



x how to be aⁿ
y (a)theist

√ WHY MANY SKEPTICS AREN'T
SKEPTICAL ENOUGH

MITCH STOKES

FOREWORD BY J. P. MORELAND

How to Be an Atheist is the best popular discussion of the (alleged) conflict between science and religion that I have ever read. The book is well written, well organized, and philosophically sophisticated. Moreover, the author's knowledge of science, the history of science, and the history of 'the conflict between science and religion' is admirably suited to his purpose. Above all, the book is *accessible*. No reader who is interested in questions about the relation between science and religion will have any difficulty in following the author's arguments."

Peter van Inwagen, John Cardinal O'Hara Professor of Philosophy,
University of Notre Dame

"How many times has atheistic naturalism appeared to be a charade, like a shell game where you never seem to see all the steps of the process? Or how frequently have you been told that atheists are too soft—that they must be even more rigorously skeptical? But then when they do follow their own system, there is nothing left with which to build their worldview! Get ready—you're embarking on a challenging journey here. In this volume, Mitch Stokes uncovers issue after issue where atheistic naturalism looks more like the king who wore no clothes, and Stokes is the one to give him the message! This is must reading—I recommend it highly!"

Gary R. Habermas, Distinguished Research Professor and Chair,
Philosophy Department, Liberty University

"I've been saying for years that professional skeptics are not skeptical enough, that they are selective in their skepticism, and that if they ever turned their skeptical faculties on their own skepticism and the materialist worldview that almost invariably comes attached to it, they would see the house of cards they've built collapse of its own internal inadequacies. Mitch Stokes, in this incisive book, does a wonderful job filling in the details to this charge against skepticism."

William A. Dembski, Senior Fellow, Center for Science and Culture,
Discovery Institute; author, *Being as Communion*

How to Be an Atheist is both readable and well documented, both incisive and wide-ranging. It is a wise book that exposes the dead-end reasoning and ultimately antihuman positions of modern skepticism. If you're looking for an accessible book to take you through the host of such skeptical arguments against belief in God, this is it!"

Paul Copan, Pledger Family Chair of Philosophy and Ethics,
Palm Beach Atlantic University

“Opponents of Christianity have often claimed that science disproves the God of the Bible. But actual scientists and philosophers of science have been far more modest, expressing serious reservations about the use of science to prove anything about the origin and ultimate nature of the world. In this book, Stokes expresses a deep respect for science, but like the best scientists themselves, is carefully skeptical about the idea that science is our final gateway to truth. He also argues that despite all recent claims to the contrary, morality does not make sense without God. The book deals with some highly technical matters in a learned way, but with wit and clarity. I profited from it very much.”

John M. Frame, J. D. Trimble Chair of Systematic Theology and
Philosophy, Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando, Florida

“Mitch Stokes takes the so-called new atheists out to the intellectual woodshed. His clear and powerful double whammy against atheism—it is difficult to ground morality in science, and it is difficult to ground science on atheism—shows just how much faith it takes to be an atheist.”

Kelly James Clark, Senior Research Fellow, Kaufman Interfaith
Institute; The Honors Program, Brooks College

“In this superbly executed book, Mitch Stokes makes a solid and creative case for why many atheists aren’t skeptical enough. If they were consistent ‘sober skeptics,’ he argues, their view of the world would be radically reimagined. For those—whether believer, agnostic, or atheist—who are not afraid to follow the truth, wherever it may lead, this book is a must-read.”

Chad V. Meister, Professor of Philosophy and Theology,
Bethel College; author, *Evil: A Guide for the Perplexed*

How to Be an Atheist

How to Be an Atheist

Why Many Skeptics Aren't Skeptical Enough

Mitch Stokes

Foreword by J. P. Moreland

 **CROSSWAY**
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

How to Be an Atheist: Why Many Skeptics Aren't Skeptical Enough

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Published by Crossway

1300 Crescent Street
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

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Cover design: Jeff Miller, Faceout Studio

First printing 2016

Printed in the United States of America

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Trade paperback ISBN: 978-1-4335-4298-5

ePub ISBN: 978-1-4335-4301-2

PDF ISBN: 978-1-4335-4299-2

Mobipocket ISBN: 978-1-4335-4300-5

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Stokes, Mitch.

How to be an atheist : why many skeptics aren't skeptical enough / Mitch Stokes ; foreword by J. P. Moreland.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-4335-4298-5 (tp)

1. Apologetics. 2. Christianity and atheism. 3. Atheism.

4. Skepticism. I. Title.

BT1212.S76 2016

239—dc23

2015023759

Crossway is a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

VP 26 25 24 23 22 21 20 19 18 17 16
15 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To my parents,
who had to put up with a lot.

I think my ultimate goal would be to convert people away from particular religions toward a rationalist skepticism.

Richard Dawkins, interview by Larry Taunton

Their scepticism about values is on the surface: it is for use on other people's values; about the values current in their own set they are not nearly sceptical enough. And this phenomenon is very usual.

C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*

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Foreword

When Crossway editor Justin Taylor asked me to write a foreword to *How to Be an Atheist*, I was excited to have this opportunity. I felt this way for two primary reasons.

First, I was and am impressed with and encouraged by Professor Stokes's academic pedigree. He has a BS and MS in mechanical engineering (with five patents!), so he understands science well. Then, too, he received an MA in religion at Yale under Nicholas Wolterstorff, and an MA and PhD in philosophy from Notre Dame with Peter van Inwagen and Alvin Plantinga as his dissertation supervisors. When I read this, my head exploded! Having been in the ministry for forty-five years, I am thrilled to see a whole movement arise, typified by Stokes, of well-educated Jesus lovers who can competently address the important issues of the day, and who can lead and teach others to be involved more intelligently.

Second, for a long time I have thought that while atheists claimed to embody the virtue of skepticism and, thus, have rationality on their side, the truth of the matter is that many, if not most, atheists employ a selective skepticism. They are skeptical of anything that supports theism, but they are not skeptical enough of some of their own beliefs as atheists. And now, finally, Professor Stokes has provided us with a book that carefully distinguishes different forms of skepticism and convincingly exposes (many) atheists' skeptical inconsistencies and inadequacies.

When I got the manuscript, I literally could not put it down. I spent the day reading the entire work. Why? The content was so well selected, so intelligently presented, and so accessible that it was a delight to read. Moreover, it is very well crafted. Stokes is a wordsmith in his writing style. (And the guy is funny!)

How to Be an Atheist is, indeed, a model work in philosophical apologetics in the sense that Stokes painstakingly criticizes atheistic views that are raised against Christianity and responds to objections. But it would be a grave mistake to think that this is just another apologetics book. No, this book gives the reader an education in a number of important areas, and it teaches us how to think. Time and time again, Stokes takes an angle on an issue that is different, insightful, and refreshing. And his research is exemplary.

If you are a believer, I urge you to get this book, encourage friends to get it, and form a study group in which you can work through the material slowly and thoughtfully. I promise you, it is well worth the effort. I meet many Christians who wish they could go back to graduate school and get an education relevant to their Christianity, but finances and other commitments present insurmountable obstacles to this move. Well, there is a second alternative: read books like this one and you will get an education.

If you are an atheist who is intellectually open to investigating some of the problems in your worldview, this is the book for you. It has an irenic tone and deals fairly and proportionately with its subject matter.

I thank Mitch Stokes for doing the hard work that made it possible to write a book like this. And I am so happy that *How to Be an Atheist* is being published. Read it, study it, and ponder what it says. You will be the better for it.

J. P. Moreland
Distinguished Professor of Philosophy
Talbot School of Theology
Biola University

Preface

I'm a skeptic by training and temperament. I understand why some people are skeptical about religion. What I don't understand is how naive some atheists are about the rational strength of their position. It's one thing to believe there's no God, but it's quite another to say things like "there exists not a shred of respectable evidence" for God's existence, or "science shows that God does not exist."¹ When atheists make such grand claims, they're either frightfully ignorant of the relevant complexities or else bluffing. In either case, they should stop, if for no other reason than that they're damaging their credibility.

Not all atheists writing today are guilty of such posturing—this should go without saying. Nor am I criticizing atheists for holding their views passionately. The real problem is when unwarranted confidence shows up in their *considered* remarks—for example, when they slow down long enough to write. This goes for all of us, in fact. Intellectual dishonesty is a sin no matter who commits it; über-certainty is a form of lying. No doubt I'm guilty of it too, and if I knew where, I'd stop. But whenever the opportunity arises, we should exercise intellectual restraint.

Part of the solution is to realize and admit that belief and unbelief are each far more than a matter of reason. Although I think that reason tips the scales in favor of belief in God, all things being equal, it also seems to me that all things *aren't* equal. Reason alone won't settle the issue. No one is neutral. This is why debates over God's existence can sometimes seem like making a legal case for your devotion to your spouse: there

¹The first is from Christopher Hitchens's introduction to Christopher Hitchens, ed., *The Portable Atheist: Essential Readings for the Nonbeliever* (Philadelphia: Da Capo, 2007), xxii; the second is from the subtitle to Victor J. Stenger, *God: The Failed Hypothesis—How Science Shows That God Does Not Exist* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2008).

are good objective reasons, but those reasons aren't the whole of it. It's always *logically* possible that your spouse is part of an alien army sent to seduce and distract earth's inhabitants prior to the invasion. Or worse, it's always logically possible that he or she is cheating on you. Reason can get away from us. As Chesterton said in *Orthodoxy* (and he's probably right), some insane people aren't *irrational*; they're *hyperrational*, with no way to tap the brakes: "The madman is the man who has lost everything except his reason."² Not that we shouldn't marshal reason. Indeed, it should play as much a role as possible in our deliberations. Just no more than that.

Now, one of atheism's virtues is its avowed skepticism. (I cannot, in fact, think of another virtue at the moment.) Yet many unbelievers, it seems to me, don't take their skepticism seriously enough. I find this puzzling. I mean, I identify with their no-nonsense skeptical stance and general distrust of humanity; these appeal to me, probably more than they ought to. What I don't understand is the lack of skeptical follow-through.

Moreover, I'm surprised that science-fueled atheism is often naive about the alleged source of said unbelief, namely, science and its methods. I must admit that I too am enthusiastic about science; you'll see no science bashing in these pages. But I will direct attention to legitimate epistemological questions regarding science. This will help us take science seriously *for the right reasons*. It will also prevent us from taking it too seriously. Ironically, overestimating science in some areas leads to underestimating it in others. For example, many of us don't appreciate how difficult science is and so don't appreciate nearly enough what scientists have actually accomplished.

But if someone *were* to insist on taking science too seriously, believing, for example, that it implies a materialistic and neo-Darwinian view of nature, this would have important implications for that person's views about morality. Morality for that person would be, I'll argue, no more than a matter of taste. If I'm right, then unbelievers should be extremely skeptical of the authority of their own moral beliefs and even about the very concept of morality. The lesson, I claim, is that über-optimism about science leads to moral skepticism—along a path through atheism (or what I will sometimes call *naturalism*, the view that

²G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (1908; repr., San Francisco: Ignatius, 1995), 24.

the natural world is all there is—“or ever was, or ever will be,” according to Carl Sagan’s secular Gloria Patri).

We believers have lots of room for improvement too. We also should become more adept at skepticism. After all, the problem in the garden was, to my lights, that we weren’t skeptical enough. Never get into a stranger’s car, no matter what kind of fruit he offers you. But the believer’s skepticism should be a studied one, not an ignorant flinch. We often throw out the baby with the bathwater. There are, for example, overzealous “science deniers” who take their skepticism too far. And even when sane and sober believers doubt science at the right points, we often do a poor job identifying why science went wrong (or we fail to appreciate how reasonable it is for science to end up there).

So both sides should be more skeptical, and about the right things. We should take skepticism as seriously as possible, but no more than that. This is what I will attempt. I’ve divided this book into three main sections. In the first section, by far the shortest, I lay some of the epistemological groundwork. In particular, I look at the limits of what we can know in general, considering our epistemic abilities with respect to sense perception and reason, our two main cognitive faculties.

Once we’ve gotten our epistemological bearings, I turn to science and, in particular, to how we should think about its methods and claims. Again, my goal is by no means to denigrate science or to deny that it tells us important and surprising things about the world. But there are also good reasons to remain agnostic or even doubtful about things we cannot directly observe; and we directly observe far less than many people imagine. My main point regarding science is that anyone who takes skepticism seriously should also seriously question whether science gives us the sober truth about fundamental reality, especially about whether naturalism is true.

In these first two sections, much of what I have to say applies to us all, believers and unbelievers alike. That is, we can all agree on much of what I say about our epistemological limitations—including the limitations of science (although the limitations are significantly worse if humans aren’t the product of design). But suppose that naturalism *were in fact* true, and further suppose that science largely supports naturalism. What implications does this have for our standard view that there are objective moral standards? In the third section, I’ll argue that if

naturalism is true, then there are no such standards. Most atheists, however, will be loath to agree. Their reluctance is understandable; but if they're serious about their skepticism—about following reason where'er it leadeth—they'll reluctantly agree.

Or at least I would if I were an atheist.

Acknowledgments

Though I can't say for certain, I'm pretty sure I know what kind of atheist I would be: I'd be darn skeptical about some of the things my unbelieving colleagues held most dear. And for quite a while, I've wanted to speak frankly to atheists—skeptic to skeptic. This book has been a chance to do that and I'm extremely grateful to (now Dr.) Justin Taylor and Crossway for the opportunity. Everyone at Crossway has been very supportive, despite some schedule setbacks due to a temporary downturn in my health. Justin in particular was entirely understanding and wholly gracious.

Speaking of Crossway, my editor, Thom Notaro, was just stellar. He had a preternatural ability to make stylistic improvements while retaining my “voice” (such as it is). He never tried to force me to say things I wouldn't say otherwise but also prevented me from letting it all hang out, metaphorically speaking. Moreover, and just as important, Thom has the theological acumen to help guide substantive content changes whenever necessary. And his attention to detail is unsurpassed. He's a valuable asset to Crossway and to any author whose book he helps craft.

Speaking of my health (which I was doing in the paragraph before last), I want to express my gratitude to New Saint Andrews College for allowing me a leave of absence during the fall of 2014 to finish this book. It was more than I deserve.

As for the book's title (which I wasn't speaking of at all), it will puzzle some folks, so I'd like to mention that it was inspired by Alvin Plantinga's article “How to Be an Anti-Realist.” And, all things being equal, anything inspired by Al is ahead of the game simply in virtue of that.

My wife, Christine, proofread the entire manuscript, and though

she has done this exact thing for each of my books, her efforts are no less appreciated for their frequency; the opposite in fact. And I never once had to sleep on the couch, no matter how many chapters she had to read in a day.

And lastly, speaking of acknowledgments (which I've been doing this entire time) I must acknowledge that I'm utterly dependent on my agent, Aaron Rench. Without him, this project would never have gotten off the ground.

Introduction

Skepticism and Contemporary Atheism

Science and Morality: The Engines of Atheism

Perhaps the most conspicuous trait of contemporary atheists—besides their atheism—is that they’re especially fervent about two things: science and morality. This observation is not a criticism. Science and morality should have everyone’s vote. In fact, as I’ll point out in a moment, we’re hardwired to be enthusiastic about both. But such enthusiasm manifests itself in a special way among atheists.

Consider science. According to unbelievers, belief in God flies in the face of what “we now know” about the world. This is largely because science allegedly shows that there is, in all likelihood, no God. In fact, the two most famous scientists of our generation—Stephen Hawking and Richard Dawkins—are atheists. (Dawkins was even voted the world’s top thinker in 2013.)¹ Is it merely a coincidence that both scientists, at the pinnacle of their respective fields, don’t believe in God? Is there something about science that encourages, suggests, or even slightly hints that God doesn’t exist? It would seem so: Dawkins’s and Hawking’s atheism is largely driven by what they think science tells us about reality. And they aren’t isolated examples.

But why think that science and God are incompatible? Let’s consider

¹John Dugdale, “Richard Dawkins Named World’s Top Thinker in Poll,” *The Guardian*, April 25, 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2013/apr/25/richard-dawkins-named-top-thinker>.

an anecdote. Around 1800, French physicist Pierre-Simon Laplace presented Napoleon with a copy of his monumental work on celestial mechanics.² When Napoleon asked Monsieur Laplace why this massive work made no mention of the Creator, Laplace is said to have replied, “I had no need of that hypothesis.”

This little exchange, said Christopher Hitchens, just might mark the moment in history when God became superfluous.³ It also illustrates the prevalent sentiment born during the Enlightenment: science has shown that the universe’s staggering order and complexity, which we once attributed to God’s meticulous care, is actually the result of entirely natural processes.⁴

We’ll look more closely at this line of thinking later, but for now, suffice it to say that most atheists see science as underwriting their unbelief. But according to some atheists, there’s something else wrong with believing that God exists. When the current crop of “new atheists” began writing, it was primarily in response to the 9/11 tragedy. Belief in God, they said, is not merely false; it is morally wrong. It places humanity’s future in jeopardy, and we therefore have a moral responsibility to eradicate it. We are also told that religious violence isn’t limited to acts of terrorism, but includes telling innocent children paralyzing stories of eternal damnation and dinosaurs on the ark. According to Dawkins, such indoctrination is worse than “ordinary”

²Stephen Jay Gould, *Dinosaur in a Haystack: Reflections in Natural History* (New York: Three Rivers, 1995), 25.

³Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Twelve, 2007), 66. Laplace’s famous quip is popular among unbelievers. The director of the Stanford Institute for Theoretical Physics, Leonard Susskind (also one of the founders of string theory), places it squarely on the opening page of his book *The Cosmic Landscape: String Theory and the Illusion of Intelligent Design* (New York: Little, Brown, 2006).

⁴As an interesting aside, the facts surrounding this anecdote may be somewhat different. For one thing, it’s not entirely clear that Laplace actually uttered these words, although he may have said something that could be taken to imply them. For example, Daniel Johnson says that the source of this story was the first astronomer William Herschel. In his diary, Herschel says:

The first Consul [Napoleon, who had not yet crowned himself emperor] then asked a few questions relating to Astronomy and the construction of the heavens to which I made such answers as seemed to give him great satisfaction. He also addressed himself to Mr. Laplace on the same subject, and held a considerable argument with him in which he differed from that eminent mathematician. The difference was occasioned by an exclamation of the first Consul, who asked in a tone of exclamation or admiration (when we were speaking of the extent of the sidereal heavens): “And who is the author of all this!” Mons. De la Place wished to shew that a chain of natural causes would account for the construction and preservation of the wonderful system. This the first Consul rather opposed. Much may be said on the subject; by joining the arguments of both we shall be led to “Nature and nature’s God.”

In any case, from Herschel’s comments, it sounds like Laplace could have believed that he could account for the prevailing order of the cosmos—and perhaps even its origin—with all-natural explanatory ingredients. See Johnson’s article, “The Hypothetical Atheist,” *Commentary*, June 18, 2007, <https://www.commentarymagazine.com/2007/06/18/the-hypothetical-atheist>.

child abuse.⁵ And Hitchens said that religion in general poisons *everything* and that Christianity in particular is a “wicked cult.” For anyone desiring moral progress, the abolition of religion will be an important first or second step.

It’s Only Natural

Science and morality, then, are the drivers of contemporary atheism and thus “sweet spots” in the debates between believers and nonbelievers. In fact, the most popular arguments against God’s existence come from science and morality, the latter in regard to evil and suffering. (Of course, many believers will think that science and morality show us just the opposite: nature looks suspiciously like it was designed, and morality seems to require a divine Lawgiver.)

But we shouldn’t be surprised that these two topics are central to the debate. In the case of science—the study of the natural world—humankind has concentrated an immense amount of resources toward understanding the cosmos. If humans were to ever get an A for effort, it would be here. On the other hand, man cannot live by facts alone. Morality tells us how we ought to behave, how we should live. Notice then, that science and morality fall along the all-important fact/value divide. Science tells us what *is* the case; morality tells us what we *ought* to do, although some atheists believe that science also tells us what we ought to do, as we’ll see.

Humans seem to be hardwired to contemplate both conscience and cosmos. Even the Bible suggests this. In the first chapter of Paul’s letter to the Romans, he says that something in us is triggered by the created order, causing us to just “see” that God exists (cf. 1:19–20). There seems to be something like a built-in faculty that causes immediate belief in God (or would cause it, were it not for sin). In his next chapter, Paul suggests that humans come equipped with a built-in *moral* faculty or, as he puts it, a moral law “written on their hearts” (2:15).

In any case, we seem specially attuned to the wiles of nature and the commands of morality. And these propensities were not lost on the great Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant, who famously said, “Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe, the more often and enduringly reflection is occupied with them: the

⁵Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), 356.

starry heavens above me and the moral law within me.”⁶ Kant has inspired more than his share of skepticism about God’s existence, whether he intended to or not.⁷ He was also, not unrelatedly, the culmination of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment and was wildly impressed by the Scientific Revolution of the previous century, a revolution in which Aristotle was overthrown by Newton. Although there was no doubt in Kant’s mind (or anyone else’s) that Newton’s mathematical physics was correct, it wasn’t clear how creatures with such limited cognitive faculties could be privy to such knowledge. So in his famous (and immensely difficult) *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant developed an excruciating epistemology meant to underwrite our mathematical and scientific knowledge.

The situation depicted by the new physics also made it difficult to see how we might account for morality. For one thing, if the world behaves according to deterministic physical laws—and humans are simply parts of that world—then how might we be held responsible for our actions? Aren’t our actions entirely dictated by the laws of physics (or some similarly natural laws)? “See God, ’twasn’t my fault I ate the fruit; it was the physics that thou gavest me.”

Kant’s overall philosophical project then was a monumental attempt to reconcile the new scientific picture with the traditional one that we’re morally responsible beings, that is, to reconcile the laws of nature with the laws of morality. Ever since the Enlightenment, this has been a pressing goal. And the problem is even stickier for atheists: if there’s no divine Lawgiver, then even the very concept of morality changes—or so I’ll argue in part 3, where we’ll look at the prospects of this reconciliatory project.

In any case, none of this would have been a problem for Kant had science not suggested it. Today we’re familiar with science telling us strange things about us and the world. But it can be disturbing nonetheless. And it was much more disturbing for folks living immediately downstream of the Scientific Revolution.

Skepticism and a New Enlightenment

Yet these folks also felt an exhilarating sense of freedom, which was at a premium during the Enlightenment. We might even summarize the

⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2002), 203.

⁷ No doubt his intentions weren’t entirely pure, but as far as skepticism about God goes, he says that he had destroyed knowledge (of God) in order to make room for faith.

Enlightenment the way philosopher Karl Popper did: as *liberation*, that is, “self-emancipation through knowledge.”⁸ But what exactly were the shackles? In a word, religion. Not that all Enlightenment thinkers were atheists; many were deists (of course, many were still Christians). But a sizeable portion of them saw organized religion as oppressive and overbearing, an intellectual dictatorship, and so they sought the freedom to think for themselves. In fact, people who bucked the religious consensus were called *freethinkers*. It was a second revolution in as many centuries: this time religion overthrown by reason.

But, allegedly, our shackles were in some sense our own fault, due to a kind of immaturity and cowardice. Kant memorably put it this way in his 1784 essay “What Is Enlightenment?”

Enlightenment is man’s release from his self-imposed tutelage. Tutelage is man’s inability to make use of his understanding without direction from another. Self-incurred is the tutelage when its cause lies not in lack of reason but in lack of resolution and courage to use it without direction from another. *Sapere Aude!* [Dare to know!] “Have courage to use your own reason!”—that is the motto of enlightenment.⁹

The Enlightenment, then, was an intellectual coming of age, a coming into one’s majority; and this required a stout heart and moral resolve. Who could fail to be moved?

The connection between knowledge and freedom was certainly not new to the Enlightenment. The ancient liberal arts were a curriculum for the liberated man, as opposed to the slave. In one sense, this is getting things backward. It is not so much that only free people should be educated (although that was true), but that education makes one free. As Epictetus—himself once a slave—said in his *Discourses*, “We must not believe the many, who say that only free people ought to be educated but rather believe the philosophers who say that only the educated are free.”¹⁰ Anyone who doesn’t appreciate educational freedom, or the freedom that genuine education provides, probably already has it.

⁸Karl Popper, “Emancipation through Knowledge,” in *Challenges to the Enlightenment: In Defense of Reason and Science*, ed. Paul Kurtz and Timothy J. Madigan (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus, 1994), 71.

⁹Immanuel Kant, “What Is Enlightenment?,” in *The Portable Enlightenment Reader*, ed. Isaac Kramnick (New York: Penguin, 1995), 1.

¹⁰Quoted in Carl Sagan, *The Demon-Haunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark* (New York: Ballantine, 1996), 354.

The Enlightenment's revolution continues. Some of today's most influential atheists are part of the Freedom from Religion Foundation (FFRF), the largest atheist advocacy group. The group's purpose is to protect "the constitutional principle of the separation of state and church" (and one of the ways you can support this cause is to buy a bumper sticker with their slogan "In Reason We Trust"). Honorary board members of FFRF have included such intellectual luminaries as Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Jerry Coyne, Steven Pinker, Rebecca Goldstein, and the late Christopher Hitchens.

Another group, the Academy of Humanism, is an organization of unbelievers who, among other things, "are devoted to free inquiry in all fields of human endeavor" and "committed to a scientific outlook and the use of scientific methods in acquiring knowledge."¹¹ Laureates of the academy (past and present) include Richard Rorty, Lawrence Krauss, Dawkins, Pinker, Dennett, A. C. Grayling, Hitchens, Antony Flew, J. J. C. Smart, and Philip Kitcher.

These groups continue the Enlightenment's emphasis on reason and freedom. It's no coincidence then that Christopher Hitchens ended his searing attack on religion *God Is Not Great* with the chapter "In Conclusion: The Need for a New Enlightenment."¹² Hitchens characterizes this coming age with heroic phrases like "unfettered scientific inquiry," "the path of skepticism," and "doubt and experiment" (as opposed to "dogma and faith"). The idea seems to be that we should be wary of what others tell us, particularly if those "others" are religious. We should be skeptical of authority and think for ourselves. *Sapere aude!*

Sober Skepticism

If knowledge unlocks freedom, then whither the notions of doubt and skepticism that Hitchens so highly valued? Knowledge and skepticism seem to be polar opposites of one another. A full-blown skeptic is someone who doubts that we can have knowledge about anything whatsoever.

There are, of course, kinder, gentler versions of skepticism. According to these, we do not (or cannot) have knowledge merely about specific topics. For example, we can be skeptics about God's existence, in

¹¹ Paul Kurtz and Timothy J. Madigan, eds., *Challenges to the Enlightenment: In Defense of Reason and Science* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus, 1994), 9.

¹²Hitchens, *God Is Not Great*, 277.

which case we don't believe—or at least we doubt very seriously—that there is any such divine being. (In fact, were you to randomly tell someone that you're a "skeptic," this is most likely the version of skepticism she would attribute to you.) But we can be skeptics about all manner of things. We might be skeptics about a physical world outside our minds (which we'll consider in part 1), about unobservable scientific entities like electrons, quarks, and gravitons (part 2), or about objective moral laws (part 3). People can also be skeptics about events, like a worldwide flood, or evolution, or the Big Bang, or the moon landing.

But "skepticism" can also refer to something much less controversial, something more mundane and practical. This kind of skepticism is an overall epistemological stance, a kind of "safety first" attitude toward what one believes, an intellectual caution. This even kinder, even gentler skepticism merely says that we shouldn't be unduly credulous, that we should filter our beliefs using a sufficiently fine doxastic sieve (*doxa* is the Greek word for "belief"). Let's call this *sober skepticism*. Sober skepticism can obviously be embraced by believer and unbeliever alike (at least it's obvious to *me*). In fact, most of us will want to say that we're sober skeptics. After all, such skepticism is *sober* in that it is in accord with reason and intellectually sophisticated: it doesn't take skepticism *too* seriously, charging recklessly into cynicism. But it's serious about epistemic standards all the same: the *skepticism* part suggests that we're epistemologically savvy and streetwise, that we've been around the intellectual block more than once. Even better, it's cool, hip, and a little dangerous. Or we skeptics see it this way.

Skepticism about God

Unfortunately, the two main kinds of skepticism we'll consider in this book—sober skepticism and skepticism about God—are often conflated. Of course, unbelievers will explain that this is no accident: if we take sober skepticism seriously, we'll also be skeptics about God's existence. General epistemic wariness (i.e., sober skepticism) implies that we'll reject things that others all too eagerly accept.

Consider, for example, the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry (CSI), which publishes *Skeptical Inquirer* magazine.¹³ CSI's founding mem-

¹³The group's Twitter bio says, "Promoting scientific inquiry, critical thinking, science education, and the use of reason in examining important issues with our magazine, *Skeptical Inquirer*."

bers include the famous atheists Carl Sagan, Isaac Asimov, and Paul Kurtz. The committee's mission is "to promote scientific inquiry, critical investigation, and the use of reason in examining controversial and extraordinary claims."¹⁴ The idea seems to be that in addition to exercising epistemic restraint, they expose those bent on deceiving us. Typical of "controversial and extraordinary" topics are the usual suspects: astrology, UFO sightings, alien abductions, Bigfoot, ghosts, and ESP; but they also include miracles, creationism, and intelligent design. Many of these subjects are categorized as *pseudoscience*, that is, questionable endeavors trying to pass themselves off as credible inquiry (i.e., as science).

Putting it this way, however, implies that there's something incompatible between sober skepticism and belief in God (as well as between belief in God and science). This is a real shame and in any case seems to me misguided. Epistemic caution does not (or does not obviously) require skepticism with respect to God's existence. But I am leaving that topic for another time. My concern in this book—part 2, in particular—is to look at the implications of sober skepticism for our general view of science. That is, my goal here isn't to show that there are good reasons for a sober skeptic to believe in God (though I heartily believe there are); instead I will try to make a decent case that there is conflict between sober skepticism and science-induced atheism.

Avoiding the Ditches

In any case, believers and unbelievers can agree that we should temper our credulity. Consider, for example, some of the characteristics described in Sagan's seminal article "The Burden of Skepticism" (which was, by the way, published in CSI's *Skeptical Inquirer*).¹⁵ This article is dear to contemporary unbelieving skeptics¹⁶ and, indeed, has much to commend it. Sagan points out that skepticism, as he means it, is noth-

¹⁴ "About CSI," http://www.csicop.org/about/about_csi.

¹⁵ Carl Sagan, "The Burden of Skepticism," *Skeptical Inquirer* 12 (Fall 1987), http://www.csicop.org/si/show/burden_of_skepticism.

¹⁶ For example, Michael Shermer (whom we'll meet in a moment), in the dedication to his book *Why People Believe Weird Things*, says this about the lecture version of the article:

To the memory of Carl Sagan, 1934–1996; colleague and inspiration, whose lecture on "The Burden of Skepticism" ten years ago gave me a beacon when I was intellectually and professionally adrift, and ultimately inspired the birth of the Skeptics Society, *Skeptic* magazine, and this book, as well as my commitment to skepticism and the liberating possibilities of science.

Shermer, *Why People Believe Weird Things* (New York: MJF, 1997).

ing esoteric and that most of us are skeptics in the everyday business of life, for example, when we are afflicted with a used-car salesman: “If you don’t exercise some minimal skepticism, if you have an absolutely untrammelled credulity, there is probably some price you will have to pay later.”¹⁷ And this is just plain good sense. You should keep your guard up.

Of course, as Sagan points out, we can take skepticism too far, turning it into the nonsober kind: “If you are only skeptical, then no new ideas make it through to you. You never learn anything new.”¹⁸ So there’s a tension, a balancing act, a happy medium between fanatical omni-acceptance and incredulity run amok. In the one ditch are gullible folks who swallow everything whole, who are undiscerning epistemological vacuum cleaners. In the other ditch are hyperskeptics, cynical folk who miss out on important truths and harbor a constant fear of appearing uneducated. This latter group turns the volume of Ben Franklin’s slightly paranoid “Distrust and caution are the parents of security”¹⁹ up to eleven.

Scientists: The Exemplars

It’s not easy to stay on the road; sometimes the ditches are separated by little more than a footpath; and even when they are a respectable distance apart, the shoulders may not be clearly marked. But this is where scientists can help us as examples, advises Sagan. A good scientist manages to avoid the extremes of gullibility and incredulity. In *The Demon-Haunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark*, Sagan says that the trick to being a good scientist is to combine skepticism with wonder. After all, scientists realize that nature can surprise us. Science has repeatedly altered our view of reality, and so scientists keep an open mind to even the craziest ideas. But they fully accept these ideas only after subjecting them to the most stringent scrutiny.²⁰ This kind of epistemological stance—which has become known as “scientific skepticism”—is one we all should take, says Sagan. And of course, taken at face value, it seems that scientific skepticism is little more than sober skepticism as practiced by scientists.

¹⁷Sagan, “The Burden of Skepticism.”

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹*Poor Richard’s Almanack*, 1733.

²⁰Sagan, *The Demon-Haunted World*, 306.

Atheist Michael Shermer, columnist for *Scientific American*, founder of the Skeptics Society, and editor of *Skeptic* magazine, also believes that science is the paradigmatic example of skeptical propriety. “Modern skepticism is embodied by the scientific method. . . . The key to skepticism is to navigate the treacherous straits between ‘know nothing’ skepticism and ‘anything goes’ credulity by continuously and vigorously applying the methods of science.”²¹ Adding to this testimony is the great physicist Richard Feynman, who says that “science is the organized skepticism in the reliability of expert opinion.”²² Again, the thought is that we should do as scientists do if we want to be sober skeptics. And there is nothing objectionable about any of this, supposing that scientists are generally good examples of sober skepticism, a skepticism that is neither too hot nor too cold. My only point here is that there are strong associations between science and sober skepticism. And though there are good reasons for this association, there’s room for improvement, as we’ll see later.

The Real Work

Regardless of whether scientists are professional skeptics, sober skepticism is a virtue. But despite its appeal, our view of such skepticism is still incomplete. When it comes to actually *being* sensibly skeptical, we haven’t really been given much direction. After all, You-Know-Who is in the details, and it’s not clear that we’ve said anything more than a commendation to take our mental hygiene seriously. There’s a reason for this coyness. Sober skepticism is nothing more than the view that we should properly manage our epistemic household; we should think clearly and well, operating our cognitive faculties with propriety.

This isn’t very exciting, unfortunately. I wish sober skepticism were flashier. The luster that many people see in skepticism—that it’s iconoclastic, heroic, and antiauthoritarian—is really not part of skepticism proper. If I’m skeptical about something simply because I don’t like someone telling me what to do or because I fancy myself a modern Prometheus, I’m simply being childish. Anyone who wishes to be thought of as an independent thinker is usually neither.

²¹ Shermer, *Why People Believe Weird Things*, 16.

²² Lee Smolin, *The Trouble with Physics: The Rise of String Theory, the Fall of a Science, and What Comes Next* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), 307.

ATHEISTS TALK A LOT ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF SKEPTICISM. BUT THE TRUTH IS, THEY'RE NOT NEARLY SKEPTICAL ENOUGH.

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