely the absence of belief, a wholly negative claim? Well, certainly many atheists seem to think so. For example, listen to the late New Atheist Christopher Hitchens: Our belief is not a belief. [Christopher Hitchens, *God is Not Great*, London: Atlantic Books, 2007, p. 5.] [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 350-352). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- The first problem is that the statement “Atheism is just non-belief in God” proves too much. What do I mean? Well, if this claim is true, consider what it entails. It would mean, for instance, that my cat is an atheist, because she does not believe in God. Likewise potatoes, the colour green, Richard Dawkins’s left foot, and small rocks are all atheists because they, too, do not possess a belief in a deity of any kind. [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 359-363). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- When I’ve mentioned this to atheist friends, the usual response is: “But a potato can’t believe anything!” To which I always reply: “So you’re now saying that atheism is the lack of belief in God by a creature that has the ability to form beliefs?” You see that is a different claim entirely. Why? Because it’s a positive claim. My atheist friend is now claiming that she believes that the external world really exists, that we are not simply brains in a jar, our thoughts and experiences manipulated like those of the humans in *The Matrix* movies. Furthermore, she is claiming that other minds exist, that it is possible for the human brain to form beliefs, and that our thinking is more or less reliable. [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 363-369). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- I think we all instinctively know there is a definite difference between active beliefs and passive beliefs. [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 397-398). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- For our active non-beliefs, disbeliefs that consume our time and energy, for those, yes, we do need to give reasons. But for other, lesser, non-beliefs, we don’t, and thus we can safely dismiss protestations about bathroom hippos and the Tooth Fairy quite easily. Why? Because those non-beliefs don’t lead

to action. [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 402-405). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]

- So what about atheism? Well, it doesn't take a lot of thought to realize that atheism causes all manner of actions. For a non-belief, it leads a pretty busy and exciting life. [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 411-412). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- Many things stand upon belief in God, such as the idea that human beings have intrinsic value. Ethics, law, and human rights theory are based on the belief that you are not just a random collection of atoms, but a person with dignity and worth. [Michael J. Perry, "The Morality of Human Rights: A Nonreligious Ground?", *Emory Law Journal* 54, 2005, pp. 97–150.] [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 434-436). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- Reject God by all means, says Nietzsche, but then you must start again with new foundations, explaining why one particular creature thrown up by the blind forces of time and chance churning the primordial soup for billions of years possesses inalienable rights whereas amoebae, cockroaches, and eggplants do not. [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 438-440). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- Novelist and atheist Llewelyn Powys wrote: [The atheist] must be bold to weave a bower of "endless night" upon the very edge of the abyss of abysses. This precarious cat's-cradle he must make his intellectual habitation. It is not only belief in God that must be abandoned, not only all hope of life after death, but all trust in an ordained moral order ... We must be prepared to take our bearings without a compass and with the slippery deck of our life-vessel sliding away under our feet. Dogmatic nihilists, profoundly sceptical of all good, we are put to our resources like shipwrecked seamen. We have no sense of direction, and recognise without dispute that all beyond the margin of our own scant moment is lost. [Llewelyn Powys, *Glory of Life*, London: The Bodley Head, 1938, p. 27. See also the discussion of Powys in John Gray, *The Silence of Animals: On Progress and Other Modern Myths*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013, pp. 176–207.] [E.g. John Gray's hauntingly bleak book *Straw Dogs: Thoughts on Humans and Other Animals*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003, or Bertrand Russell's

classic essay, “A Free Man’s Worship” (1903, the text is available on numerous websites, if one searches for the title.) [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 441-447). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]

- So, once again, we can ask: what about atheism? Does the statement “I do not believe in God” stand alone: stark, naked, and proud, utterly self-reliant? Or does it attract other beliefs to it; does it possess a kind of gravitational pull? Once again, it is tremendously easy to show that atheistic beliefs rarely exist in isolation. For example, most atheists believe in naturalism, the world view which says that only material things exist. Many atheists also believe in some form of scientism, the belief that science can answer any and all questions both about the natural world and about the human condition. The list goes on and on. [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 459-464). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- If you believe that God does not exist, you are highly likely to believe that physics, chemistry, and biology can explain everything. You will also be tempted to pounce opportunistically on materialism as a way of keeping the divine foot out of the door. [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 465-467). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- There is one last powerful piece of evidence that atheism really is a belief system, if not even more than a belief system, and that’s its increasing tendency to function as an identity marker. [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 473-475). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- On the other hand, many atheists do use their non-belief in God very much as an identity marker. They introduce themselves as atheists, they proudly write “freethinker” or “sceptic” in their social media profiles – with the more zealously enthusiastic changing their profile pictures to little icons of the Flying Spaghetti Monster. Furthermore, many atheists show a tendency to gather together in communities centred on their atheism. Some hang out online at places like the Richard Dawkins website in order to beat up on non-believers and remind one another how cool it is to be an atheist. They attend conferences, groups, and seminars; they buy the latest books written by atheist gurus; they have creeds and accuse those who disagree with them of

heresy. They are even starting churches. [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 482-488). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]

- Atheist philosopher Thomas Nagel was deluged with thousands of angry messages, many calling him a “heretic”, after his book *Mind and Cosmos* questioned several aspects of evolution and suggested that materialism could not explain several key features of reality. See Joseph Brean, “What has gotten into Thomas Nagel?: Leading atheist branded a ‘heretic’ for daring to question Darwinism”, *National Post*, 23 March 2013 (online at <http://life.nationalpost.com/2013/03/23/what-has-gotten-into-thomas-nagel-leading-atheist-branded-a-heretic-for-daring-to-question-darwinism/>).

[Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 3007-3011). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]

- Andrew Watts, “The church of self-worship: Sunday morning with the atheists”, *The Spectator*, 22 February 2014 (<http://www.spectator.co.uk/features/9141372/so-tell-me-about-your-faith-journey-sunday-morning-at-the-atheist-church/>). [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 3011-3013). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]

- See e.g. “Atheist Church Split: Sunday Assembly and Godless Revival’s ‘Denominational Chasm’”, *The Huffington Post*, 23 January 2014 ([http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/01/06/atheist-church-split\\_n\\_4550456.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/01/06/atheist-church-split_n_4550456.html)). [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 3015-3017). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]

- Would it be possible even to describe some forms of atheism as a religion? Some scholars of religion think that you can, for instance Stephen Prothero of Boston University: Atheism is a religion of sorts, or can be. Many atheists are quite religious, holding their views about God with the conviction of zealots and evangelizing with verve ... It stands at the center of their lives, defining who they are, how they think, and with whom they associate. The question of God is never far from their minds. [Stephen Prothero, *God is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions That Run the World*, New York: HarperOne, 2010, p. 326.] [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 500-505). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]

- But here’s the important thing to consider: simple disbelief in God does not

make one non-religious. There are plenty of religious people who don't believe in God – such as many adherents of Buddhism, Confucianism, some forms of Judaism, and most of the Canadian United Church. To be “religious” doesn't simply mean “to believe in God”. [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 506-508). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]

- A very helpful suggestion was once offered by sociologist Émile Durkheim, who defined religion as “a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things”. By “sacred things”, Durkheim meant anything a person holds dear, including their ideas and values. [See Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Translated by Carol Cosman with Introduction and Notes by Mark S. Cladis, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, esp. pp. xxi, 46.] [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 508-511). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- There's a second way to think about the word “religion” and that's to consider a “religion” as a system of belief that attempts to answer ultimate questions. Is there a God? Why are we here? How do we determine good and evil? What happens when we die? Even the most hard-nosed, nihilistic atheist has answers to those questions (“No”; “Time plus chance plus natural selection”; “Personal preference”; “We rot”, etc.) and so it fits the definition quite well. [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 512-515). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- Being religious is simply part of what being a human being is. As the French philosopher Julia Kristeva put it in a memorable book title, we all have this incredible need to believe. [Julia Kristeva, *The Incredible Need to Believe*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2011. See also Christian Smith, *Moral, Believing Animals: Human Personhood and Culture*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.] [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 516-517). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- Everybody has beliefs that are central for them, beliefs that cause actions, beliefs that define them, beliefs that have implications. And for those kinds of beliefs we can be asked to give reasons. [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 519-521). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]

- Christopher Hitchens, who said: “That which can be asserted without evidence can be dismissed without evidence.” Quite right too. [Hitchens, *God Is Not Great*, p. 50.] [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 521-523). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]

### **3 The Aardvark in the Artichokes (or: Why Not All Gods are the Same)**

- For example, it bears an uncanny resemblance to one particular claim that has been advanced by some contemporary atheists. Known as the “One God Less” argument, an illustrative specimen occurs in this paragraph from Richard Dawkins’s *The God Delusion*: I have found it an amusing strategy, when asked whether I am atheist, to point out that the questioner is also an atheist when considering Zeus, Apollo, Amon Ra, Mithras, Baal, Thor, Wotan, the Golden Calf and the Flying Spaghetti Monster. I just go one god further. [Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 77.] [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 562-566). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- Dawkins is, for example, a bachelor with regard to every other woman except his wife, but I am not sure that it would be entirely fair on that basis to deny existence to Mrs Dawkins. [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 567-569). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- “Another damnable creationist,” the former Simonyi Professor for the Public Understanding of Science would mutter, scarcely breaking his stride. “I’m not a creationist,” the passer-by retorts. “I’m a biologist, just like you. Also just like you, I’ve rejected Pangenesis, Lamarckian Inheritance, and Punctuated Equilibrium. But, unlike you, I’m a more consistent sceptic. Indeed, I just go ‘One Theorem Further’ and also deny Natural Selection.” [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 606-609). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- Alvin Plantinga, “Two Dozen (or so) Theistic Arguments”, available online at: <http://bit.ly/plantinga24>. At a more popular level, I can also recommend C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, Glasgow: Collins, 1990, and Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God*, London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2008.
- I occasionally encounter enthusiastic young atheists who inform me that physicists can explain, using science alone, why there is a universe at all, why there is something rather than nothing. A commonly quoted work in this

regard is Lawrence M. Krauss's *A Universe From Nothing*, New York: Free Press, 2012. In a nutshell, his argument is: (a) Nothing isn't really nothing, but is really a kind of something; (b) Science can tell us a lot about something; (c) Therefore we don't need God. You may accuse me of simplistic parody here, but quite seriously that's the argument and many reviewers (including fellow atheists) have called him out on it, pointing out that the book is woefully mistitled, since it doesn't answer the question at all. [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 3045-3050). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]

- Indeed, as somebody once remarked, even to argue against God is to tacitly admit that he exists. What do I mean? Well, to argue against God, to write books like *The God Delusion*, is to admit that truth is important (otherwise, why does it matter what somebody believes?). It's to claim that pursuing knowledge is a virtue (otherwise, why choose the hard truth over a comfortable lie?). It's to claim that justice matters (Dawkins's book is a profoundly moral tract, even offering us an atheist ten commandments). But truth, the pursuit of knowledge, the existence of ultimate values such as justice – those are grounded, ultimately, in God. And so to pick these things up and wield them as weapons against God is to play by his rules. [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 689-694). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- I find it fascinating that many atheists suddenly look like Unitarian Universalists at this point, claiming that all religions teach the same thing, so therefore we can't possibly discriminate between them. [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 711-713). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- I ended up studying Islam for twenty years and getting a PhD in Qur'anic Studies. One of the discoveries that fascinated me the most in my doctoral research was that Allah, the God of the Qur'an, is startlingly different from Yahweh, the God of the Bible. Indeed, on almost every major point of Christian doctrine, I think it is safe to say that Islam teaches the opposite. [Andrew G. Bannister, *An Oral-Formulaic Study of the Qur'an*, New York: Lexington Books, 2014.] [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 714-717). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]

- Among the major differences between Islam and Christianity is that of the character and nature of God as understood by the Bible and the Qur'an. For the Bible, Yahweh is a relational God, a God who appears to his people throughout the Old Testament, who took on flesh in the incarnation of Jesus Christ in the New Testament, and who will be present, the Bible claims, in heaven with us once again: "For now we see through a glass, darkly," wrote the apostle Paul; "but then face to face".<sup>76</sup> This is very different from Allah in the Qur'an, a God who is distant and remote, transcendent and lofty, who does not deign to step down into his creation, and is not present in Paradise. [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 720-725). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- Central, too, to the Christian understanding of God is that Yahweh is loving; indeed, the Bible goes as far as to boldly make the claim that God is love,<sup>78</sup> the one whose character and nature define what love actually is. You will commonly hear people opine that all religions teach that God is love, but this is simply not true – for instance, nowhere does the Qur'an claim that "Allah is love". [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 728-731). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- Finally, at the heart of Christianity stands the belief that, in Jesus, God has experienced suffering, paying the price of the cross in order to reconcile humanity to himself. Now atheists may choose to dismiss, laugh at, or even scoff at that claim, but it is a claim unique to Christianity.<sup>80</sup> It is certainly not an idea found in Islam, where the Qur'an goes as far as to deny that the historical event of Jesus' crucifixion ever happened. [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 732-735). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- All other religions of which I am aware tend to work in one of three basic ways: they claim that if you know the right things, do the right things, or experience the right things, then you will achieve paradise, nirvana, wisdom, a higher state of consciousness, good teeth – whatever it is you are looking for. Islam adopts this model ("Keep the commandments"), as does, incidentally, the New Atheism, whose message is that if you think the right way – think good, secular, scientific thoughts – you'll be one of the smart ones, one of the brights,<sup>81</sup> one of the elite, the elect. [Andy Bannister: *The*

*Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 737-742). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]

#### **4 The Santa Delusion (or: Why Faith in God Does Not Mean You're Insane)**

- Let me give you a flavour: A beautiful child close to me, six and the apple of her father's eye, believes that Thomas the Tank Engine really exists. She believes in Father Christmas, and when she grows up her ambition is to be a tooth fairy. She and her schoolfriends believe the solemn word of respected adults that tooth fairies and Father Christmas really exist. This little girl is of an age to believe whatever you tell her. If you tell her about witches changing princes into frogs, she will believe you. If you tell her that bad children roast forever in hell, she will have nightmares. I have just discovered that without her father's consent this sweet, trusting, gullible six-year-old is being sent, for weekly instruction, to a Roman Catholic nun. [Richard Dawkins, *A Devil's Chaplain: Selected Writings*, London: Phoenix, 2004, p. 151.] [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 801-806). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- It's a theme to which Dawkins regularly returns. Here he is again: Father Christmas and the Tooth Fairy are part of the charm of childhood. So is God. Some of us grow out of all three. [Quoted in *Third Way* magazine, Vol. 26, No. 5, June 2003, p. 5.] [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 809-812). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- Now Dawkins is not the only one to compare God to Santa Claus; for example, here is another of the New Atheists, Daniel Dennett: The kindly God who lovingly fashioned each and every one of us (all creatures great and small) and sprinkled the sky with shining stars for our delight – that God is, like Santa Claus, a myth of childhood, not anything a sane, undeluded adult could literally believe in. That God must either be turned into a symbol for something less concrete or abandoned altogether. [Daniel Dennett, *Darwin's Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meanings of Life*, London: Simon & Schuster, 1996, p. 18.] [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 813-817). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- This final exhibit was penned by psychologist Nigel Barber in *The Huffington Post* and is instructive because it singles out those whom these atheists really think are responsible – the pernicious parents who pass on these beliefs:

Similarly, in religious countries, people may well stop believing in Santa Claus when they grow up but still hang on to their religious belief system. So it takes more than skepticism to separate people from their religious faith. Why do religious people trash some implausible beliefs but keep others? Perhaps they get something out of the beliefs they keep. Once a person grows up, their parents no longer shower them with gifts during the holiday season, so they have no particular reason to sustain their credulity concerning Santa Claus, although they do pass on the belief to children. [Nigel Barber, “Why Believe in God but Not Santa Claus?”, Huffington Post, 21 February 2014 ([http://www.huffingtonpost.com/nigel-barber/why-believe-in-god-but-not-santa-claus\\_b\\_4816026.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/nigel-barber/why-believe-in-god-but-not-santa-claus_b_4816026.html)).] [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 821-827). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]

- The first problem is that it’s a classic example of an ad hominem fallacy. That is when, rather than critique an argument or belief, you attack the person making it. [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 830-832). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- As Mark Twain once remarked: “A lie can get halfway around the world before the truth can even get its boots on.” [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 841-842). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- Much better to allow Richard Dawkins’s own words to do the talking: Once, in the question time after a lecture in Dublin, I was asked what I thought about the widely publicized cases of sexual abuse by Catholic priests in Ireland. I replied that, horrible as sexual abuse no doubt was, the damage was arguably less than the long-term psychological damage inflicted by bringing the child up Catholic in the first place. [Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 356.] [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 854-858). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- Psychologist95 Nicholas Humphrey, in a lecture for Amnesty International (you can’t make this stuff up), produced this incredible gem: Children, I’ll argue, have a human right not to have their minds crippled by exposure to other people’s bad ideas – no matter who these other people are. Parents, correspondingly, have no god-given licence to enculturate their children in whatever ways they personally choose: no right to limit the horizons of their

children's knowledge, to bring them up in an atmosphere of dogma and superstition, or to insist they follow the straight and narrow paths of their own faith. In short, children have a right not to have their minds addled by nonsense. And we as a society have a duty to protect them from it. So we should no more allow parents to teach their children to believe, for example, in the literal truth of the Bible, or that the planets rule their lives, than we should allow parents to knock their children's teeth out or lock them in a dungeon. [Nicholas Humphrey, "What Shall We Tell the Children?" in Wes Williams (ed.), *The Values of Science: Oxford Amnesty Lectures 1997*, Oxford: Westview Press, 1998, pp. 58–79 (also available online at <http://www.humphrey.org.uk/papers/1998WhatShallWeTell.pdf>). [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 872-880). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]

- Of course, mention of "stupid" brings us to the key idea at the heart of Humphrey's argument: children must be protected from stupidity, from "bad ideas". The problem is, who gets to decide what counts as a bad idea? [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 883-885). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- The problem is the woefully naïve idea that there is such a thing as neutrality, a kind of educational Switzerland of the mind, a sterilized, value-free homogenous zone from which everything but pure Reason™ has been expunged. That simply doesn't work, because values are everywhere. For instance, the idea that Knowledge Is a Good Thing is not derived from "reason", but is in fact a value. The belief that we should Tell the Truth in Reporting Our Scientific Results is an ethic. The idea that we should be Nice To One Another And Not Pull Our Schoolfriend's Pigtails is a moral value. The claim that we are Utterly Alone In A Godless, Purposeless, Directionless Universe In Which We Are Doomed To Oblivion is a religious claim, however much its advocates squeal in protest when this is pointed out. [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 894-901). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- So here's an idea instead: perhaps we could recognize that everybody has deeply held beliefs about the world (be they atheist or theist), and that most parents, most of the time, will try to raise their children in the best way they

can, instilling their values in them as they do so. And guess what? There will come a time when those children will become teenagers, and teenagers will become adults, and at some point they will choose for themselves – maybe they'll even do this in a considered, balanced way, exploring the evidence for the different world views and seeing which one makes the best sense of reality. [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 905-910). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]

- As Western culture becomes increasingly secular, fewer and fewer people are being raised in religious families. That doesn't stop people finding faith. [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 923-924). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- Peter tells the story of his long journey to Christian faith, starting out from the same type of atheism as that of Christopher, in his book *The Rage Against God*, a book he wrote because: I want to explain how I became convinced, by reason and experience, of the necessity and rightness of a form of Christianity that is modest, accommodating and thoughtful – but ultimately uncompromising about its vital truth. I hope very much that by doing so I can at least cause those who consider themselves to be atheists to hesitate over their choice. I also hope to provide Christian readers with insights they can use the better to understand their unbelieving friends, and so perhaps to sow some small seeds of doubt in the minds of those friends. [Peter Hitchens, *The Rage Against God*, London: Continuum, 2010, p. 2.] [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 928-934). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]

## **5 Aim for That Haystack! (or: Why Psychological Arguments Against Religion Fail)**

- Psychological arguments seem to be everywhere these days. We're told that everything – our politics and our prejudices, whom we love, what we buy, which sports team we support – can all be explained on the basis of our upbringing, our hopes and fears, our psychology. [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 988-990). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- The claim that religious beliefs can simply be explained by psychology is an idea most commonly traced to Sigmund Freud, the Austrian neurologist who

today is remembered as the father of psychoanalysis. Along with sex, religion was a topic that fascinated Freud and, for him, it was all a psychological projection: people believe in God because they project their hopes, desires, and fears into the sky, for instance creating a heavenly version of their earthly father, somebody who is a loving and protecting guardian. We are also afraid of death and mortality, so we project the idea of heaven and an afterlife. You get the idea. [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 999-1004). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]

- Muslim Alom Shaha, author of *The Young Atheist's Handbook: Death gives birth to gods; without death, there would be fewer gods, if any ... Inventing a god is a coping strategy that has been adopted by people since prehistoric times, and it is understandable.* [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 1004-1007). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- Thus we are faced with the puzzling brain-teaser of how it is that evolution, if that is the only game in town, has produced something quite as magnificently odd as human beings, wired to look for ultimate meaning, purpose, and comfort, even though these things are not to be found in the materialistic universe that atheists believe we inhabit. [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 1011-1013). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- If Alom were to find himself lost in the deserts of the Arabian Empty Quarter, stumbling around desperately looking for water, his craving for hydration wouldn't mean that every sparkling glimmer on the horizon was an oasis – mirages may be more common than not. But surely his thirst should tell him that there is such a thing as water. So what is it, in short, that has “set eternity in the hearts of men”? (Ecclesiastes 3:11) [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 1013-1016). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- Now I realize that admission would make Alom leap to his feet and proclaim: “Exactly! That's my very point! But Andy, just because something makes you feel good, it doesn't mean that it's true.” To which I would want to respond: precisely. You cannot deduce whether or not something is true, or whether something exists, from how you feel about it. [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 1018-1020). Monarch Books.

Kindle Edition.]

- Of course, the same point works with negative things too. There are many things the thought of which makes me feel fear or disgust: Star Wars Episode I, death, my tax return, and the Ravenous Bugblatter Beast of Traal, to name but four. But the fact that I feel bad about those things doesn't tell me anything about whether or not they are real. [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 1025-1028). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- My point is simply this: what you feel about God doesn't answer the question of whether there is a God. You may love the idea of God, or you may hate the idea of God – but that simply describes your emotions and psychology and tells us nothing about his actual existence. [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 1049-1051). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- Maybe the reason why Dawkins really believes in evolution is primarily that it annoys creationists and there's nothing he enjoys more than a hearty argument. Those examples help us to get at something quite important: it is possible to believe in things – real, existing things – for entirely wrong or incoherent reasons. [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 1055-1057). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- I admire the candour of an atheist such as Aldous Huxley, for example: For myself, as, no doubt, for most of my contemporaries, the philosophy of meaninglessness was essentially an instrument of liberation. The liberation we desired was simultaneously liberation from a certain political and economic system and liberation from a certain system of morality. We objected to the morality because it interfered with our sexual freedom; we objected to the political and economic system because it was unjust. The supporters of these systems claimed that in some way they embodied the meaning (a Christian meaning, they insisted) of the world. There was one admirably simple method of confuting these people and at the same time justifying ourselves in our political and erotic revolt: we could deny that the world had any meaning whatsoever. [Aldous Huxley, *Ends and Means: An Inquiry into the Nature of Ideals and into the Methods Employed for their Realization*, London: Chatto and Windus, 1941, p. 273.] [Andy Bannister:

*The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 1058-1065). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]

- Other atheists who have reflected carefully on their motives have similarly admitted that their atheism is not so much rational as emotional; here, for instance, is philosopher Thomas Nagel: I want atheism to be true and am made uneasy by the fact that some of the most intelligent and well-informed people I know are religious believers. It isn't just that I don't believe in God and, naturally, hope that I'm right in my belief. It's that I hope there is no God! I don't want there to be a God; I don't want the universe to be like that. [Thomas Nagel, *The Last Word*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 130.] [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 1069-1074). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- For instance, sometimes people have grabbed hold of religion because they have seen in it a way to achieve power, as was once pointed out by Karl Marx in this very famous paragraph: Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the feeling of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless circumstances. It is the opium of the people. [Cited in David McLellan (editor), *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 72.] [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 1079-1082). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]

## **6 Sven and the Art of Refrigerator Maintenance (or: Why Religion Doesn't Poison Everything)**

- Hitchens concludes: As I write these words, and as you read them, people of faith are in their different ways planning your and my destruction, and the destruction of all the hard-won human attainments that I have touched upon. Religion poisons everything. [Hitchens, *God Is Not Great*, p. 13.] [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 1194-1196). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- Here, in similarly impassioned voice, is Sam Harris: Religious unreason should acquire an even greater stigma in our discourse, given that it remains among the principal causes of armed conflict in our world. Before you get to the end of this paragraph, another person will probably die because of what someone else believes about God. Perhaps it is time we demanded that our fellow human beings had better reasons for maintaining their religious

differences, if such differences exist ... [T]he most monstrous crimes against humanity have invariably been inspired by unjustified belief. [Harris, *The End of Faith*, pp. 77–78.] [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 1199-1204). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]

- The problem is that we've tried that experiment, several times, in history. The French Revolution represented one attempt at driving religion from society and creating a secular utopia and it ended with bloody violence and the whoosh of the guillotine, including ironically for its chief architect, Maximilien Robespierre, whose Cult of Reason left tens of thousands dead. Or one might point to more recent and even grander secular re-engineering projects, such as in the former Soviet Union or in China, where a state-sponsored atheism drove out all challengers, chasing religion from society. The result? Millions upon millions dead. Imagine no religion? We don't have to imagine: we can simply replay the historical tape. [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 1237-1242). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- Even Richard Dawkins, in one of his more magnanimous moments, remarked that "Christianity may be a bulwark against something worse". [Cited in Ruth Gledhill, "Scandal and schism leave Christians praying for a 'new Reformation'", *The Times*, 6 April 2010. (Online at <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/faith/article2460128.ece>.)] [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 1244-1245). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- There's a fascinating set of books that provides excellent bedtime reading for those of a more masochistic bent. Called the *Encyclopedia of Wars*, it documents in three massive volumes some 1,763 wars between 8000 BC and AD 2003. Of these, the editors see fit to categorize only 123 conflicts as "religious". That's less than 7 per cent in over ten thousand years of history – if religious types really are out to get us all, as Hitchens claims, they've got some catching up to do. Indeed, even many of that 7 per cent are probably mislabelled, since many of the wars we're quick to tag as "religious" often had secular and political goals. [Charles Phillips and Alan Axelrod (editors), *Encyclopedia of Wars, Three Volumes*, New York: Facts on File, 2004.] [See William T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology*

and the Roots of Modern Conflict, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. Cavanaugh makes the helpful point (p. 4) that secular Western societies love to differentiate between our violence and their violence: “They have not yet learned to remove the dangerous influence of religion from political life. Their violence is therefore irrational and fanatical. Our violence, being secular, is rational, peace making, and sometimes regrettably necessary to contain their violence. We find ourselves obliged to bomb them into liberal democracy.”] [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 1252-1258). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]

- Even today, it’s easy to sloppily characterize something such as the Israeli–Palestinian conflict as a “religious” conflict when it’s primarily about territory. [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 1258-1259). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- Let’s try another word: what about science. Science, poisonous? Surely science is good and wonderful; after all, it’s given us pacemakers, iPhones, space telescopes, and Bill Nye the Science Guy. Well, yes. But science has also given us thalidomide, nuclear and chemical weapons, environmental pollution, and a host of other ills. Science is far from neutral. [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 1277-1279). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- So politics poisons everything, science poisons everything, business poisons everything. If we had the time and the inclination, we could add other items to that list: money, sex, power, journalism, goat’s cheese, and many more. [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 1297-1299). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- However, all these things can also go wrong and go wrong badly. They can be used for evil as well as for good. Why? Well, to answer that, ask yourself what politics, science, business, money, sex, power, journalism, and religion have in common. Well, for one thing they’re all nouns. They’re words. And words don’t really do anything. [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 1306-1309). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- You see, it is human beings that are the common link and, more specifically, it is the involvement of human beings that explains why all these things can be used for good or for ill, to harm or to heal. [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist*

*Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 1311-1312). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]

- The Russian novelist Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn gets as close to the mark as any thinker. Imprisoned and tortured as he was by the Soviets for his dissenting political views, one would have thought that Solzhenitsyn, more than most people, would have been quick to cry “Politics poisons everything” and to denounce his captors as uniquely evil. But he was far wiser than that and instead wrote these words: “The line between good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either, but right through the middle of every human heart and through all human hearts.” [Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago: 1918–1956*, New York: HarperCollins, 2002, p. 75.] [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 1313-1318). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- In other words, it is we who poison everything. [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Location 1318). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- I would point out that an atheist of no less a stature than John Gray, former Professor of European Thought at the London School of Economics and certainly no fan of religion, has something very interesting to say in his book *Heresies: Liberal humanism is a secular rendition of a Christian myth, but the truth in the myth has been lost on the way. The biblical story of the Fall teaches that evil cannot be rooted out from human life. Humans are radically flawed – a perception rooted in the doctrine of Original Sin. It is not error or ignorance that stands in the way of a better world. The human animal may yearn for peace and freedom, but it is no less fond of war and tyranny. No scientific advance can answer the contradictions of human needs. On the contrary, they can only be intensified as science increases human power.* [John Gray, *Heresies: Against Progress and Other Illusions*, London: Granta, 2004, p. 8.] [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 1321-1327). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- A few years ago, the Canadian novelist Douglas Coupland wrote an autobiographical novel which explored the way that his generation (he grew up in the 1960s) tried to throw out religion and tackle all these questions under their own secular steam. Listen to what he says: Now – here is my secret: I tell it to you with an openness of heart that I doubt I shall ever

achieve again, so I pray you are in a quiet room as you hear these words. My secret is that I need God – that I am sick and can no longer make it alone. I need God to help me give, because I no longer seem capable of giving; to help me to be kind, as I no longer seem capable of kindness; to help me love, as I seem beyond being able to love. [Douglas Coupland, *Life After God*, New York: Pocket Books, 1995, p. 359.] [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 1350-1356). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]

- “I don’t know what I believe or disbelieve any more. I guess that’s why I’ve settled on the term ‘agnostic’. Do you think that’s lazy?” “Well, there are two types of agnostic,” I replied. “You can be a lazy agnostic, yes – which I’d define as somebody who can’t be bothered to find the answer to the God question. Alternatively, you can be an active agnostic – somebody who is genuinely searching for the answer but just hasn’t found it yet.” [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 1373-1377). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- You see, if atheism is true, then religion is purely a human invention and, like all human creations, it can harm as well as help. So just live with it and let natural selection, that most powerful of sieves, strain out the adaptations that work from those that do not. If Mother Nature approves of the evolutionary benefits of religion, well we’re stuck with it, like it or not. [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 1379-1382). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]

## **7 The Lunatic in the Louvre (or: Why Science Cannot Explain the Entirety of Reality)**

- Who could possibly imagine that the way to answer a question of art history (the reason why Leonardo painted the Mona Lisa in the style that he did) could be answered by analysing the paint’s chemical composition or studying the wood frame? [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 1445-1446). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- Well, maybe from a statement like this: “Science is the only philosophical construct we have to determine truth with any degree of reliability.” That pronouncement was made by Harry Kroto, a man who is no dribbling village idiot but rather a Nobel-Prize-winning chemist. The technical term for

Harry's idea is scientism, the view that science can answer any and all questions, that it can quite literally encompass the whole of reality, from the secrets of supernovae to the laws of cricket. [Cited by P. Z. Myers at [http://scienceblogs.com/pharyngula/2011/07/theres\\_something\\_obvious\\_misssi.php](http://scienceblogs.com/pharyngula/2011/07/theres_something_obvious_misssi.php). The original quote can be found in *The Times*, 7 April 2011. [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 1449-1453). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]

- Richard Dawkins claims that “scientists [are] the specialists in discovering what is true about the world and the universe” [Richard Dawkins, *A Devil's Chaplain: Selected Writings*, London: Phoenix, 2004, p. 242.] [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 1453-1454). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- Stephen Hawking, wrote: [P]hilosophy is dead. Philosophy has not kept up with modern developments in science, particularly physics. Scientists have become the bearers of the torch of discovery in our quest for knowledge. [Cited in Stephen Hawking and Leonard Mlodinow, *The Grand Design*, New York: Bantam Books, 2010, p. 5.] [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 1455-1457). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- I was recently involved in filming a TV documentary exploring this very question and got to interview another leading atheist, the chemist Peter Atkins. We had a fun couple of hours together during which we disagreed about almost everything; I was particularly struck by something Peter said when I asked him about the explanatory power of science. Very excitedly, he announced: Humanity should be proud that he [sic] has actually stumbled into this way of understanding the world and that it really can attack every problem that concerns humanity with the prospect of an outcome. Science also gives you the promise of understanding while you're alive, whilst religion offers the prospect of understanding when you are dead. [Peter Atkins, *Burning Questions* TV documentary, Episode 2: “God and Science” (<http://www.burningquestions.ca>).] [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 1457-1463). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- Consider the question: what is the value of a human life? Now that's not a question merely plucked at random from the ether, but is arguably one of the

most important questions of all – the answer to it lies at the root of ethics, law, and justice. [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 1474-1476). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]

- Your value is not derived from your chemical constituents, your relationships, or your production. If we go down that route, we're all in trouble (unless you're a grossly overweight lawyer with great social networking skills). Rather, most of us would want to say that human beings have intrinsic value, yet, no matter how much "science" you do, you won't derive that answer. Science may be able to comment on what you're made of; what it can't determine is what you are – and there's a huge difference. [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 1487-1491). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- OK, well in that case let me instead point out something closer to home, namely how a claim such as "science is the only reliable way to uncover truth" actually destroys science itself. How? Well, consider one of the major pillars on which science rests, the idea that knowledge is a good thing. [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 1500-1502). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- Here's Christopher Hitchens in full rhetorical flow: [W]e are in need of a renewed Enlightenment, which will base itself on the proposition that the proper study of mankind is man, and woman ... The pursuit of unfettered scientific inquiry, and the availability of new findings to masses of people by easy electronic means, will revolutionize our concepts of research and development ... And all this and more is, for the first time in our history, within the reach if not the grasp of everyone. [Hitchens, *God Is Not Great*, p. 283.] [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 1502-1506). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- Not merely is there the question of why science exists; there's also the question of how science works. Science stands not merely on foundational ideas about the value of knowledge; it is also built on the ethic that telling the truth and reporting your results accurately are good things. [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 1520-1522). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- No matter how many experiments you run, you will not produce "Do Not Lie

About Your Results” in a test tube or a particle accelerator. [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 1529-1530). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]

- “We don’t need to worry about trusting scientists, because science is repeatable”. In other words, if I don’t trust the results of a particular scientist, I can go out and try to repeat them. It’s often claimed that this virtue of repeatability lies at the very heart of the scientific method. The problem, of course, is that it’s not quite true. Consider the Large Hadron Collider at CERN in Switzerland, one of the largest scientific instruments ever made, built to smash atoms into each other at high speed in an attempt to unlock the secrets of subatomic particles (and possibly to create new flavours of Maltesers). Now, let’s imagine that I am of a sceptical persuasion and I become suspicious of claims that physicists have used the Collider to discover the famed Higgs boson particle. [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 1530-1536). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- “Repeatability!” I exclaim. No, I’m not going to take this at face value; what I want to do is to recreate their results for myself. There’s just one itchy-bitsy little problem: the small matter of planning permission to dig a seventeen-mile-long tunnel starting in my back garden and the minor question of where I can find six billion dollars in funding. Perhaps, on second thoughts, I ought to take it on trust after all. Thank goodness, then, that those scientists are such ethical chaps! [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 1536-1539). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- The moral of all of this is that science is a wonderful tool, a powerful tool, possibly the best tool that humankind has ever invented, but it is only one tool and, like any tool, there are places where it works well and there are others where it simply doesn’t work at all. [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 1540-1543). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- Geneticist and atheist Richard Lewontin admits as such: It is not that the methods and institutions of science somehow compel us to accept a material explanation of the phenomenal world, but, on the contrary, that we are forced by our a priori adherence to material causes to create an apparatus of

investigation and a set of concepts that produce material explanations, no matter how counter-intuitive, no matter how mystifying to the uninitiated. Moreover, that materialism is an absolute, for we cannot allow a Divine Foot in the door. [Richard Lewontin, “Billions and Billions of Demons: A Review of Carl Sagan’s ‘The Demon-Haunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark’”, New York Review of Books, 9 January 1997.] [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 1568-1572). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]

- All of this is evidence that the information I have revealed to you is true. In short, revelation is not contrary to reason. [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 1585-1586). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- Daniel Dennett. His book *Consciousness Explained* was an attempt to show how science could answer perhaps the most difficult question of all: what is the human mind and how does it work. Here he is, in full swing: There is only one sort of stuff, namely matter – the physical stuff of physics, chemistry, and physiology – and the mind is somehow nothing but a physical phenomenon. In short, the mind is the brain ... we can (in principle!) account for every mental phenomenon using the same basic principles, laws, and raw materials that suffice to explain radioactivity, continental drift, photosynthesis, reproduction, nutrition, and growth. [Daniel Dennett, *Consciousness Explained*, Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1991, p. 33.] [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 1587-1592). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- Here’s another atheist, Colin Blakemore: The human brain is a machine which alone accounts for all our actions, our most private thoughts, our beliefs ... All our actions are products of the activity of our brains. It seems to me to make no sense (in scientific terms) to try to distinguish sharply between acts that result from conscious attention and those that result from our reflexes or are caused by disease or damage to the brain. [Colin Blakemore, *The Mind Machine*, London: BBC Books, 1990, p. 270.] [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 1599-1603). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- Science, you see, has limits. Science comes to an end where, in fact, it opens

up questions far bigger than itself. [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Location 1647). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]

## **8 Humpty Dumpty and the Vegan (or: Why We Really Do Need God to Be Good)**

- Listen to these words from Alom Shaha, author of the Young Atheist's Handbook: Despite not believing in God, and not believing in an afterlife where I might be rewarded or punished for my behaviour, I try to be a good person. That's the most any of us can do. [Shaha, *The Young Atheist's Handbook*, p. 45.] [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 1721-1724). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- The question is not "Can somebody be good without God?" but rather, "What do we actually mean by the word 'good' in the first place?" [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 1733-1734). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- the question of who gets to decide what "good" means – was neatly illustrated in a famous paper written by the Yale University law professor Arthur Leff.<sup>193</sup> He points out that any moral claims (e.g. "You ought to help old ladies across the road"; "You ought not to poke badgers with a stick"; "Generosity is good"; "Paris Hilton is bad") – are authority claims, and to any authority claim we can respond like the school bully or the town drunk and cry: "Yeah? Sez who?" In the absence of God, says Leff, there are but two options: you can turn every individual person into a little godlet, able to decide good and evil for themselves. But then who evaluates between them when there are clashes between godlet claims? Alternatively, you can turn the state into God and let it determine good and evil, but then might becomes right and you have sheer, naked brutality (and what's wrong with government-sponsored brutality, if the state is the only moral authority?) [Arthur A. Leff, "Unspeakable Ethics, Unnatural Law", *Duke Law Journal* 6, 1979, pp. 1229–1249. Available online at <http://bit.ly/leff>.] [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 1822-1830). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- But Harris thinks he has the solution. No need for philosophy or theology or any other dusty ology for him; he can square the circle using science. How so? Well, the key, says Harris, is carefully defining what we mean by

“morality”: [Q]uestions about values – about meaning, morality, and life’s larger purpose – are really questions about the well-being of conscious creatures. Values, therefore, translate into facts that can be scientifically understood.... If there are objective truths to be known about human well-being – if kindness, for instance, is generally more conducive to happiness than cruelty is – then science should one day be able to make very precise claims about which of our behaviors and uses of attention are morally good, which are neutral, and which are worth abandoning. [Sam Harris, *The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values*, New York: Free Press, 2011, pp. 1–2, 8.] [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 1846-1852). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]

- You see, there are a number of problems with trying to use science like this. First, why choose to maximize happiness? Why not choose knowledge? Or compassion? Or bravery? Or stamp-collecting? In short, science cannot tell us why we should value happiness over and above all other virtues or pursuits. [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 1862-1865). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- Most of us instinctively sense the problem there: indeed, to paraphrase the philosopher John Stuart Mill: “Better to be an unhappy Socrates than a very happy pig.” [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 1866-1867). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- But if we must stick with happiness, well here’s another question for Harris: why is your happiness worth the same as my happiness? From where are you deriving the Magical Moral Standard that meticulously evens out the playing field with spirit-level precision and allows us to conclude that everybody has an equal right to be happy? After all, it’s perfectly possible that somebody else’s happiness is best served at your expense. [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 1867-1870). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- Here’s atheist Michael Ruse explaining how he thinks this might work: Darwin himself recognized that although the struggle for existence can lead to open conflict, it does not necessarily do so. Often one can get more out of life by cooperating rather than by fighting. This is fairly obvious when we think about it. Suppose there is some desirable resource, let us say a freshly

killed animal that is a major source of protein. Two rivals might do much better by deciding to share the booty rather than fighting over it. [Michael Ruse, “Naturalist Moral Nonrealism”, in R. Keith Loftin (ed.), *God & Morality: Four Views*, Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2012, pp. 53–74, citing p. 58.] [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 1886-1890). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]

- The first problem is that what Ruse describes is not actually morality at all, but merely a description of behaviour. Natural selection has chosen the lion’s pointy teeth, the seagull’s streamlined wings, and the baboon’s bright red bottom – but not because they are right, or good, or proper; simply because they get the job done (fighting, fleeing, feeding, or reproducing). [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 1893-1896). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- Despite the myriad difficulties that beset attempts to ground goodness without God, morality is everywhere. We simply can’t help ourselves – we open our mouths and moral judgments tumble out. [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 1912-1913). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- It turns out that Richard Dawkins is a cricket fan and so he took to Twitter to protest: Stuart Broad obviously knew perfectly well he was caught. Refused to walk. What a revolting cheat. I now want Australia to win the Ashes. He followed this up with: I am well aware that it is a fact that professional cricketers care about winning more than about morality. But they bloody well shouldn’t. [Richard Dawkins (@RichardDawkins), 12 July 2013, 5:38 p.m., <https://twitter.com/RichardDawkins/status/355803363834732544>.] [Richard Dawkins (@RichardDawkins), 12 July 2013, 6:11 p.m., <https://twitter.com/RichardDawkins/status/355811671723347969>.] [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 1918-1922). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- Indeed, in his book *River Out of Eden*, Dawkins penned this oft-quoted passage: The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but blind, pitiless indifference. As that unhappy poet A. E. Housman put it: “For Nature, heartless, witless Nature Will neither know nor care.”

DNA neither knows nor cares. DNA just is. And we dance to its music. [Richard Dawkins, *River Out of Eden: A Darwinian View of Life*, New York: Basic Books, 1995, p. 133.] [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 1925-1930). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]

- As the Harvard political philosopher Michael Sandel puts it in his book *Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do*: Debates about justice and rights are often, unavoidably, debates about the purpose of social institutions, the goods they allocate, and the virtues they honour and reward. Despite our best efforts to make law neutral on such questions, it may not be possible to say what's just without arguing about the nature of the good life. [Michael J. Sandel, *Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do?*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010, p. 207.] [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 1944-1947). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- Unless you're willing to tackle the question of the "good life", the question of telos, of purpose, then you cannot actually address questions of morality, for you have no way of knowing what a human life is supposed to be. [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 1948-1949). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- There's only one solution to all of this, and that is if there is a source of goodness that is bigger than and above and beyond us – a transcendent source of goodness, perhaps what the Greek philosopher Plato called "The Good" (capital T, capital G), from which all morals and values, opinions and choices, decisions and actions ultimately derive their value. Perhaps that source of all goodness might also provide something more: perhaps it might help with the question of purpose, [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 1953-1957). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]

## **9 The Peculiar Case of the Postmodern Penguin (or: Why Life Without God is Meaningless)**

- A recent poll for a major Internet search company ranked "What is the meaning of life?" as the toughest question of all, coming far above such other existential stumpers as "What is love?", "Do blondes have more fun?", and "Why do you never see baby pigeons?" [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 2027-2029). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]

- What you think the meaning of life is will shape your values, ideals, beliefs, hopes, dreams, and opinions [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Location 2052). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- Friedrich Nietzsche put it: “He who has a why to live for can bear with almost any how”. [Cited in Viktor E. Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, New York: Pocket Books, 1997, p. 126.] [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 2055-2056). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- is it actually possible for life to have meaning if God doesn’t exist? If there is no God, if we are alone in an atheistic universe, the human race thrown up like flotsam and jetsam on the tides of time, chance, and chaos, then isn’t life meaningless, valueless, and purposeless? [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 2058-2060). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- Molleen Matsumura: We humanists agree that there is no karmic law, no Grand Plan, and no Grand Planner to make the world make sense for us. Instead of discovering “The Meaning of Life,” we’re faced with the job of creating meaningful lives for ourselves. [Molleen Matsumura, “Ingredients of a Life Worth Living”, in Dale McGowan et al. (editors), *Raising Freethinkers: A Practical Guide for Parenting Beyond Belief*, New York: AMACOM, 2009, p. 129.] [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 2061-2063). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- Humanist Canada website: Humanism is a philosophy or life-stance based upon a profound respect for human dignity and the conviction that human beings are ultimately accountable to themselves and to society for their actions. It is a deity-free worldview that affirms our ability to lead ethical and meaningful lives without reliance upon a belief in the supernatural. [Source: <http://humanistcanada.ca/about/humanism>.] [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 2065-2068). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- For instance, what happens if my meaning contradicts your meaning? [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Location 2097). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- So who wins? My “meaning” and your “meaning” are so vastly, staggeringly, cataclysmically different that there’s simply no reconciling them. And given

we've already admitted that on atheism there's no meaning "baked" into reality, no "right answer", as it were, then I guess we're left to fight it out. [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 2103-2105). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]

- But, on the other hand, if there is no author, if The God Delusion were simply created by somebody casually lobbing a hand grenade into the Scrabble™ factory, the letter tiles falling in such a way that they created the text by sheer fluke, then there is no "meaning" in the book, only what you or I choose to read into it. [See the discussion in Richard Taylor, *Metaphysics*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1983, pp. 100–105.] [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 2119-2122). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- Bertrand Russell, in one of his most famous essays, wrote: Man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving; that his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms; that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave; that all the labours of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and that the whole temple of Man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins ... Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul's habitation henceforth be safely built. [Bertrand Russell, "A Free Man's Worship", available online at <http://www3.nd.edu/~afreddos/courses/264/fmw.htm>.] [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 2126-2132). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- atheist philosopher John Gray wrote: "We cannot escape the finality of tragedy ... there is no redemption from being human." [Gray, *The Silence of Animals*, p. 208.] [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 2139-2140). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- Or, as an atheist friend paraphrased it on Twitter last year: "Atheism says that you will die, your friends will die, your family will die, the human race will die, the universe will die (this is why atheism is not exactly an easy sell)."

[Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 2141-2142). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]

- Here goes: People seem to struggle with the notion that this life is all there is. Many seem to think that if they accept that this is it, life has no meaning. A friend once compared this to saying that a cake has no meaning once you've eaten it. A cake provides you with a pleasurable experience, a focus for celebration, a memory, and even perhaps a wish. An eaten cake will give you energy. Some of its atoms may literally become part of you through the processes that are continually replacing the billions of cells in your body. Similarly, when you die, your memory and the things you did will live on for a while, but your atoms will live on for a lot longer, becoming part of other objects in the universe. [Shaha, *The Young Atheist's Handbook*, p. 36.] [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 2145-2151). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- In a book with almost that very title,<sup>229</sup> professor of psychology Roy Baumeister suggests that, if we are to tackle the issue of life's meaning satisfactorily, there are four underlying questions that must be answered first:<sup>230</sup> the question of identity (Who am I?); the question of value (Do I matter?); the question of purpose (Why am I here?); and the question of agency (Can I make a difference). [Roy F. Baumeister, *Meanings of Life*, New York: The Guilford Press, 1991. His work is nicely summarized in McGrath, *Surprised by Meaning*, pp. 104–112.] [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 2157-2161). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- Yet when it comes to human life, most of us do not want to be treated this way, as one of an endless series of equally interchangeable entities. "I am not a number!" cried Patrick McGoochan in the cult 1960s TV show *The Prisoner*, and he was absolutely right: we don't want to be labelled, filed, stamped, indexed, or categorized by our nationality, gender, race, or genetic profile. Yet if we follow atheism it's hard to see how we can be anything other than this: if we are just lumbering biological robots, driven by the puppet masters of our DNA who care not one jot about who we are, provided that we reproduce, then it does seem that the question of identity is unanswerable. [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 2166-

2171). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]

- The problem with applying this to human beings, of course, is that it is thoroughly utilitarian, a philosophy that is deeply troubling because it tends to see human beings as means rather than ends. You look at me and you don't see the dashing young writer with the charming accent, but somebody who can lend you a five-pound note, introduce you to the right people, help you get a job, or buy double-glazing from you. [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 2174-2177). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- Of course, if atheism is true, then Alom is probably right and it's hard to see what actual, inherent value we have simply by virtue of being ourselves. [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 2178-2179). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- The rock was one of millions that the tide was idly toying with, but something about it caught my eye. I picked it up and turned it over, studying the way that countless waves had shaped the granite and worn it smooth. Warmed by the morning sun, the rock felt comfortable in my hand; the curve of one side fitted snugly in my palm. So I pocketed it and brought it back to my office, and now the rock has a purpose: it's a paperweight, helping keep Alom Shaha's book open at page 36. Of course, the rock did not choose that purpose, any more than the cake chose to be eaten. Its existence was meaningless, purposeless until I picked it up and changed that fact. What goes for the rock goes for us, too, according to atheism. Unless purpose is provided from outside us, there is none at all. [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 2183-2189). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- Of course, that presumably means that my atoms aren't really mine, are they? They're just passing through, temporarily occupying the space that comprises Andy Bannister on their way to becoming something else. [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 2191-2193). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- Leo Tolstoy wrote this in his autobiography: [This is] a question without an answer to which one cannot live, as I had found by experience. It was: "What will come of what I am doing today or shall do tomorrow? What will come

of my whole life?” Differently expressed, the question is: “Why should I live, why wish for anything, or do anything?” It can also be expressed thus: “Is there any meaning in my life that the inevitable death awaiting me does not destroy?” [Leo Nikolayevich Tolstoy, *A Confession*, Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1998 [1882], p. 16.] [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 2198-2201). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]

- What awaits us – our civilization, our race, our planet, indeed the universe as a whole – is destruction and extinction, no matter what we do. So, for sure, enjoy the ride, but let us at least be honest about where we are heading. [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 2209-2211). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- The Jewish psychotherapist Viktor Frankl once remarked that “Life is a quest for meaning”. Frankl survived the concentration camps of World War Two, an experience that forced him to look long and hard at these questions, especially the question of whether it is possible to find a meaning that can stand up in the face of incredible suffering. Frankl concluded: For too long we have been dreaming a dream from which we are now waking up: the dream that if we just improve the socioeconomic situation of people, everything will be okay, people will become happy. The truth is that as the struggle for survival has subsided, the question has emerged: survival for what? Ever more people today have the means to live, but no meaning to live for. [Viktor E. Frankl, *The Unheard Cry for Meaning: Psychotherapy and Humanism*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1978, p. 21.] [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 2218-2223). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- Rather, what you need to find is a framework that enables you to answer those questions of identity, value, purpose, and meaning. [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Location 2226). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- Yet if this is true, we’re faced with an exceedingly puzzling mystery: namely, why it is that we yearn for more? What is it about human beings that makes us the only the creatures who ask “Why”? [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 2251-2252). Monarch Books. Kindle

Edition.]

- But what if atheism isn't true? What if those desires, those yearnings point somewhere: what if there really is a magnetic north to which the compass needle of the soul is inexorably drawn? [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 2256-2257). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]

## **10 The Panini Poisoner of Pimlico (or: Why Everybody Has Faith)**

- By way of contemporary example, in his book *The End of Faith*, atheist Sam Harris writes this: [F]aith is what credulity becomes when it finally achieves escape velocity from the constraints of terrestrial discourse – constraints like reasonableness, internal coherence, civility and candor. [Harris, *The End of Faith*, p. 65.] [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 2318-2321). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- Try if you wish to live a totally faith-free existence, but that will require doing nothing, going nowhere, and trusting no one. [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 2380-2381). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- Faith is part of the bedrock of human experience and one on which we rely in a million different ways every day, usually ways we haven't actually thought about until somebody helpfully points them out to us. [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 2383-2384). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- Yet the clue is actually in the very word “faith” itself, which comes from the Latin word *fides*, meaning “trust” and “reliability”. [It's also ironic that Dawkins, Harris, Dennett et al. would presumably say that they are confident that atheism is true. Why is this ironic? Because the word “confidence” comes from the Latin *con fides* – “with faith”.] [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 2396-2397). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- I have good reasons to trust my wife, because time and experience have led me to believe that she is trustworthy, honourable, generous, and kind. Because of that, I'm willing to exercise faith, to place my trust, to believe in her. My faith in her is not disconnected from the evidence; it's precisely because of the evidence. Faith and evidence are thus closely connected – or,

to put it another way, our belief in something or someone flows from our belief that they are trustworthy. [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 2402-2407). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]

- For instance, I can accumulate fact after fact about my wife, I can gain more and more reasons to trust her, but I can never 100 per cent prove that she isn't a very clever confidence trickster, out to play the long game. [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 2409-2410). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- First, we need to ask the right questions. Rather than sophomoric sound bites (“Prove God exists, you dyed-in-the-wool faith-head!”) we need to be willing to weigh a wide range of evidence and consider where it points when it is taken together. Among the data we would want to consider would be questions such as why there is something rather than nothing; why the laws of physics appear so finely tuned for life – indeed, why there are laws of nature at all and why mathematics so perfectly describes them; why reason and rationality work, why it is that we find ourselves conscious and able to trust our cognitive processes. We would also want to consider questions like beauty and meaning, purpose and morality, and ask ourselves whether the existence of all these things fits better with the claim that the universe is, at root, just dumb, mindless atoms banging together, or with the idea that there is some kind of higher power, some kind of God, behind it all. [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 2461-2469). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- Being willing to weigh the evidence honestly is a valuable tool for assessing whether something is worth putting your faith in. There's a second way, too, and that's by being willing to put what you currently believe to the test. [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 2481-2482). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- A few years before his untimely death from cancer, atheist Christopher Hitchens took part in a panel discussion at the Christian Book Expo in Dallas. During the dialogue, Hitchens made a fascinating statement: The struggle is to realize that whilst there is a transcendent and a numinous accessible to us through our imagination – I would give the examples of love, susceptibility to music, landscape, poetry architecture, and so forth, there is no need for

this to become a supernatural – especially not a supernatural that contains a hidden but unalterable supervising, superintending, intervening deity. [The video of the discussion can be seen on YouTube at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bphSDKOIE6I>.] [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 2502-2506). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]

- This was Wilson's response: You can't use the word "transcendent" without explaining "transcends what". On naturalism, the space-time continuum is all there is. Our imaginations bump our heads on the ceiling. There is no way to get out. There simply is no upstairs. [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 2509-2511). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- Every time we try to ask a deeper question, or appeal to anything outside the realms of physics, chemistry, and biology (realms whose borders are patrolled by fearsome-looking guards with moustaches and baseball bats), we are stuck, bumping our heads on the ceiling. God? Ouch. Morals? Damn. Beauty? Yikes. Meaning? Whack! Philosophy? Hey, easy with that bat; that hurt. [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 2513-2516). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- The question is not whether you have faith. You do; we all do – the atheist and the theist, the sceptic and the seeker, the doubter and the disciple. Rather, the question is simply this: is that in which you are placing your faith able to bear the weight; is it trustworthy? [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 2544-2546). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]

## **11 The Reluctant Eunuch (or: Why We Really Can Know a Lot About Jesus)**

- The idea that history is largely unreliable, a wholly untrustworthy concoction of lies, mistakes, and biases, liberally dosed with layer upon layer of interpretation and marinated in conspiracy, is more common than you might imagine. [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 2591-2592). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]
- historian and sceptic Bart Ehrman, in the introduction to his book *Did Jesus Exist?*, explains: What I do hope is to convince genuine seekers who really want to know how we know that Jesus did exist, as virtually every scholar of antiquity, of biblical studies, of classics, and of Christian origins in this

country and, in fact, the Western world agrees. Many of these scholars have no vested interest in the matter. As it turns out, I myself do not either. I am not a Christian, and I have no interest in promoting a Christian cause or a Christian agenda. I am an agnostic with atheist leanings, and my life and views of the world would be approximately the same whether or not Jesus existed ... But as a historian, I think evidence matters. And the past matters. And for anyone to whom both evidence and the past matter, a dispassionate consideration of the case makes it quite plain: Jesus did exist. [Bart D. Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist? The Historical Argument for Jesus of Nazareth*, New York: HarperCollins, 2012, p. 5.] [Andy Bannister: *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Kindle Locations 2676-2683). Monarch Books. Kindle Edition.]

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