

# Theism vs. Atheism: Who or What is Eternal?

By Martin Pickup

Is there a God, or isn't there? It is the most important question a person can contemplate, and the answer one gives to this question will have a profound effect upon the way he lives his life. The issue really comes down to deciding what it is that has always existed: supernatural intelligence or non-intelligent matter? In other words, are we going to believe that God or that matter is eternal?

## The Worldview of Atheism

A true atheist espouses the worldview known as *naturalism*. He believes that nature—i.e., our material universe—is all that exists. So how does the atheist explain the origin of nature itself? According to naturalism, there can be no God who created the natural realm. Such a being necessarily would have to be separate from nature itself—hence, a supernatural being—and naturalism presupposes that nothing outside of the natural realm can exist. The atheist's worldview therefore allows for only two hypothetical explanations for the existence of nature: either it has always existed, or it came into being all by itself.

The latter option is really not an option at all, for no atheist believes that something can literally come from nothing. While he may affirm that the universe as we know it today came into being by means of evolutionary processes, an atheist doesn't believe that the universe started from absolute nothingness. His worldview affirms that some part of the natural realm—some bit of matter or energy ... *something*—must always have existed, as well as the natural processes by which it developed into the complex universe that we see

today. To put it another way, if our material cosmos of space and time began as a “big bang,” as most scientists theorize, then something material already had to exist in order to cause the bang.

In reality, then, atheism and its naturalistic worldview imply only one possibility as to the origin of nature: it had no origin in the strictest sense of the term. There was no moment in the past when the material realm began to exist. Nature—in some rudimentary form at least—must always have existed. So the debate between atheism and theism boils down to one issue: either *something* or *someone* is eternal. We either believe that inherent eternality and non-contingency belong to nature, an impersonal system of matter; or we believe that inherent eternality and non-contingency belong to a supernatural being.

Theism calls this supernatural being “God.” Some atheists scoff at the idea of God by saying, “If God made all things, and yet nothing comes from nothing, then who made God?” Well no one, of course. The point of theism is that God has always existed. If an atheist finds that notion incredible, he needs to realize that the only other option is to believe that matter itself is inherently eternal. But that means that non-intelligent matter somehow possessed the capacity to develop into the present universe, and that this development took place without design or intention, simply as the result of random natural processes. Is that view more credible than the concept of God?

Strict naturalists apparently think so, because they opt for the eternality of nature. But their position means that the complexity and order of the universe in which we live is all the result of blind chance. It means that the rationality we possess as human beings—that which enables us to investigate, analyze, understand, and philosophize about the universe

in which we live—arose from nonrational matter and the chance results of random forces. So non-intelligence produced intelligence, non-life produced life, and chaos produced order—all by sheer happenstance. All of this is what the atheist must swallow as the necessary result of his naturalistic worldview. I find the worldview of theism far more plausible.

### **Does Science Prove Naturalism?**

Some people adopt atheism because they think that modern science has somehow proven it to be true. Many scientists talk as if their discipline has elevated naturalism to a place of virtual certainty. But is that correct? Has science proven that nature is all that exists? Has it demonstrated that believing in a supernatural God is an illogical notion?

People who think so fail to recognize the limitations of science. Scientific investigation can give us information about the way in which the universe functions, but it can never give us knowledge about what may exist beyond the natural realm. Ontological considerations lie outside the purview of scientific investigation. Science is limited to a study of the physical; it cannot provide us with knowledge of the metaphysical. It can neither verify nor falsify a naturalism worldview. Science is like a train that can take us on a fast and exciting ride, but it cannot venture beyond the tracks on which it runs. As soon as any scientist starts moving away from a discussion of physical data that can be analyzed and begins talking about worldviews and issues of eternal existence, he has stopped functioning as a scientist and donned the garb of a philosopher.

But if a naturalistic scientist wants to talk philosophy, let's do that. As I said before, if naturalism is correct and there is no God, then one has to believe in the eternity of matter

and that the universe sprang forth on its own with no intelligence producing it or guiding the process. Yet with each new scientific discovery that we make, we learn how increasingly complex and orderly the cosmos really is. From cellular DNA to far-away black holes, ours is a world that cries out against the notion that its existence is the result of sheer chance. Far from destroying the reasonableness of a belief in a supernatural designer, science actually discloses to us a cosmos so amazingly ordered that only the existence of a supreme designer can logically explain it.

The atheist responds by saying that modern science has shown that there are natural explanations for many of the phenomena of nature that previously were assumed to have supernatural causes. Ancient civilizations thought that hurricanes, tidal waves, and eclipses were caused by capricious gods and goddesses venting their wrath. But scientific investigation has shown us that these phenomena are the result of physical forces acting according to predictable natural laws. Ancient people thought that sickness was the curse of evil spirits. Yet now we know that diseases are caused by germs, not by gremlins or goblins. So what reason is there, the atheist asks, for assuming a supernatural causation for anything at all? Why is there still a reason to believe in God?

The fact that science has disproven many of the supernatural speculations and superstitions of pre-scientific man does not argue that all supernatural views must be false. Nor does our discovery of the natural processes that directly cause the events of nature negate the possibility that a supernatural being exists who created and indirectly utilizes these natural processes. Precipitation, we now know, is the direct result of evaporation and condensation, but that does not prove that we need not thank God for the rain.

No matter how much we come to learn about the way our material world functions, we will always be faced with the question of ultimate causation. Is it reasonable to think that the material universe came to exist and function in all of its complexity with no supernatural intelligence behind it? Does it really make sense to believe that nature in some form has always existed, and that it produced—on its own and by mere happenstance—all that we observe today? I don't think so.