

CHRIST



CHRIST
OR
CHAOS

—

DAN
DEWITT

CHAOS

FOREWORD BY JOSH WILSON

“Dan DeWitt is a sharp, rigorous thinker who can communicate deep truths in a way people can grasp. This book shows the way forward in the struggle between Christ and our reigning secularist cultural mood. Buy three copies of this book. Get one copy for an unbelieving friend, to think through the claims of Christ. Get one for a young Christian, unsure of his or her faith. And then read one copy yourself, to equip you to engage your neighbors with the credible good news of Jesus Christ.”

Russell Moore, President, The Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission;
author, *Onward*

“Dan DeWitt has written a pithy, intelligent, and delightfully readable book that takes aim at—and *hits squarely*—the old questions raised by the so-called new atheists. Having debated atheists Christopher Hitchens, Michael Shermer, and Daniel Dennett, I can say authoritatively that DeWitt has neither oversimplified nor overcomplicated the issues. Every serious-minded Christian would do well to read this book.”

Larry Taunton, Executive Director, Fixed Point Foundation

“A wonderfully accessible book, perfect not only for college students, but for seekers and doubters as well. Dan takes sophisticated reasoning on some of the most difficult questions and really puts it on the bottom shelf.”

J. D. Greear, Lead Pastor, The Summit Church, Durham, North Carolina; author, *Jesus, Continued . . . : Why the Spirit inside You Is Better Than Jesus beside You*

“Thanks to Dan DeWitt for a very readable and articulate conversation about the power of the gospel in the face of various forms of opposition. DeWitt’s discussion will be useful to anyone who would consider the claims of Christianity in the context of other treasured options and objections. In recognizing the power of presuppositions for any view we hold, DeWitt explains how only the presuppositions of the Christian faith can provide the foundation that other views claim to offer.”

K. Scott Oliphint, Professor of Apologetics and Systematic Theology, Westminster Theological Seminary; author, *Covenantal Apologetics*

“Dan DeWitt’s book packs a wallop. The conversational style masks a deep acquaintance with the major issues and philosophies of the day. DeWitt successfully shows how behind every apparently rational objection to faith lies a moral and ‘religious’ commitment, which can be shaken only by a gospel jolt. Winsome and engaging, this text is must reading for any aspiring Christian apologist.”

William Edgar, Professor of Apologetics, Westminster Theological Seminary

“I’m kind of over apologetics-type books. Many—if not most—portray conversations with skeptics in this weird alternate reality where unbelievers ask all the right questions in the right order and care about intellectual consistency. Dan DeWitt knows that world doesn’t exist. And in *Christ or Chaos* he shows how fluid and complex journeys to and from Christ really are. Still, he avoids wandering through spiritual-sounding truisms. DeWitt is not afraid of arguments and facts. Like all his writing, this book anthologizes some of the most compelling reflections from Christianity’s best thinkers. *Christ or Chaos* wrestles with the deepest questions without the familiar cookie cutters.”

Aaron Cline Hanbury, Editorial Director, *Relevant* magazine

“*Christ or Chaos* gets right to the heart of the biggest human question: Are we made by God with a plan, or are we a cosmic accident? With stories, research, and personal examples, Dan will take you on a journey exploring the most important questions of life. And as you will see, the evidence for the Christian worldview is compelling.”

Sean McDowell, Assistant Professor of Christian Apologetics, Biola University; author, *A New Kind of Apologist*

“Change begins with conversations. With compassion-filled logical prose, DeWitt’s *Christ or Chaos* provides believers with an accessible icebreaker so that they can begin thoughtful long-term conversations with the nonbelieving world.”

D. A. Horton, Pastor, The Summit Church, Durham, North Carolina; author, *Bound to Be Free*

“In *Christ or Chaos* DeWitt uses argument in an artistic way to illustrate the biblical view of the world. He shows not only that Christianity is true, but also that it is the only compelling way to understand the cosmos and the human condition. This is a great read.”

FLAME, Grammy-nominated Christian hip-hop artist

“In this book Dan applies eternal truth to modern ideologies in a way that engages and equips every reader to discover or defend his or her faith. All who care about spiritual truth owe it to themselves to read this book.”

Russ Lee, award-winning singer/songwriter; lead singer, NewSong

“DeWitt weighs the evidence for and against Christianity theologically, cleverly, and profoundly, yet with sensitivity and clarity. In the end, he reminds us that only the gospel can change the human heart and enlighten the mind. If you want to be prepared to answer difficult questions about the reality of your Christian faith in the public arena in a gentle and reverent way, this book is for you. I thoroughly enjoyed reading it and I will recommend it frequently.”

Miguel Núñez, Senior Pastor, International Baptist Church,
Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic; President, Wisdom and Integrity

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Dan DeWitt

Foreword by Josh Wilson

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Christ or Chaos

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To my big brother, Chris,
with much love and respect

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Foreword

You know the feeling you get when you're relaxing in a chair, leaning back, arms up, fingers folded behind your head, and all of a sudden you recline just a little too far? Right after you suck all the air out of the room, one of two things happens. The first is that by flailing your arms in just the right direction at just the right speed, you somehow manage to right yourself and find your balance. The alternative is that you fall flat on your back, wind knocked out, probably needing to take a few moments to recover from your not-so-graceful plunge.

That second outcome: that's me when I went to college. My dad is a pastor, I was raised in the church, and I grew up with mostly Christian friends. I was taught that what I believed was the absolute truth, no ifs, ands, or buts about it. All the way through my high school career, I can't remember doubting much about my faith. I was comfortable, leaning back in my cushy Christian recliner, confident that I had this faith thing figured out.

Then, in college, I met people who believed differently than me. Some of them followed other religions. Others

were atheists or agnostics. But one thing we all had in common was that we were basically decent people, adhering to a fairly similar set of moral guidelines. I didn't really know any atheists in high school, and out of my naiveté, I assumed they were probably all immoral or uncaring, and obviously not very thoughtful since they didn't believe in God. What I found was quite the opposite. These folks became my friends. As I got to know them, I realized that they were intelligent and incredibly thoughtful. They just happened to subscribe to a completely different worldview.

My chair collapsed and I spiraled, arms thrashing, into the abyss of confusion. I began to wonder if my faith was ill placed. I wasn't sure if there were good, rational reasons to believe in Christianity. I considered, for the first time, that some other religion might have it right or, even scarier, that there might be no God at all.

About that time, I met someone named Dan DeWitt, who became my college pastor at church. Dan was exactly who I needed to have in my life during those frightening moments of rebuilding my faith. Dan had been down the path I was on, and knew well how to respond to my doubts. He listened with grace, prayed with and for me, and helped me sort through *why* I believe *what* I believe. He took his time and didn't give me a one-size-fits-all solution.

Dan wasn't afraid of my doubts, I learned, because God isn't afraid of our doubts. I came to see my growing list of questions not as a sign of a weak faith, but as an indicator

that I was taking my faith seriously. I learned to view my doubts as opportunities, as an invitation to search for truth.

One of the things I appreciate about Dan is that he is a Christian leader who's not afraid to publicly empathize with skeptics. He won't tell you he has it all figured out, because none of us do. But he will consistently point you toward the great Love and Light that has captured his heart.

Jesus is big enough to handle your uncertainty. He isn't intimidated by your questions. That's because he's not a formula, but a real person. And in the end, what will change your life is not an argument, but the very Spirit of God. And I'm praying that's exactly what will happen as you work through the following pages.

This book is Dan's way of catching your recliner. It's his way of pulling up a chair alongside of yours for a friendly dialogue about the most serious of topics: truth that *can* be defended, but doesn't need defending; the love of God that isn't deserved, but is given freely; and a peculiar providence that places people, and even books like this one, in our lives at just the right time. Maybe you'll discover, perhaps even for the first time, a faith strong enough to support you with all of your questions and doubts.

Josh Wilson
singer/songwriter

Introduction

Reality Used to Be a Friend of Mine

Thirst was made for water; inquiry for truth.

C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce*

The sun will probably kill us.

That's what scientists tell us. The large warmth-giving star our earth orbits around will continue to heat up until it burns all its nuclear fuel. Feeding its insatiable hunger for energy, it will grow into what experts call a "Red Giant." In its hot wrath this giant will gobble up all life on earth and burp out a silent planet.

The End.

That's how the curtain closes in one storyline at least. And that's the outlook many embrace today. The plot begins

in a murky prebiotic ocean and ends in the heat death of all of civilization. And if that's where life came from and where history is headed, there's not much we can do about it. After all, wishful thinking has never slain a giant.

I loved giant stories as a kid. They involved mysterious beans, cunning heroes, and defeated Goliaths. But the Red Giant isn't my idea of an inspirational fairy tale. I think I like the Jolly Green Giant, who advertises canned vegetables on television, a whole lot better.

If it were up to me, the Green Giant would trounce the Red Giant, and we would all walk off into the sunset holding hands and snacking on sweet peas. In all seriousness, there actually is a fifty-five-foot-tall statue of the Jolly Green Giant in Blue Earth, Minnesota. If things end the way scientists predict, this monument will one day melt beneath the heat of the expanding sun, a reminder that life doesn't have to mirror fantasy.

Not every story has a happy ending. Not all giants are jolly. When I was a child I thought like a child. Perhaps it's time to put away childish things.

But we're all suckers for a good story. That's why we squirm a bit at gloomy projections for the human race. We want a comedy even though our meteorological forecast forces us into a tragedy. I think deep down we're all holding out hope for a David figure to step in with a humble sling and defend us from the cosmic foe threatening our existence. We simply want a better ending.

Choose Your Own Adventure

Every perspective of reality contains an inherent narrative. Every worldview is a novel. Each has an author, a beginning, and an end. The task for thinking people is to consider not which story is the most interesting, but which one is actually true. In the end we may find a story compelling and true in which we can lose ourselves. Better yet, we may discover a story in which we can actually *find* ourselves. That would be novel indeed.

As a young boy I enjoyed reading the Choose Your Own Adventure books. At the end of each short chapter you would be asked a question about the plot and then be directed to a specific page to continue the story, depending on your answer. While every decision along the way would influence the outcome, none was more important than the very first. Your response to the first question would determine the scope of all of your future options.

Reality works a lot like this. We all have to make fundamental assumptions about the nature of the universe. The first chapter of the human narrative presents the question about origins. The options are (a) nature contains the answer to this question or (b) something outside nature contains the answers. The decisions that follow are important, but this first choice determines the possibilities—the parameters—of the rest of the plot.

This is the basic worldview assumption that Thomas is forced to wrestle with his junior year in college. His

roommate, Zach, has recently become an atheist. Zach is convinced that his new worldview offers a superior explanation of the universe. Encouraging Thomas to reconsider his faith, Zach has suggested that Christianity is irrational and detached from reality.

The two have been best friends since they were little kids. Very few of their childhood memories do not include the other in some way. Rooming together in college was a given. They've looked forward to it since their senior year in high school when they decided to attend the same university. But now, in their third year of college life, it seems they've never been further apart.

This has both taxed their friendship and challenged Thomas's faith. He fears it may drive them apart forever. How can their friendship survive such a clash?

To be honest, many a night Thomas has wondered if his roommate is right. On occasion he has asked himself, "Is Christianity really disconnected from the world? Is religious belief irrational?"

What most troubles him is that some of Zach's arguments against Christianity seem reasonable and persuasive. After all, they've both seen some really unfortunate things in the church. Thomas doesn't have to be convinced of the limitations of their religious upbringing or of the evils done in the name of faith. So in many ways he empathizes with Zach's decision to walk away.

And he's considered what it would mean to follow in his footsteps.

On the other hand, if atheism is true, then the grand story of humanity means basically that we are the products of time and chance and are headed toward nonexistence. We are simply matter in motion—entropy in sneakers. But to Thomas the human experience seems to point the opposite direction. Is this only wishful thinking?

Thomas has always considered the biblical description of the world to line up with his lived experience. For him, Christianity has always made sense of life. So he's not ready to give up without a fight. Yet his roommate has raised some valid questions about belief in God. Given the topic and their lifelong friendship, this is no trivial debate he can brush off.

Thankfully, this isn't a journey Thomas has to take alone. He finds support from a campus ministry leader who offers some helpful resources for responding to Zach's challenge. They talk late one evening and develop a list of biblical themes we should expect to encounter in the real world if Christianity is indeed true.

Thomas's list includes things like a universe that is not eternal, telltale signs of design in creation, a universal longing for God (or a God substitute), a moral fabric to the universe, and accounts of God interacting in history. If Christianity is true, we should expect to find these things in the world around us and in the human experience.

If Christianity is irrational, then it should be easy enough to expose this and demonstrate that its explanation of the world and human lives is incoherent and unconvincing. But

if Christianity is true, then it should provide insights into the world we live in, the values we hold, and the lives we seek to lead.

Is reality best explained by cosmos or chaos? The word *cosmos* is used to refer to the universe as an orderly system. The word *chaos* refers to something governed by chance. Which word best describes our world? Do we live in a cosmos or a chaos? Does Christianity lead us to understand the cosmos in a way that makes sense of our lived experience? Christianity, if true, should offer a map to reality—a guide to understanding the cosmos.

The Next Steps

In these pages we will follow Thomas as he reevaluates his faith in light of his roommate's challenge that Christianity is irrational. I hope to provide an honest portrayal of what faith and friendship look like when they're held in tension. And I hope to demonstrate the gospel's relevance in the contemporary landscape of skepticism.

Like my earlier book *Jesus or Nothing*, I use a narrative framework with fictional characters to illustrate what it might look like to work through issues in real-life situations. Each chapter focuses on a different aspect of Christianity that Thomas considers important and how it relates to his experience. I interweave some of the arguments for and against the Christian worldview in an attempt to depict what these kinds of dialogues can look and sound like. I

recognize that my bias as a Christian will affect the way I present either side.

I take this approach because I happen to think the gospel is up to the challenge. I'm concerned that many Christians are content to hunker down in Christian echo chambers and ignore the broader cultural conversations about faith in God. Some treat the gospel like a fragile heirloom that should be covered in Bubble Wrap, hidden in the attic, and thus preserved for future generations.

I tend to think the gospel can hold its own. The gospel won't be intimidated or overshadowed by rival truth claims. As the famous preacher Charles Spurgeon said, you don't defend a lion. Unchain it and it will defend itself.

This book is about the gospel minus the Bubble Wrap. It's about the gospel's power unshackled and taken out of the attic. We need the gospel more than it needs us. And we see the gospel best when we actually see through it—when it's like a pair of reading glasses giving us a clear vision of reality.

That's why Christians should never be ashamed of the gospel in the private or public domain, in our churches or in the marketplace of ideas. We shouldn't shiver at the thought of subjecting the gospel to the test of sincere scrutiny. If it's false, then we have nothing to gain, and if it's true, we have nothing to lose. As C. S. Lewis once said, "One must keep on pointing out that Christianity is a statement which, if false, is of no importance, and, if true, of

infinite importance. The one thing it cannot be is moderately important.”¹

This may be a good place to offer a disclaimer: I make frequent references to Lewis throughout this book. I teach a class on Lewis a couple times every year at Boyce College, and in all my reading related to worldview analysis I find that few writers illustrate worldview thinking in terms of their private lives, public debates, and published works as well as he does.

I’ve written this book for students like Thomas who are torn between faith and friendship. I’ve also written this book for students like Zach who have walked away from the gospel. My prayer is that somewhere between their polar positions, through the ambient noise of skeptics and religious sound bites, a healthy conversation can take place about what Christianity looks like in the real world—or better yet—what the real world looks like in Christianity.

Much Ado about Nothing

For what you see and hear depends a good deal on where you are standing; it also depends on what sort of person you are.

C. S. Lewis, *The Magician's Nephew*

The twentieth-century journalist and Christian apologist G. K. Chesterton once said, “There are two ways of getting home; and one of them is to stay there. The other is to walk round the whole world till we come back to the same place.”¹ Chesterton’s point was that truth might be closer than you realize, perhaps right under your nose. And sometimes, like with the prodigal son, truth is found at the end of a long road back to the Father’s house.

Chesterton was specifically speaking of Christianity. And in his book *The Everlasting Man* he contrasted two

helpful forms of analyzing the Christian faith. The first is from the inside. The second is from a million miles away. As he said, “The best relation to our spiritual home is to be near enough to love it. But the next best is to be far enough away not to hate it.”²

In other words, sometimes stepping just outside the front door of a particular worldview leaves you too close to have a clear perspective. You can be standing beneath the awning while complaining of the shade. Your proximity itself creates emotional and intellectual blind spots.

As Chesterton put it, “The popular critics of Christianity are not really outside of it. . . . Their criticism has taken on a curious tone; as of a random and illiterate heckling.”³ The modern-day terrain of heckling, as Chesterton describes it, is fraught with emotional landmines and intellectual blockades. Safe passage to meaningful conversations can be hard to find.

A Bridge over Troubled Waters

The well-known literary critic C. S. Lewis navigated this terrain as a young man. Lewis describes this journey in his first published work after his conversion to Christianity, *The Pilgrim's Regress*. A fictional account of his conversion, the book was written over a holiday visit with his childhood best friend. Lewis patterned the work after John Bunyan's classic *The Pilgrim's Progress*.

Like Bunyan, Lewis used allegory to make his point. But his “regress” offers a glaring contrast to Bunyan's “prog-

ress.” Lewis wanted to illustrate that his character found spiritual fulfillment not by progressing to a far-off land to be freed from a heavy burden, but in the fulfillment of a longing that, as he learned, could take place only in the Christianity he had rejected from his youth. He found progress by turning around and retracing his steps.

Sometimes that’s what progress looks like: turning around and heading back the other way. It can hardly be called progress if we are simply going further down the road but heading the wrong direction.

Lewis later described this in his autobiographical work *Surprised by Joy*: “But then the key to my books is Donne’s maxim, ‘The heresies that men leave are hated most.’ The things I assert most vigorously are those that I resisted long and accepted late.”⁴

As a young man Lewis walked away from his spiritual upbringing. And it took some time for him to get far enough away to no longer hate it. But then he came back close enough to learn to love it. He walked around an entire world just to come back home.

I’ve seen this process myself. I’ve known some who have walked away from Christianity and now find it difficult, whether they acknowledge it or not, to engage in a careful and considerate conversation about the faith. As Donne said, they hate most the heresies they have personally left. They’ve walked away from Christianity. And now they despise it.

You’ve probably known someone who fits that descrip-

tion. They dismiss Christianity with visceral hatred, yet go on to talk about the virtues of Muslim prayers, or the value of Buddhist meditation, or the solitude of Hindu temples. They are, according to Chesterton, still too close to see clearly. That's because proximity matters.

I've experienced what may be akin to a skeptic's rejection of Christianity, though my story doesn't involve losing faith in God. In the middle of my college years I made a decisive break with the brand of Baptist fundamentalism I had grown up with. I didn't renounce faith in God or anything like that, but I did leave the denomination of my childhood.

It took me a few years to get over it, to be honest. I was bitter—probably because I was hurt. It was hard to even talk about it without feelings of resentment welling to the surface. I channeled my anger through public expression in a way that I now find unfortunate. Not necessarily because I have come around to change my opinion per se, but rather because I realize that emotional tirades aren't synonymous with compelling arguments.

I think about this when I read the e-mails or Facebook posts of friends who have left Christianity and embraced atheism. Though I don't assume I understand their journey, I think I can empathize a little, as can many who may be more objective than I was in the face of similar emotional unrest.

This tendency is illustrated in a 2013 article by Larry Taunton, "Listening to Young Atheists: Lessons for a Stronger Christianity," published in *The Atlantic*. After traveling

to numerous college campuses and surveying students in various skeptic organizations, Taunton made six summary observations: (1) these students all had religious backgrounds of some kind; (2) they felt the mission and message of their childhood churches were vague; (3) they felt their churches offered superficial answers to their serious questions; (4) they had respect for leaders who took their questions seriously; (5) the ages between fourteen and seventeen were crucial in their later decision to become atheists; (6) and their decision to leave the faith was discussed primarily in emotional categories.⁵

Taunton's observations offer insight on the traction that the new atheist movement has gained since 9/11 and the subsequent publication of Sam Harris's book *The End of Faith*. The new atheist authors have a receptive audience with young people who have left the church. And the emotional nature of their decisions, as described by Taunton, can make it difficult to build bridges for meaningful conversations.

Dueling Evangelists

Thomas has tended to ignore the banter of public atheists like Richard Dawkins. So much of the exchange between Christians and atheists in mainstream media is unfortunately filled with anger and scorn. But Thomas can't ignore his roommate, Zach. They're lifelong friends. They're in it for the long haul, as the saying goes.

But when Zach comes out as an atheist, Thomas is at a

loss for how to respond. The resentment Zach now feels toward his religious past can make things awkward between them at times. Thomas represents something he wants to leave behind. But Zach doesn't want to leave Thomas behind. It's complicated.

Thomas is also committed to their friendship, and deep down he hopes one day Zach will find his way back. But Zach is hoping Thomas will come to see things his way. So, it's a bit of an evangelistic arm-wrestling match.

Some Christians might be surprised by the amount of resources designed to help skeptics deconvert Christians. Much like the evangelistic programs Evangelism Explosion and FAITH Evangelism for Christians, atheists have books and videos tailor-made for propagating the message of naturalism. I'm guessing they won't co-opt the title *soul winners* for their skeptic missionaries, though.

In his book *A Manual for Creating Atheists*, Peter Boghossian describes the optimal evangelist for deconverting Christians: "Enter the Street Epistemologist: an articulate, clear, helpful voice with an unremitting desire to help people overcome their faith and to create a better world."⁶ The author uses the term *epistemologist* to describe a person who helps others determine what constitutes true knowledge—which is to be found, he suggests, in atheism. In other words, a worldview that begins with something other than nature, like Christianity, cannot provide true knowledge. Such knowledge can only be found by beginning with a God-free cosmos.

That's why Boghossian encourages atheists to invite their Christian friends into "a world that uses intelligence, reason, rationality, thoughtfulness, ingenuity, sincerity, science, and kindness to build the future."⁷ Such a view is contrasted with Christianity, which is said to be "built on faith, delusion, pretending, religion, fear, pseudoscience, superstition, or a certainty achieved by keeping people in a stupor that makes them pawns of unseen forces because they're terrified."⁸ You can't argue with a thoughtful and kind worldview versus a perspective built on delusion.

Another book with a similar theme of godless evangelism is *50 Simple Questions for Every Christian*, by Guy P. Harrison. The questions are intended to displace confidence in the Christian message. The first question, "Does this religion make sense?" is also the guiding inquiry of my book.⁹ It's a question that hits home with Thomas. He must decide, "Am I sufficiently convinced to call myself a Christian?"

This summarizes Thomas's mission in the face of Zach's challenge. A challenge that launches an authentic conversation about faith between friends. A challenge ripe with opportunities.

What's the Matter?

This reminds me of the exchange between Richard Dawkins and David Robertson, a pastor in Scotland. Their letters are published in the short paperback *The Dawkins Letters: Challenging Atheist Myths*. The correspondence began

when Robertson responded to Dawkins's book *The God Delusion*.

I found their dialogue both entertaining and helpful, but one particular point stood out. After the exchange with Dawkins, Robertson began to hear from readers, many of whom were atheists. Robertson found many of these conversations insightful, but they almost always ended up going back to respective presuppositions, things we assume but cannot prove about reality.

I've found this to be true myself. My best conversations with atheist friends have dramatized how our contrasting starting points control where we end up. It's like we're on open escalators going in opposite directions. We can talk to each other up to a point and appeal to each other to come along with us. But we're up against the reality that we've taken our stances on different starting points leading to different places.

Presuppositions are like the ground we stand on or the track we take. They allow outcomes, frame vantage points, build worldviews. They control what we find thinkable and believable, and whether we're willing to "go there."

Central to Thomas's assumptions about reality is a belief in the existence of an eternal and personal Creator. This is his starting point for making sense of the world. Zach, on the other hand, begins with nature as his fundamental presupposition: nature is all there is. For Thomas reality is described by Christ; for Zach, by chance or chaos.

As an atheist now, Zach certainly no longer believes in

God. He's comfortable with the idea that the cosmos is all there is, or ever was, or ever will be. He believes that the material stuff making up the cosmos is all that's real.

But what exactly is this material stuff that makes up the universe? What must an atheist assume about this ultimate reality?

A few centuries before Jesus was born, a Greek philosopher named Democritus took a stab at describing this very thing. He believed atoms are the basic building blocks that make up everything we see and correspondingly all that is. He considered atoms indivisible. The word *atom* itself means "that which cannot be cut or divided."

The term comes from two Greek words: *tomos* means cut, and the letter *a* in front is a negation.¹⁰ The word *atheist* is formed the same way: the *a* simply negates *theos*, the Greek word for God, giving us literally "no God." Many believe Democritus was both an atomist and an atheist. And according to the late atheistic author Victor Stinger, atomism equals atheism. If all that exists is the stuff that makes up the natural world, then there is certainly no room for God.

Depending on what you thought of his atomism and atheism, Democritus could be a fun guy to have around. In fact, his nickname was the "Laughing Philosopher." If you were to go back in time to the 300s BC, you might find him at the center of social life somewhere in Athens mixing it up at a toga party and poking fun at human folly. But if you fast-forward over twenty centuries to our day, what

do modern-day atheists believe about the building blocks of reality?

For starters, we now know that the atom can be divided, a scientific breakthrough with serious consequences, considering the death toll of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. What about the consequences of an atheistic view of matter?

Three things would be hard to avoid while retaining an atheistic outlook. On the assumption of atheism, it seems that matter must be eternal, impersonal, and nonrational or mindless. This would seem to flow from the atheist's basic understanding of ultimate reality.

First, *matter would have to be eternal*. Lawrence Krauss, an atheistic author and theoretical physicist, has recently suggested that the universe came from nothing. If his book, aptly named *A Universe from Nothing*, solved the philosophical riddle of why there is something instead of nothing—as Richard Dawkins boldly claimed in his endorsement—then this would prove that matter is *not* eternal. It came from nothing.

Krauss admits in his writing and speaking, however, that the “nothing” he refers to isn't really *nothing*, at least not the way we conventionally understand the term. He describes nothing as a “bubbling, broiling, brew of virtual particles.”¹¹ He also admits that he cannot account for the physical laws that guide the nothing.

If the “nothing” Krauss is referring to includes preexisting matter, energy, or laws, then he doesn't really explain how the universe came from nothing. Instead, he is simply

theorizing about how the universe came from *something* (virtual particles and physical laws). Of course this would certainly make for a less provocative book title: *A Universe from Something*. It would also imply that this preexisting something—if not created—has been around forever.

Second, *matter would have to be impersonal*. Take away a personal Creator, and you have no way to account for persons within the cosmos. On the other hand, if you have an eternal, personal, intentional force behind the creation, you no longer have atheism. It's one or the other—a personal Creator who gives the universe and its occupants a purpose and values, or eternal stuff that is impersonal and just there. If anything that makes up the cosmos qualifies as personal, purposeful, guided, or good, then you have taken a big step away from naturalism.

This dilemma can be seen clearly in an excerpt from Richard Dawkins's book *River out of Eden: A Darwinian View of Life*:

In a universe of blind physical forces and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt, other people are going to get lucky, and you won't find any rhyme or reason in it, nor any justice. The universe that 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.¹²

Finally, *matter would have to be nonrational*. You cannot hold to atheism and still have a mind as the source

of all things or reasonable minds as part of the world of matter. This creates a pretty big obstacle for atheist intellectuals who are willing to consider it. The prolific author and Notre Dame University professor Alvin Plantinga has spilled a fair bit of ink on this topic in what he describes as the “The Evolutionary Argument against Naturalism.”¹³

At the risk of oversimplification, let me summarize: Plantinga essentially argues that eternal, impersonal, and mindless matter cannot provide a proper foundation for proving that our minds are reliable. If our brains are just one more accident in a long string of accidents that have led to the world we live in, then why should we trust what we think? Our brains are mindless outcomes. If we are the products of unguided evolution, then there is no reason to consider our brains trustworthy. We can say they are directed at survival, but that isn’t necessarily the same thing as being directed at truth or justice. (I’ll say more about this in chapter 5.)

The simplest way around this problem is to insert some kind of mind behind the creation of the world that initiates and guides the process. But if you make this move, you have taken a giant leap away from atheism. Thomas Nagel, an atheist and well-known philosophy professor at NYU, flirts with this notion in his 2012 book *Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature Is Almost Certainly False* (Oxford University Press). He ponders that there must be more behind reality than just eternal,

impersonal, and nonrational matter. He just doesn't come to any clear conclusions as to what it must be.

So, in sum, atheist presuppositions begin with eternal, impersonal, and mindless matter. These presuppositions must be taken on faith and cannot be proved scientifically.

Atheism is irrational—that at least is how one atheistic philosophy professor, Crispin Sartwell, describes his God-free worldview in a 2014 article published in *The Atlantic*:

Ironically, this is similar to the totalizing worldview of religion—neither can be shown to be true or false by science, or indeed by any rational technique. Whether theistic or atheistic, they are all matters of faith, stances taken up by tiny creatures in an infinitely rich environment.¹⁴

Crispin's honesty is shocking. He says he has taken “a leap of atheist faith” by committing to a view of the universe as a natural and material system. And he says other atheists should own up to their faith commitments as well by calling for an atheism that displays epistemological courage.

The notion that believers rely on emotions while atheists form their worldview through rationality is simply false, Crispin says. Both require a “bold intellectual commitment” that cannot be proved with scientific data. In this way, Crispin concedes that his atheism is more of an interpretation and less of an argument.

And that's where Thomas and Zach's conflict really lies,

with interpretations and presuppositions. The atheist novel begins with an interpretation, a bold intellectual commitment to a view of the natural universe resulting from eternal, impersonal, and mindless matter. That really seems to be what the late Carl Sagan, atheistic scientist from Harvard University, implied many years ago when he famously said, “The cosmos is all that is, or ever was, or ever will be.”

But is *cosmos* the best word to describe Sagan’s view of reality? Would not *chaos* better summarize a narrative that begins as an accident and is governed by blind chance? It seems the atheist is forced to build every subsequent chapter of his or her worldview novel on an introduction that begins with mindless forces, is governed by nothing, and is going nowhere.

On Losing Oneself

A number of atheists recognize that this starting point might not support everyday human values. Or rather, that many things we highly esteem are actually illusions. The premium we place on our minds to discover truth is one example. Other values seem difficult to reconcile with an atheistic worldview.

As an atheist himself, Duke University philosophy professor Alex Rosenberg suggests in *The Atheist’s Guide to Reality: Enjoying Life without Illusions* that things like personhood, human significance, and the ability to make meaningful decisions and moral distinctions are all illusions. His conclusions seem in keeping with the notion that

everything stems from eternal, impersonal, and mindless matter.

The question readers should ask is whether you can build a rational bridge from matter and chance to human values like free will and morality. Can you get there from here? Rosenberg says no.

Rosenberg's mantra throughout the book is that the facts of the physical universe are what fix the facts of the human experience. This makes sense if the physical is all that is, or ever was, or ever will be. If all that exists is the material universe and physical laws, then the only things we should treat as facts are what we can discover through physical science.

The only problem with Rosenberg's premise is that it's wrong. Or to be more specific, it's self-refuting. The statement "physics fixes all the facts"¹⁵ isn't itself a physically verifiable fact. In other words, he says we should accept only physical facts while, it seems, he's hoping we don't notice the one glaring exception to this rule: the very thesis statement undergirding his entire project. He seems to overlook this altogether nonphysical assumption.

The reason Rosenberg's claim can't stand up to its own test is that it's a philosophical value, not a scientific one. For "physics fixes the facts" to be a fact itself, we must be able to discover it through physical science. But science cannot do that. We won't discover it under a microscope or through a telescope. It is an assumption the atheist must make about the world, an assumption that the physical world is all there is, or ever was, or ever will be.

And what if this assumption is wrong?

This is not to imply that all atheists think it's impossible to explain the nonphysical. In his little book *Atheism: A Very Short Introduction*, Julian Baggini, an atheistic philosopher, gives this defense: "What most atheists do believe is that although there is only one kind of stuff in the universe and it is physical, out of this stuff comes minds, beauty, emotions, moral values—in short the full gamut of phenomena that give richness to human life."¹⁶

So, atheism doesn't necessarily require you to reject nonphysical things like beauty and morality according to Baggini. Or at least that's what he says in his short book on atheism. But he seems less hopeful in his 2011 TED talk "Is There a Real You?" delivered to high school students.

In this talk Baggini grapples with the implications of how this "one kind of physical stuff in the universe" relates to our idea that humans have personhood, the notion that we are selves. He says:

There isn't actually a "you" at the heart of all of these experiences. . . . You are the sum of your parts. . . . If everything else in the universe is like this, why are we different? Why think of ourselves as somehow not just being a collection of all our parts, but somehow being a separate, permanent entity which has all those parts?¹⁷

Is there a real you? Baggini asks. And his response is essentially, "Not really."

These examples illustrate some reasons why Thomas

isn't convinced that Zach is right. Eternal, impersonal, and mindless matter doesn't seem to offer a compelling explanation for what it means to be human. Thomas isn't ready to take Rosenberg's advice and reject the human experience as fiction by discarding things like free will and moral distinctions. Or Baggini's verdict that we are no more than the sum of our physical parts.

A Literary Loop

This clash between religious and secular worldviews is certainly not new. The celebrated science fiction author H. G. Wells also dipped his pen into the genre of historical narrative in an attempt to explain humanity without reference to religion. His book *The Outline of History*, published in 1920, sold over two million copies and has been translated into multiple languages. He described this massive tome as “an attempt to tell, truly and clearly, in one continuous narrative, the whole story of life and mankind so far as it is known to-day.”¹⁸

Wells brought his skill as a wordsmith and his philosophically nuanced perspective as a skeptic fully to bear on the project. The impact of the Wellsian worldview is illustrated in the true story of a young Jewish father in New York City who required his eight-year-old daughter, an intellectual prodigy, to read the work in its entirety, resulting in her conversion to atheism.¹⁹ But the book was not without its challengers.

Just a couple of years later, back in Britain, an opinionated

journalist took up the task of countering Wells's manifesto with a book of his own. The author was G. K. Chesterton, and the book was *The Everlasting Man*, which I quoted at the beginning of this chapter. Chesterton challenged Wells's premise that atheism offers a more compelling account of history. Chesterton contended that Wells's main problem in the book was simply that he was wrong.

The then atheist professor C. S. Lewis read Chesterton's *Everlasting Man* in the mid-1920s and later described the book as a major contribution to his trajectory away from atheism and his conversion to theism. In the following years, Lewis moved from theism into the thing itself, the gospel of Jesus Christ. This propelled him onto an international platform for defending his faith during a time of war.

Lewis's keen mind and clear prose providentially reached that same household in the Bronx where Wells's book had left its mark years before. The aforementioned young girl, now a grown woman, was jolted by Lewis's clear presentation of the gospel, which led her to begin reading the New Testament, a surprising activity for a Jewish atheist. Even more surprising, she went on to reject atheism, like Lewis years earlier, and embraced the offer of the gospel.²⁰

Her name was Helen Davidman. That name might sound familiar to you. She later moved to England and subsequently became the wife of C. S. Lewis, bringing the literary loop full circle.

The contrast between Wells's *Outline* and Chesterton's *Everlasting Man* illustrates the fundamental difference be-

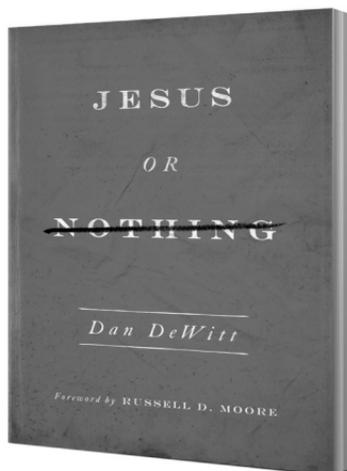
tween Zach's and Thomas's perspectives. It's a matter of which interpretation, which bold intellectual commitment, accounts for the human experience.

Hypothetically, both could be wrong in their views regarding ultimate reality. Yet one thing is certain: they cannot both be right. And it seems their respective worldviews represent two of the most widely held belief systems in Western culture.

Thomas has decided to begin his response to Zach's challenge that Christianity is irrational by reflecting on the opening chapters of Genesis. What insights, if any, does the Bible offer for explaining the origin of the cosmos?

To answer that, we must head back to the beginning.

It's time to make a choice.



Many young adults are abandoning the Christian faith, convinced that it's an outdated and uneducated belief system. In *Jesus or Nothing*, Dan DeWitt describes the rock-solid foundation for life that Christians enjoy in and through the gospel—offering an explanation for our existence, grace for our guilt, and meaning for our mortality.

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"Atheism is often portrayed as the only intelligent worldview, but this book dispels the fog of that myth. I heartily recommend Jesus or Nothing to anyone struggling to sort through the shrill, confusing voices trying to tell us what matters most."

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DAN DEWITT (PhD, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary) is the dean of Boyce College, the undergraduate school of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, where he teaches courses on worldview, philosophy, apologetics, and C. S. Lewis. He is the author of *Jesus or Nothing* and blogs regularly at theolatte.com.

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