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# The **Despair** of **Atheism**

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# The Despair of Atheism

Kyle Butt, M.Div.

Article In Brief... 

**Atheism contends that our Universe is a cosmic accident and humanity is a biological blip on the screen that will eventually be eradicated in a void of nothingness. This incorrect view of life implies that human life has no objective purpose and that what humans do throughout the course of their brief lives is ultimately meaningless. Such a view of humanity is not only incorrect, but it offers nothing but despair and a tragic apathy to life. Christianity, on the other hand, accounts for humanity's innate desire and hunger for purpose and meaning, while at the same time offering hope and the realization that our lives really do matter.**

**A**N implication is an idea that follows logically from a set of facts which are plainly stated. The concept of an implication is clearly seen in math. Take the Pythagorean Theorem, which says that for a right triangle the sum of the two shorter sides squared equals the longest side (the hypotenuse) squared— $A^2 + B^2 = C^2$ . So, if one short side is 3 and the other is 4, then we can know exactly what the longest side is, even though it is not stated or written down—it is 5. An implication is not less of a fact than what is stated or “seen.” It is just as factual, only not stated. Another clear example of an implication is seen in the famous syllogism:

All men are mortal. Socrates is a man. Knowing those two explicit facts, what else can be known? If a person is thinking logically and correctly, then he or she can know a third piece of information that is included in the premises but not written down: therefore, Socrates is mortal.

All beliefs have implications. They may be difficult to uncover and piece together, but they are there and follow inescapably. If a person is rational and honest, there is no denying an implication. In light of that fact, what implications follow from the belief that there is no God? Many of these implications have been fleshed out in

other places.<sup>1</sup> This article will deal with only one: The concept of atheism implies that human life does not have any objective meaning. If atheism is true, then human life is meaningless.

At first glance, it may seem that the burden is to prove that atheism implies meaningless. That is not the case, since that task has already been done eloquently by many of those in the atheistic community. Leading atheists do not deny that their belief implies meaninglessness. On the contrary, they openly admit the implication, and spend the bulk of their discussions trying to incorporate the implication of meaninglessness into a “fulfilled” human life. Thus, instead of proving the implication, we will simply cite several unbelievers who have done so, and then proceed to show that it is impossible to live a fulfilled human life without the concept of objective meaning. Humans have been **designed** to understand that life has real meaning and purpose. When these concepts are denied, those who take time to consider the loss recognize that something is amiss. Humans intuitively know their lives have purpose. To deny that truth forces them into a state of cognitive dissonance of the worst kind. The only conceivable outcome of knowing that humans should (and do) have an objective purpose in their lives, while denying the fact, is a state of despair.

## ATHEISM IMPLIES THAT LIFE IS MEANINGLESS

**A** brief look at the writings of unbelievers reveals that meaninglessness naturally follows from the concept of atheism. Atheistic philosopher Alex Rosenberg penned a book titled *The Atheist's Guide to Reality: Enjoying Life*

*Without Illusions*. *Harper's* magazine reviewed the book, saying: "Rosenberg is admirably frank about the implications of scientism [atheism—KB]." The back cover of the book quotes from the *New York Times Book Review*: "The work of a well-informed and imaginative philosopher." At the beginning of the book, Rosenberg declared: "This book aims to provide the correct answers to most of the persistent questions.... Given what we know from the sciences, the answers **are all pretty obvious**...." He then provided a list of questions with his concise "pretty obvious" answers following each question:

- Is there a God? No.
- What is the nature of reality? What physics says it is.
- What is the purpose of the Universe? **There is none.**
- What is the meaning of life? **Ditto.**
- Why am I here? **Just dumb luck.**
- Does prayer work? Of course not.
- Is there a soul? Are you kidding?
- Is there free will? Not a chance!
- What happens when we die? Everything pretty much goes on as before, except us.
- What is the difference between right and wrong, good and bad? There is no moral difference between them.
- Why should I be moral? Because it makes you feel better than being immoral.
- Is abortion, euthanasia, suicide, paying taxes, foreign aid, or anything else you don't like forbidden, permissible, or sometimes obligatory? Anything goes.

- What is love, and how can I find it? Love is the solution to a strategic interaction problem. Don't look for it; it will find you when you need it.
- Does history have any meaning or purpose? It's full of sound and fury, but signifies nothing.
- Does the human past have any lessons for our future? Fewer and fewer, if it ever had any to begin with.<sup>2</sup>

Graham Lawton, Executive Editor of *New Scientist* magazine, penned a brief article titled, "What is the Meaning of Life?" He began with his blunt, one line answer: "The harsh answer is 'it has none.'" He went on to say: "Your life may feel like a big deal to you, but it's actually a **random blip of matter and energy in an uncaring and impersonal universe**."<sup>3</sup> Stephen J. Gould, one of the most recognized evolutionary paleontologists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, wrote about atheism's meaninglessness with his customary flair: "We are here because one odd group of fishes had a peculiar fin anatomy that could transform into legs for terrestrial creatures;

because the earth never froze entirely during an ice age; because a small and tenuous species, arising in Africa a quarter of a million years ago, has managed, so far, to survive by hook and by crook. **We may yearn for a 'higher answer'—but none exists.**"<sup>4</sup>

Philosopher and self-professed atheist, Thomas Nagel, teaches and writes extensively on atheism's implication of meaninglessness. In his brief book *What Does it All Mean? A Very Short Introduction to Philosophy*, he stated: "If you think about the whole thing, there seems to be no point to it at all. Looking at it from the outside, it wouldn't matter if you had never existed. And after you have gone out of existence, it won't matter that you did exist."<sup>5</sup> Eminent atheistic author, debater, and spokesperson Richard Dawkins boldly said: "The universe 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**."<sup>6</sup> Edward O. Wilson quipped that "no species, ours included, possesses

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a purpose beyond the imperatives created by its genetic history.”<sup>7</sup>

The late William Provine, atheistic professor in the Department of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology at the distinguished Cornell University, stated: “Naturalistic evolution has clear consequences that Charles Darwin understood perfectly. 1) No gods worth having exist; 2) no life after death exists; 3) no ultimate foundation for ethics exists; 4) **no ultimate meaning in life exists**; and 5) human free will is nonexistent.”<sup>8</sup>

The existential philosopher Albert Camus, winner of the Nobel Prize in literature, struggled greatly with atheism’s lack of meaning and purpose. So great was his contemplation of it, he declared, “I therefore conclude that the meaning of life is the most urgent of questions.”<sup>9</sup> Camus then championed the idea of the “absurd” man. He used a very specific meaning for the word “absurd.” In his writing, the concept of the absurd is the recognition and acceptance that life has no meaning, rhyme, or reason. He says of the absurd man: “He feels within him his longing for happiness and for reason. The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world.”<sup>10</sup> His whole book begins with the premise that atheism denies any meaning to the world, and proceeds to flesh out how a person can keep from committing suicide once he arrives at universal meaninglessness. Thus, he begins the book, saying: “There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy.”<sup>11</sup> And later in the book he concludes, about his

entire book, discussion, and life: “Let me repeat. None of all this has any real meaning.”<sup>12</sup>

### CREATING OUR OWN MEANING?

If there is no God, then the implication that life ultimately has no real meaning cannot be denied. Knowing, however, that humans have an innate sense that their lives have meaning and need to have a purpose, atheism is burdened with the unenviable task of manufacturing meaning with no raw materials, whipping it into existence out of thin air. How does this work? One approach put forward by leading unbelievers is that we simply create our own, individual meaning in our lives. When asked about the meaning of life, Alom Shaha, author of *The Young Atheist’s Handbook*, stated:

Yes, of course I know that life is ultimately without meaning or purpose, but the trick is not to wake up every morning and feel that way. Cognitive dissonance? Embrace it. **Create a sense of meaning and purpose** by doing something useful with your life (I teach), being creative—I don’t mean that in a poncey hipster way, I mean make a curry, build some bookshelves, write a poem. And most importantly, find people you like and love and spend lots of time with them. I regularly have people over for dinner, throw parties for no other reason than I just want to spend time surrounded by the people I love. And if you’re really stuck, eat rice and dal. Physically filling yourself with the food you love really does fill the emptiness you may feel inside.<sup>13</sup>

Biology professor, author, and lecturer Jerry Coyne states: “What people cannot abide is the conviction that the Universe and life are pointless. **Which is what really, science is telling us.** Pointless in

the sense that there is no externally imposed purpose or point in the Universe. As atheists, this is something that is manifestly true to us. **We make our own meaning and purpose.**”<sup>14</sup>

Dr. Pete Etchells, lecturer and science writer, expounded on the idea of creating our own meaning when he said:

Whenever I get involved in conversations about the meaning of life, and where everything’s headed, I can’t help but feel that there’s an underlying assumption that because these are “big” questions, they necessarily need big answers. There aren’t any, though. We’re not here for a universal purpose, and there is no grand plan, no matter how tempting it is to believe it. But that’s absolutely fine, because it means that if there aren’t any big answers, the little ones are all the more important. So every day, I take my dog for a walk in the field near my house. Sometimes I get to see a pretty sunset, but usually it’s either bucketing down and I get soaked, or cold, or the field is full of mud and bugs and dog [poop], and it’s a pain to navigate through. **Whatever the situation, though, my dog has the most ridiculous fun ever, and being a part of that little moment of joy is what it’s all about.**<sup>15</sup>

So, the answer to the meaning of life is make curry, build a bookshelf, or wander through a muddy field full of dog poop and watch your dog have fun? The problem with this “create-your-own-meaning” approach is twofold. First, it refuses to take the word “meaning” seriously. It is a semantic game in which the word can be applied to anything. Meaning “for you” might be watching your dog run, “for me” it might be watching paint dry, “for him” it might be watching grass grow, etc. Just because an activity may bring momentary tranquility

or pleasure to a person does not endow it with any objective meaning. A person's arbitrary attachment of the word "meaning" to something does not somehow create meaning in any real sense—not for that person or for others. Abraham Lincoln once sagely quipped: "How many legs does a calf have if you call its tail a leg? Four. Just because you call a tail a leg does not make it so." Attaching the words "meaning" and "purpose" to a bowl of shrimp and grits or a sushi roll will never be sufficient to answer the "most urgent question" of life.

The second insurmountable problem for this approach of creating meaning is that those who propound it intentionally hide the dark truth that necessarily follows. They often paint a picture of self-created meaning in rosy terms of a tranquil couple viewing a sunset, a man walking his beloved dog, or a parent running and laughing with a child. What they are forced to omit, if they want to keep up the ruse, is that self-created "meaning" can manifest itself through **any** behavior, including genocide, serial killing, torture, terminal drug addiction, overdose, etc. Using the proponents' own logic, a man could just as easily say he finds meaning in killing other people's dogs in the park as in watching his own pet frolic playfully. As Sommers and Rosenberg accurately stated:

Darwinism thus puts the capstone on a process which since Newton's time has driven teleology to the explanatory sideline. In short it has made Darwinians into metaphysical Nihilists denying that there is any **meaning or purpose to the universe**, its contents and its cosmic history. But in making Darwinians into metaphysical nihilists, the solvent algorithm should have made them into

**ethical nihilists** too. For intrinsic values and obligations make sense only against a backdrop of purposes, goals, and ends which are not merely instrumental. **But the Darwinian philosophers have shied away from this implication.**<sup>16</sup>

If human existence has no real meaning, then neither do moral or ethical ideas. We may like to think that humans would adhere to some type of generally accepted guidelines, but we would have no grounds to insist that they do. I may "create my own meaning" by reading a book to a child, while another person may contend that they find meaning in killing their parents and cannibalism. There is no rational grounds upon which a person could argue that reading a book to a child is more **meaningful** than murder and cannibalism. After all, as Camus said, "Let me repeat. None of all this has any real meaning." As philosopher John-Paul Sartre declared: "Everything is indeed permitted if God does not exist."<sup>17</sup> The create-your-own-meaning approach fails miserably.

### LIFE HAS NO MEANING, BUT JUST ACT LIKE IT DOES?

**M**any unbelievers recognize that we cannot create meaning just by saying we have. They see the failure of attempts to infuse meaning where there is, or can be, none. Their approach is simple: Admit that life is meaningless in every sense, but live like there is a meaning. Dr. Loyal Rue is a strong proponent of what he calls a noble lie. Based on a naturalistic framework, he writes, "The universe is blind and aimless.... The universe is dead and void of meaning.... The universe just is."<sup>18</sup> He admits that, from a naturalistic standpoint, meaninglessness "is not something

that one can argue away by showing that it results from fallacious thinking.... It is logically and empirically secure."<sup>19</sup> How does Dr. Rue suggest that humans approach meaninglessness? He concedes that we cannot live fulfilled lives with the truth before us. He proposes that we adopt a lie, a noble lie, that the Universe has real meaning, even though (according to atheism) it does not. His stated thesis is "to oppose a monstrous truth [meaninglessness—KB] with a noble lie."<sup>20</sup> Why does Dr. Rue insist we adopt this lie? Because, he says, "without such lies, we cannot live."<sup>21</sup> [One wonders why, in the face of life's meaninglessness, Rue suggests a noble lie? If there is no objective meaning, purpose, or morality, would it not be just as acceptable to adopt an ignoble lie? According to Rue's view, what would be wrong with telling yourself that the more people you kill, the more meaning your life has, or the more money you steal, the more meaningful you are? After all, if we simply make up lies to make ourselves feel better, a lie is a lie—and **any** lie will do.]

Thomas Nagel touched on this avoidance approach when he wrote:

Even if life as a whole is meaningless, perhaps that's nothing to worry about. Perhaps we can recognize it and just go on as before. The trick is to keep your eyes on what's in front of you.... Some people find this attitude perfectly satisfying. Others find it depressing, though unavoidable. Part of the problem is that some of us have an incurable tendency to take ourselves seriously. We want to matter to ourselves "from the outside." If our lives as a whole seem pointless, then a part of us is dissatisfied.... Life may be not only meaningless but absurd.<sup>22</sup>

Notice that Nagel realizes that if you take your life "seriously" then

(cont. on p. 93)

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it just won't do to think about the meaninglessness of it all. What does he suggest? "The trick is to keep your eyes on what's in front of you." In other words, do not think about it. Act like it is not there. Ignore the lack of purpose and meaning. Atheism prides itself on rationality, enlightenment, and intellectual honesty. And yet denial, avoidance, and deceit must lie at the heart of unbelief in order for humans to be truly satisfied and live productive lives.

American film director, writer, actor, and comedian, Woody Allen, understands the problem he and his fellow atheists struggle to face. He stated:

This is my perspective and has always been my perspective on life. I have a very grim, pessimistic view of it. I always have since I was a little boy; it hasn't gotten worse with age or anything. I do feel that it's a grim, painful, nightmarish, meaningless experience and that the only way that you can be happy is if you tell yourself **some lies and deceive yourself**. But I am not the first person to say this or even the most articulate person. It was said by Nietzsche, it was said by Freud, it was said by Eugene O'Neill. **One must have one's delusions to live**. If you look at life too honestly and clearly, life becomes **unbearable** because it's a pretty **grim** enterprise, you will admit.<sup>23</sup>

In another interview, he said:

Then after a while, you start to realize, I'm taking the big picture here, that eventually you die and eventually the Sun burns out and the Earth is gone and eventually all stars and all the planets and the entire Universe goes, disappears and nothing is left at all. Nothing of Shakespeare's or Beethoven. All gone. Michelangelo, all gone. And you think to yourself. It is a lot of noise and sound and fury.

And where's it going? It's not going any place.... You know it just seems like a big, meaningless thing. **You can't actually live your life like that**. Because if you do, you just sit there. Why do anything? Why get up in the morning and do anything?<sup>24</sup>

Allen, Nagel, Rue, and others are forced to admit that a meaningless, hopeless, purposeless Universe incapacitates the most optimistic unbelievers. Were they to attempt to put into practice a course of action consistent with their belief, then they would not even get up in the morning. In fact, there would be no real reason to do anything—ever. That is why Camus recognized the fact that the only real question to answer in such a world is why would a person want to stay alive at all?

### NOTHING LEFT BUT DESPAIR

**W**hat is left in a world where meaninglessness reigns supreme, but its human inhabitants are wired to need meaning in their lives? As Lawrence Krauss so brazenly reminds his readers and listeners: "And by the way, that's the second of the two things I wanted to remind you of. The first is that you're insignificant. And the second, the future is **miserable**."<sup>25</sup> French humanist, Voltaire, encapsulated this recognition of misery in his "Poem on the Lisbon Disaster," in which he wrote: "What is the verdict of the vastest mind? Silence: the book of fate is closed to us. Man is a stranger to his own research; He knows not whence he comes, nor whither goes. **Tormented atoms in a bed of mud**, devoured by death, a mockery of fate."<sup>26</sup>

So, humans are "insignificant," "miserable," "tormented atoms in a bed of mud." Yet, atheism is

not finished painting humanity's sad plight with the pale colors of despair. Peter Atkins opined: "We are children of chaos, and the deep structure of change is decay. At root, there is only corruption, and the unstemmable tide of chaos. Gone is purpose; all that is left is direction. This is the **bleakness** we have to accept as we peer deeply and dispassionately into the heart of the Universe."<sup>27</sup>

Albert Camus quoted Kierkegaard, who said: "If man had no eternal consciousness...what would life be but despair?" Camus then wrote: "This cry is not likely to stop the absurd man. Seeking what is true is not seeking what is desirable. If in order to elude the anxious question: 'What would life be?' one must, like the donkey, feed on the roses of illusion, then the absurd mind, rather than resigning itself to falsehood, prefers to adopt fearlessly Kierkegaard's reply: '**despair**.'"<sup>28</sup> Bertrand Russell bemoaned: "Brief and powerless is Man's life; on him and all his race the slow, sure doom falls **pitiless** and **dark**. Blind to good and evil, reckless of destruction, omnipotent matter rolls on its relentless way; for Man, condemned today to lose his dearest, tomorrow himself to pass through the gate of darkness...."<sup>29</sup>

Into this chaos of bleakness, meaninglessness, insignificance, torment, and despair, Christianity offers a hope that can anchor the soul (Hebrews 6:19) and a truth that does not need a "noble lie" to make it palatable. Christianity provides the only system that can give humanity a reason to get up in the morning and live life to the fullest.

## A RESPONSE TO ATHEISM'S DESPAIR

**M**adalyn Murray O'Hair was the founder of the American Atheist organization. She lived a life in complete rebellion against her God. Her rabid atheism prodded her to attack the idea of God whenever she could. But her atheism could not bring her joy, only a forlorn heart of desperation. When her personal belongings were auctioned, it was discovered that on six different pages of her writings was the heartbreaking cry: "Somebody, somewhere, love me!"<sup>30</sup> The greatest tragedy of atheism is that it strips the world of everything meaningful, including real love.

Atheist Dan Barker admitted that, according to atheism, "In the end of the cosmos it's not going to matter. You and I are like ants or rats or like pieces of broccoli, really, in the big picture...there is no value to our species...we are no different than a piece of broccoli in the cosmic sense."<sup>31</sup> As we have seen, according to atheism, humans are nothing more than matter in motion, "tormented atoms in a bed of mud." Our actions will not determine where we spend eternity. And any "feeling" that one person may have for another person can only be "skin deep." It can only be a product of the physical brain. As much as atheists try to discuss love, hope, honor, or any of the elevated human virtues, they cannot explain how such can exist in a world without God.

Sadly, just like O'Hair, there is a world full of people who want someone to love them, but they refuse to recognize that there is Someone Who does. Their Creator, God, loves them so much that He came to die on the cross for them. Jesus Christ, God in the flesh, gave His life to prove His love for humanity and to show humans

that they are not cosmic accidents, but intentionally designed persons who have a meaning and purpose in life. And He gave His life so that those humans who choose to obey Him can live eternally in heaven. "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life" (John 3:16).

But God's love has a limit. He will not **force** anyone to believe in Him. He loves each person enough to let us all freely choose whether or not to believe in and obey Him. And our choice will determine our eternal destiny. Moses once wrote to the Israelites: "I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life" (Deuteronomy 30:19). The failure to choose the right beliefs and actions in this life has real consequences. These are not imagined consequences that have to be endowed with meaning by subjective, arbitrary feelings. On the contrary, the consequences are objectively real.

We are not ultimately like broccoli or rats. Our decisions really matter, for now and for eternity.

Those who refuse to acknowledge God can have no hope for an after-life or joy in death, only despair. Agnostic Bart Ehrman, who once claimed to be a Christian, wrote: "The fear of death gripped me for years, **and there are still moments when I wake up at night in a cold sweat.**"<sup>32</sup> The Bible explains that Christ came to defeat death, and "release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage" (Hebrews 2:15). The only solution to the fear of death and the deep, abiding despair that stems from atheism is to seek God and His will. Madalyn Murray O'Hair's cry, "Somebody, somewhere, love me!" echoes across the world from millions of voices who are trying to find love and hope apart from God. The irony of it all is that they have shut their ears to the voice of God, Who through His Son, calls from the cross, "I love you." Instead of the bleak, tormented, useless, meaningless, purposeless, pitiless, miserable despair that atheism demands, let us turn our faces to the true light, hope, joy, and love that our Creator provides.<sup>33</sup>

## SPEAKING SCHEDULES

### Kyle Butt

August 15-17	Sevierville, TN	(256) 435-9356
August 28	Florence, AL	(256) 764-0104

### Eric Lyons

August 2-3	Austin, TX	(512) 858-4500
August 19-21	Sevierville, TN	(256) 435-9356
August 28	Andalusia, AL	(334) 222-3651

### Dave Miller

August 4,11	Montgomery, AL	(334) 264-2985
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### Jeff Miller

August 11	Montgomery, AL	(334) 264-2985
August 15-22	Sevierville, TN	(256) 435-9356

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Kyle Butt (2008), "The Implications of Atheism (Parts 1 & 2)," Apologetics Press, <https://apologeticspress.org/apcontent.aspx?category=12&article=911>.
- <sup>2</sup> Alex Rosenberg (2011), *The Atheist's Guide to Reality: Enjoying Life Without Illusions* (New York: W.W. Norton), p. 3, emp. added.
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- <sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 28.
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 3.
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 117.
- <sup>13</sup> As quoted in Tom Chivers' article, "I Asked Atheists How They Find Meaning in a Purposeless Universe," *BuzzFeed*, <https://www.buzzfeed.com/tomchivers/when-i-was-a-child-i-spoke-as-a-child>, emp. added.
- <sup>14</sup> Jerry Coyne (2012), "The Odd Couple: Why Science and Religion Shouldn't Cohabitate," Speech to Glasgow Skeptics, December 21, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0wCl\\_aOQ-2s&noredirect=1](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0wCl_aOQ-2s&noredirect=1), emp. added.
- <sup>15</sup> As quoted in Chivers, emp. added.
- <sup>16</sup> Tamler Sommers and Alex Rosenberg (2003), "Darwin's Nihilistic Idea: Evolution and the Meaninglessness of Life," *Biology and Philosophy*, 18:653-658.
- <sup>17</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre (1989), "Existentialism is Humanism," in Existentialism from Dostoyevsky to Sartre, ed. Walter Kaufman, trans. Philip Mairet (Meridian Publishing Company), <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/sartre/works/exist/sartre.htm>.
- <sup>18</sup> Loyal Rue (1994), *By Grace and Guile: The Role of Deception in Natural History and Human Affairs* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press), p. 3.
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>21</sup> As quoted in William Lane Craig, "The Absurdity of Life Without God," *Reasonable Faith*, <https://www.reasonablefaith.org/writings/popular-writings/existence-nature-of-god/the-absurdity-of-life-without-god>.
- <sup>22</sup> Nagel, pp. 100-101.
- <sup>23</sup> Woody Allen interview, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5yVPS8XB0BE>.
- <sup>24</sup> Woody Allen, YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2MsuqvLlItk>.
- <sup>25</sup> Quote from Lawrence Krauss as quoted in Austin Brown's *The Case for Utter Hopelessness: Why Atheism Leads to Unyielding Despair* (2017), (Self Published), emp. added.
- <sup>26</sup> "Poem on the Lisbon Disaster" in Joseph McCabe (1912), *Toleration and Other Essays by Voltaire* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons), <http://people.whitman.edu/~iversojr/Candidate/lisbon.htm>, emp. added.
- <sup>27</sup> Peter Atkins (1984), *The Second Law* (New York: Scientific American), p. 200.
- <sup>28</sup> Camus, p. 40, emp. added.
- <sup>29</sup> Bertrand Russell (1910), "Free Man's Worship," <https://users.drew.edu/jlenz/br-free-mans-worship.html>, emp. added.
- <sup>30</sup> As quoted in an article by Chuck Colson (1999), "The Real Madelyn Murray O'Hair," <http://www.breakpoint.org/1999/06/the-atheists-god/>.
- <sup>31</sup> Quoted from his debate with Paul Monata, July 10, 2006, posted on the radio program "The Infidel Guy," [https://drive.google.com/file/d/0BzBGd8nA3jj\\_N181TG10MDB6YUE/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/0BzBGd8nA3jj_N181TG10MDB6YUE/view).
- <sup>32</sup> Bart Ehrman (2008), *God's Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question—Why We Suffer* (New York: HarperOne), p. 127.
- <sup>33</sup> See Eric Lyons and Kyle Butt (no date), *Receiving the Gift of Salvation* (Montgomery, AL: Apologetics Press).

# Did Solomon Err in Proverbs 6:7?

Dave Miller, Ph.D.



Go to the ant, you sluggard! Consider her ways and be wise, which, **having no captain, overseer or ruler**, provides her supplies in the summer, and gathers her food in the harvest. How long will you slumber, O sluggard? When will you rise from your sleep? (Proverbs 6:6-9).

**S**OME have charged the Bible with error because Solomon stated that ants have no "captain, overseer, or ruler"—when "everyone knows" that ants have a queen. As with most allegations leveled against

the inspiration of the Bible, a little study and deeper examination beneath the surface would dispel such premature assessments.

First, observe that the first of the three Hebrew terms in verse 7, rendered "captain" in the NKJV,

refers to a magistrate or military leader—a person in authority who is the decider.<sup>1</sup> The NASB and RSV render the term "chief," the KJV has "guide," while the NIV renders it "commander." The second term, rendered "overseer"

in the NKJV, refers to an “official, officer” or “magistrate”<sup>2</sup>—those who oversee the work of others. The third word means to “rule, have dominion over.”<sup>3</sup> Clearly, all three terms used by Solomon in verse 7 connote the exertion of authority over others via guiding, commanding, overseeing, and ruling. These terms certainly characterize the function of most human queens.

Second, one must realize that mere humans—perhaps early entomologists or other naturalists—were responsible for assigning the term “queen” to one particular ant in an ant colony. As we’ve just noted, in the conventional sense of the term, a queen is a ruler who wields absolute power over her subjects. Whatever hierarchy exists between herself and her subjects, all are ultimately subject to her directives, guidance, and oversight of her kingdom. However, a study of life in an ant colony quickly reveals that the queen **does not function as a “queen”** in the conventional sense of that word. She does not govern, rule, direct, oversee, make decisions, or lead the colony. Keller and Gordon note: “there is neither a central authority at work here nor any hierarchy among the workers. Work arrangements depend entirely on individual initiatives within a system of self-organization.”<sup>4</sup> Another writer elaborates: “Indeed, strictly speaking, ant-hives are republics—each individual having their own special office, and each performing it with assiduous diligence.”<sup>5</sup>

So why have researchers acquiesced to the term “queen”?

Because the entire colony depends on her for their existence since she does only one thing: lay eggs. That’s it. Her “job is to lay eggs.”<sup>6</sup> She is their progenitor—not leader: “Once she settles in and begins laying eggs, that’s all she does for the rest of her life.”<sup>7</sup> Her importance is seen in that the colony would die out if she did not produce more ants. But that function does not accurately translate into her being thought of as a “queen.” No wonder that, toward the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, “some writers had dispensed with the term ‘queen’ altogether, finding it an inappropriate term to describe the founding female of the nest.”<sup>8</sup> She wields no apparent authority, makes no decisions for the rest of the colony, or exercises control over them. The term “mother” is more apropos and descriptive of her actual role. As noted 19<sup>th</sup>-century naturalist and Vice President of both the American Entomological Society and the Academy of Natural Sciences, Henry McCook, explained: “Her queenhood is wholly fanciful, except in the first stages of her independent career. Her **motherhood** is the great fact of life to her and her fellows. It is as a **mother** that she is the destined foundress of a new community.”<sup>9</sup>

Third, a return to the context quickly clarifies Solomon’s point. The context shows that Solomon is addressing the problem of laziness. Ants do not have overlords or bosses that stand over them and direct their activity or keep them working. Instead of sleeping the day away and avoiding work, ants manifest initiative and indus-

try. They do so without coercion from a hierarchy of authority or power. Instead, they manifest remarkable independence and individual responsibility. They do what needs to be done for the survival of the colony without a boss standing over them. So there is no error on Solomon’s part. In fact, his emphatic declaration, coupled with the reinforcement of not one but three specific descriptive terms (“captain,” “overseer,” “ruler”), only adds additional credence to the divine origin of Solomon’s remarks. The surface appearance of error is strictly due to the uninspired selection of the term “queen” to refer to the female ant that is responsible for egg production.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Francis Brown, S.R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs (1906), *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004 reprint), p. 892; William Gesenius (1847), *Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1979 reprint), p. 738.
- <sup>2</sup> Brown, Driver, and Briggs, p. 1009; Gesenius, p. 517.
- <sup>3</sup> Brown, Driver, and Briggs, p. 605; Gesenius, p. 817.
- <sup>4</sup> Laurent Keller and Elisabeth Gordon (2009), *The Lives of Ants* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 57-58.
- <sup>5</sup> “Natural History: The Ant, or Emmet” in James Hogg, ed. (1852), *Hogg’s Instructor* (Edinburgh: James Hogg), 9:246.
- <sup>6</sup> “Insects” (2000), *Exploring Life Science* (Tarrytown, NY: Marshall Cavendish Corporation), 6:439, <https://apologeticspress.page.link/Exploring-Life-Science>.
- <sup>7</sup> L. Patricia Kite (2001), *Insect Facts and Folklore* (Brookfield, CT: The Millbrook Press), p. 10.
- <sup>8</sup> Charlotte Sleight (2003), *Ant* (London: Reaktion Books), p. 79.
- <sup>9</sup> Henry McCook (1909), *Ant Communities and How They are Governed* (New York: Harper & Brothers), p. 157. Cf. Lori Lach, Catherine Parr, and Kirsti Abbott (2010), *Ant Ecology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).





## NOTE FROM

## The Editor

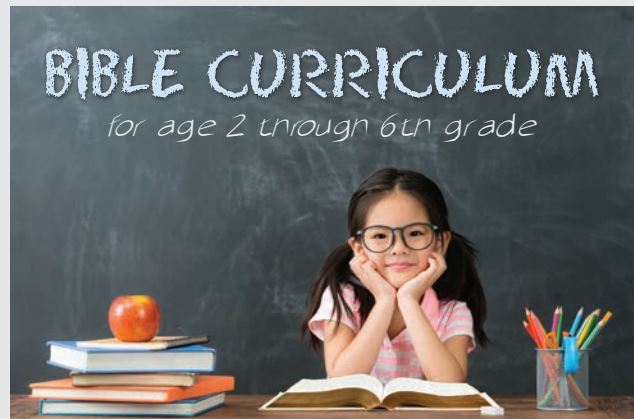


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