

What is an atheist?

by John A. Davison

It is always a good idea to define the terms when one asks a question. In asking "What is an atheist?" I discovered an ambiguity in the dictionary definition. The American Heritage Dictionary defines an atheist as -

"One who does not believe in the existence of God."

I will use Friedrich Nietzsche to illustrate the ambiguity to which I refer. His "Gott ist Tot" is one of the most profound summaries in all of philosophy. Hasn't Nietzsche implied that God once existed? Can such a person properly be considered to be an atheist?

I think this calls for a clarification of the word atheist. The key word in the dictionary definition is "existence." A more precise definition might be as follows -

"An atheist is one who denies that God ever existed."

This is the brand of atheist represented by Richard Dawkins and his New World counterpart Paul Zachary Myers, or for that matter by any proponent of the Darwinian paradigm, one which includes no role for a higher power either now or in the past. I realize there are devout Darwinians who also claim to be devout Christians. The Christian ethic demands a living, personal God. What would be the role of such a God in a mechanism driven entirely by chance and natural selection?

I had an interesting experience on the Richard Dawkins weblog, richarddawkins.net. On October 12, 2006 I introduced the thread "God or Gods are now dead but must have once existed." That title was a ruse of course because no one knows anything for certain about Gods. The important thing is that it worked! In the course of about a week it produced twelve pages of heated exchange, nearly all directed against me and around 60,000 views, probably a forum record, following which I was summarily banished and denied further viewing of the forum from my computer, a condition still in effect.

An important feature of any inquiry is never to make unnecessary assumptions (Principle of Parsimony or Occam's Razor). Is it necessary that God or Gods still exist in order to understand the world? I answer no. Obversely, can we understand the world without postulating that a God or Gods once existed? Once again I must answer no. I find it unthinkable that matter could organize itself even once into a living, evolving organism. I regard it as mandatory that there were an unknown number of supernatural interventions (creations) in the remote past. Those who claim otherwise are, in my carefully considered opinion, living in fantasy worlds.

I have pluralized God for a sound reason. When I examine the world I find it quite impossible to accept a single Creator. The world is much easier for me to understand if I postulate at least two Gods, one benevolent, the other malevolent. Actually this dualism is present in the Judeo-Christian ethic with Lucifer as a fallen angel. I hope I can be

forgiven if I have elevated him to the level of a God!

Parallel differences prevail in evolutionary science. The Darwinians assume a single origin of life with diversity emanating from a single source, a diversity resulting from random mutations and natural selection. Actually there is very little evidence for such a perspective. Both the fossil and the extant living worlds are represented by profound discontinuities most of which are unconnected and may remain so. Leo Berg, for whom I have enormous respect, maintained -

“Organisms have developed from tens of thousands of primary forms, i.e., polyphyletically.”
Nomogenesis, page 406.

There is nothing in the present state of our knowledge in conflict with Berg’s assertion and much in support of it.

As an example close to home, it is only within the level of the Mammalian Order Primates to which we belong that we now have incontrovertible evidence for evolutionary continuity, a continuity which has obviously been accompanied by, and perhaps largely caused by, reorganizations of a common ancestral chromosome structure. There is no question that *Homo sapiens* is an animal with animal ancestors. The origins of all the higher taxonomic categories from Order to Phylum remain shrouded in mystery. The same can be said for the plant world.

In summary, there is no more reason to insist on a monotheistic creation than there is on a monophyletic evolution, but to deny that one or more Creators, beyond our present capacity to comprehend, must have once existed is unthinkable for this investigator. By rejecting the Darwinian model, I am joined by Pierre Grasse who put his convictions in italics for emphasis.

“Any system which purports to account for evolution must invoke a mechanism not mutational and aleatory.”
Evolution of Living Organisms, page 245.

and

“Let us not invoke God in realities in which He no longer has to intervene.”
page 166.

* italics do not appear in this version of the essay. Grasse’s first statement was entirely in italics. In the second so was “no longer has to intervene.”