

# Is there a God?

## The Story – The Deserted Island

Imagine yourself growing up on a desert Island. You have been there since you were a child and have never even seen or read a book. You have not been exposed to any religious thinking. You have grown up on this beautiful Island surrounded by sandy beaches, plenty of fish and fruit to eat, and great weather. When you consider the island's beauty and plant life and wildlife you have increasing appreciation and feelings of gratitude. Everything is so wonderfully complex and works together in ways that are amazing. You know that you yourself make things, you have used your intelligence and skills to build a hut for shelter, fishing poles and spears to catch food, and a bed woven of banana leaves to sleep on. You are actually pretty proud of these creations. But when compared to the Island, they seem pretty simple, to say the least. It

hits you that somehow this island came to be and that whoever made this Island is incredibly more intelligent and powerful and creative than you. You don't have a good name for this incredible creator, but you choose to use the name "Master Creator" in your thinking.

One day you decide to steal a coconut from your brother's food pile. You do this even though you have plenty of food in your own stack. Your conscience tells you that you have done something wrong. You know that you wouldn't want your brother to do that to you. The beautiful island tells you that the creator exists and that he must have made it and you as well. Consequently, he has the right to expect you to live a certain way. Your theft was done in secret, and your brother is not aware. But is your misdeed hidden from the creator? You fear that the Master Creator sees and cares about your behavior. What if Master Creator is upset and punishes you?

What do you do with this moral awareness and accountability? *Can your knowledge of the Island's creation and your awareness of a Master Creator solve your problem? Is "He" the source of your accusing conscience?* What to do? You can't undo the stealing. You might try to pay God back. Make a fire. Burn some coconut offerings. Then a storm comes in and wrecks your hut. You think that this must be Master Creator punishing you. So you make another fire... burn some more coconut offerings. Your conscience is accusing and condemning you. Life is not right!

Another storm comes. The hut falls down again. Well, you think, the coconut offerings were not enough! Maybe the problem is that I am offending the Master Creator by eating coconuts to begin with. O.K. I'll switch to bananas... The storms stop. Must have been the new Creator pleasing diet.

But, one week later you have this huge craving for another of your brother's coconuts. You fight off the temptation for a while, but then you dig in to a big juicy coconut. Yum! But then you feel guilty for offending the Master Creator.

### Reflections

Was it difficult to fully imagine yourself in this story without bringing in your knowledge and opinions from your actual life?

Was it reasonable for you within the story to ascribe the complexity and beauty of the island to a cause?

How about to an intelligent being? Why or why not?

What was your reaction to calling this being Master Creator?

Is it appropriate to feel bad about taking your brother's coconuts? Why or why not?

What do you think of the guilt you experience (in the story)?

How would you prefer to write this story?

## Why Talk about God?

### The existence of God is Pivotal

The opening story of this chapter places you in an imagined existence on a deserted island. The story explores how this person (you) seeks to understand and attach meaning to the surrounding environment and your own actions. It is not difficult to think of a lot of questions one would have in this situation: How did I get here and what is my place? How do I explain and make sense of both the beauty of the island and its

harsh realities? What am I to do with my time and creativity? Why is it worth the effort to survive? Who cares about me? What do I hope for? What are my obligations to my brother? Should I sacrifice myself for his well-being? Who wins if we disagree? This simple story of a two-person society on a desert island compels you to grapple with each of the components of human meaning (that we discussed in book 1): transcendence (place in reality), significance (purpose), and community (commonality with others).

But I am pretty sure that as you read the story you experienced some strong reactions. In the story, I have you turning to the idea of God to explain the beauty of the island and the source of the guilt you experience after stealing from your brother. Now, if you are a person who does not believe that God exists, you will probably be quite irritated by the story. You can't imagine yourself explaining the island based on the creative work of God. And whatever regrets you have regarding the coconuts, they would have nothing to do with an "imaginary" God. So the idea of seeking to make amends to this "fantasy" God will seem like a tragic waste of time. If you have a debt to anyone it is only to your brother. No need for fairy tales. God is not needed for you to have significance and a reason to survive and prosper. If anything the whole idea of God is not only untrue but results in a whole variety of pointless, wasteful, and even harmful human activity. Your ideas of transcendence, significance, and community are all in line with a reality without God.

*Atheism is a non-prophet organization. —George Carlin*

On the other hand, if you believe in God you will have an entirely different reaction to the story. You will think it wise and appropriate that you would recognize the creative hand of God in the island. The beauty and complexity you see would be part of a reality that God is responsible for. You would find it hard to believe that such wonder and “design” could ever happen without the work of an intelligent creator. In this story, you do not know much about this God, but you have properly reasoned that you are also a product of his work and that He defines your purpose. Accordingly, the uncomfortable feelings of guilt you have when stealing are much more than a practical desire for productive harmony with your brother. There is a third person involved – God. He is rightly offended and you need reconciliation with Him most of all. In fact, being on good terms with God is much more important than being on good terms with your brother. You find the idea of reality without God is to you to be pointless, empty, meaningless, and dismal. For you the central ideas of meaning and purpose (transcendence, significance, and community) are all in line with a reality that includes God and is driven by Him.

*God used beautiful mathematics in creating the world. — Paul Dirac*

The existence of God is definitely a huge question. In fact, it is a pivotal question. It drives the many ways we view reality, our lives, and purpose. Both believer and atheist agree the question is critically important. If this is the case, you might be puzzled why I have placed this question as the second book in this series. That is a good question! I had considered making the question of God’s existence the first book, but I decided that the question of human meaning more naturally prompts

the question of God than the reverse. As we discussed, the broad categories of meaning are common for all people – including God believers, agnostics, and atheists. But how we define the specifics of meaning within these categories is critically different based upon our beliefs about God. So, for better or worse I have placed the question of God after the question of meaning.

### The Existence of God is Hotly Debated

In preparing to write this book, I reviewed a fair amount of the literature on the topic. I also spent quite a number of hours on the Internet watching debates between Theists and Atheists. Watching debates certainly requires a lot of patience and mental discipline. Debates by their very nature are adversarial and like most people I find myself picking a side and rooting for a decisive victory. Debates about God's existence are especially intense. This issue of God is a matter of core worldview for both sides and the debaters understandably feel a huge responsibility to represent their side convincingly and not yield ground. Listening and civility become early casualties of these wars, and if you read the comments of readers/viewers it gets even less civil and reasonable. YouTube comments are typically rants and name-calling. Book reviews are a little better but are nonetheless often nasty.

*My wife Mary and I have been married for forty-seven years and not once have we had an argument serious enough to consider divorce; murder, yes, but divorce, never — Jack Benny*

I often wonder how much anyone's mind is changed by these debates. I wish that each side would accept more of the burden to understand and be able to adequately represent the

other side. In fact, to have any ability to learn requires a real willingness to understand opposing beliefs and humbly admit where our position is weak and be open to correction. Part of this means reading the books that offend you or think will offend you. Theists need to take the time to really understand the positions and concerns of atheists. Atheists need to do the same. Read the books. Listen to the advocates of both sides carefully. Show respect. Don't fill your head with only second-hand opinions. You won't get the whole picture if you do. And most of all and this much is true whether you are a believer or an atheist - if you are wrong about God it is a very big deal.

### **Three Major Components of the God Question**

How do we think through this question of the existence of God? The first thing to note is that there is definite disagreement as to the existence of anything supernatural, much less God. The two major worldviews of Atheism and Theism stand in direct opposition. For the purposes of this discussion, I want to focus on the two major views – Atheism and Monotheism (which includes Christianity, Islam, and Judaism).

The claims of Monotheism include that there is a single sovereign supernatural entity (God) that is the only entity whose existence is explained in itself. This entity is responsible for the creation and sustaining of the physical, mental, and moral orders. All things within these orders proceed ultimately from this self-existent being, including the existence, composition or character, the ability to change and interact, the possession of a purpose, and an ultimate destiny.

Atheism denies that there is any such entity. Atheism, as it is commonly defined, is materialistic. That is to say that reality is composed only of physical (or material) stuff and there is

nothing in existence but the material. The physical, mental, and moral categories of reality are composed of and explained by the properties and interaction of material things (atoms, sub-atomic particles, elements, etc.). Atheism asserts that there is no creative mind that explains reality. Reality in all its facets emerges from the simple to the complex through the laws of physics, chemistry, and biology and this understanding has been verified by the discoveries of science and that whatever gaps may reside in our understanding will be closed only by further understanding of the material order and not by appealing to the supernatural or to God.

There are myriad of books and articles on this topic. A simple scan of Amazon or the Internet will provide a lifetime of reading that dates from the earliest records of human civilization to the present day. Materialistic Atheism currently has a number of vocal and well-spoken advocates including Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, Daniel Dennett, and Richard Dawkins. Current notable and also well-spoken advocates for Theism include Norman Giesler, Alvin Plantinga, Peter Kreeft, William Lane Craig, and Willaim Dembski.

I will focus the discussion of the question of God's existence on three major areas of reality and discuss how these two worldviews think about each area with respect to explaining them with or without God. Accordingly, I will describe the major tenets and arguments made by each side within each of three pivotal areas: (1) The Nature and Existence of Physical Reality, (2) The Design and Purpose of Physical reality, (3) The explanation of Morality. This will be an admittedly brief summary of very detailed and sometimes complex arguments. I do encourage you to read the authors above and others for a full understanding. My desire here is that you understand the



depth and importance of the question of God and to appreciate these two major views and their assertions. There is little middle ground and which answer you adopt has huge implications.

### **The Nature and Existence of Physical Reality**

Why does the physical realm (the entire set of physical things that exist – that is the universe) exist and how did it arrive at this point in time? Was there a beginning to the physical realm or has it always existed? What is the explanation of change? Does everything have a cause? If there was a big bang that was the starting point of all the stuff in the universe as well as the laws of physics, what was before the bang? Was there nothing before the start? And if there was nothing before the start, how was there something after the start? And if there was something before the start, was there really a start at all? Is there something besides the physical realm that explains it? If there is can we really know about it, since we are physical beings? These are some of the questions that we can ask about the nature and existence of the physical universe.

These can be mind-boggling questions. They are also questions that are not answerable solely by means of observation and experiment. That is to say that they are questions that are not fully answerable by science. Now, I am a scientist by training and profession and I am truly impressed by what the scientific method has given to our understanding and to our quality of life. But it is also reasonable to say that these questions lie beyond the province of science.

Consider a star trek and beyond future. Imagine this future filled with amazing knowledge and technologies that revolutionize our existence with regards to energy (virtually unlim-

ited), travel (light speed and beyond), computing power (a trillion times today's speed), agriculture (bioengineered and plentiful), medicine (Nano robots patrol the body and fix us at the cell level and we also fully understand the human genome and genetic disease is repairable), etc. Even in this glorious future (or any beyond it) can you see that the questions in the above paragraph will not be fully answered by the discoveries of science? Despite this, can you also see that these are questions of nature and origin that still remain? In other words - reality has an explanation that is true (not a matter of opinion), and that explanation cannot be found by empirical science alone, no matter how advanced that science is.

How then are they addressed, if not by our senses? The answer is that the Atheist and the Theist address these basic questions about the nature and existence of physical reality using metaphysical reasoning and arguments. Metaphysics is thinking and reasoning that goes beyond the physically examinable, and hence the realm of science. Some of these metaphysical assumptions are very simple and so embedded in our common sense that we hardly notice that they are there. Here are a few examples: the world we receive by our senses is actually there; the world is intelligible to the human mind; the laws of nature will continue to operate the same way in the future; and events have causes. These four examples are the very basis of doing science and without them no science is possible. There are, of course, many other items of metaphysical topics that fill volumes of philosophy books and which can be quite complicated. We will examine a few along the way in this chapter. But the point is that both Theists and Atheists deploy metaphysical reasoning and assumptions in addition to

empirical (physical) knowledge in reaching their positions about God.

Let's first examine the Atheistic view concerning the nature and existence of physical reality. Atheistic materialists look at the physical world and observe that everything that surrounds us is composed of matter (stuff) and energy (motion or the potential for motion). The scientific method is one of studying matter and energy and understanding in increasing detail its behavior and its composition. This is done through careful observation and by intentional experimentation. In experimentation science progresses by seeking to simplify interactions in a controlled way so that what is complex can be "taken apart" and understood. This "scientific" process has resulted in impressive gains in understanding of the composition of things and how they function and interact. This understanding has progressed incredibly in the past century and has resulted in mathematical descriptions of the behavior of nature that we call "laws". These laws allow us to predict the behavior of simple physical systems and create incredibly useful tools that have revolutionized the quality of life we experience. Truly the middle-class today enjoys conveniences and comforts unavailable to the richest kings of a hundred years ago.

*Something pretty mysterious had to give rise to the origin of the universe —  
Richard Dawkins*

The materialist rightly points out that the advances of science have replaced many previous and primitive understandings of nature. The world is no longer flat. Organisms and not spirits cause disease. Inheritance is driven by genetic codes