

Six Questions to Ask an Atheist

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Many times, as Christian theists, we find ourselves on the defensive against the critiques and questions of atheists. Sometimes, in the midst of arguments and proofs, we miss the importance of conversation. These questions, then, are meant to be a part of a conversation. They are not, in and of themselves, arguments or "proofs" for God. They are commonly asked existential or experiential questions that both atheists and theists alike can ponder.

1. ***If there is no God, "the big questions" remain unanswered***, so how do we answer the following questions: Why is there something rather than nothing? This question was asked by Aristotle and Leibniz alike—albeit with differing answers. But it is an historic concern. Why is there conscious, intelligent life on this planet, and is there any meaning to this life? If there is meaning, what kind of meaning and how is it found? Does human history lead anywhere, or is it all in vain since death is merely the end? How do you come to understand good and evil, right and wrong without a transcendent signifier? If these concepts are merely social constructions, or human opinions, whose opinion does one trust in determining what is good or bad, right or wrong? If you are content within atheism, what circumstances would serve to make you open to other answers?
2. ***If we reject the existence of God, we are left with a crisis of meaning***, so why don't we see more atheists like Jean Paul Sartre, or Friedrich Nietzsche, or Michel Foucault? These three philosophers, who also embraced atheism, recognized that in the absence of God, there was no transcendent meaning beyond one's own self-interests, pleasures, or tastes. The crisis of atheistic meaninglessness is depicted in Sartre's book *Nausea*. Without God, there is a crisis of meaning, and these three thinkers, among others, show us a world of just stuff, thrown out into space and time, going nowhere, meaning nothing.
3. ***When people have embraced atheism, [were not] the historical results... horrific***, as in the regimes of Stalin, Mao and Pol Pot who saw religion as the problem and worked to eradicate it? In other words, what set of actions are consistent with particular belief commitments? It could be argued, that these behaviors – of the regimes in question – are more consistent with the implications of atheism. [However], I'm thankful that many of the atheists I know do not live the implications of these beliefs out for themselves like others did! It could be argued that the socio-political ideologies could very well be the outworking of a particular set of beliefs – beliefs that posited the ideal state as an atheistic one.
4. ***If there is no God, the problems of evil and suffering are in no way solved***, so where is the hope of redemption, or meaning for those who suffer? Suffering is just as tragic, if not more so, without God because there is no hope of ultimate justice, or of the suffering being rendered meaningful or transcendent, redemptive or redeemable. It might be true that there is no God to blame now, but neither is there a God to reach out to for strength, transcendent meaning, or comfort. Why would we seek the alleviation of suffering without objective morality grounded in a God of justice?
5. ***If there is no God, we lose the very standard by which we critique religions and religious people***, so whose opinion matters most? Whose voice will be heard? Whose tastes or preferences will be honored? In the long run, human tastes and opinions have no more weight than we give them, and who are we to give them meaning anyway? Who is to say that lying, or cheating or adultery or child molestation are wrong—really wrong? Where do those standards come from? Sure, our societies might make these things "illegal" and impose penalties or consequences for things that are not socially acceptable, but human cultures have at various times legally or socially disapproved of everything from believing in God to believing the world revolves around

the sun; from slavery, to interracial marriage, from polygamy to monogamy. Human taste, opinion law and culture are hardly dependable arbiters of Truth.

6. ***If there is no God, we don't make sense***, so how do we explain human longings and desire for the transcendent? How do we even explain human questions for meaning and purpose, or inner thoughts like, why do I feel unfulfilled or empty? Why do we hunger for the spiritual, and how do we explain these longings if nothing can exist beyond the material world?

For further reading, see Ravi Zacharias's book *The Real Face of Atheism*, and C.S. Lewis's book *Mere Christianity*. The RZIM website has many excellent resources on atheism at www.rzim.org, as does the Centre for Public Christianity at www.publicchristianity.org.