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An Investigation Into Belief Systems

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Abstract

This paper examined the enduring debates between—scientific atheism and scientific theism—through the lens of plausibility as a measure of their explanatory power for the whole range of human experience. Contemporary debates between scientific atheism and scientific theism often focus on empirical adequacy or methodological commitments, yet they lack a shared evaluative framework for comparing these positions as comprehensive worldviews capable of accounting for the full range of human experience. Using philosophical frameworks from Charles Darwin, David Hume, Francis Collins, Alistair McGrath, and Richard Dawkins, this paper built an evaluation scale from 1-10 to compare the plausibility of scientific atheism and scientific theism, based on the ability to explain experience, the ability to explain cosmic origins, and moral realism. Counterarguments from existential atheism, moral realism, and Nietzsche's critique of religion provide additional perspectives, yet highlight atheism's reliance on frameworks external to empirical science. This paper argued that scientific atheism's reliance on proven evidence as the be-all and end-all leaves vital questions about existence unanswered, earning it a lower score of 3/10. Scientific theism, as a comprehensive belief system, earns a score of 9/10. Ultimately, the analysis concluded that while both frameworks contribute valuable insights, scientific theism presents a more comprehensive and compelling worldview, while atheism is questionable as a complete explanatory system.

Keywords: Theology, Atheism, Theism, Philosophy, Belief

1. Background

"I want atheism to be true," philosopher Thomas Nagel wrote in his 1997 book, *The Last Word.* "And am made uneasy by the fact that some of the most intelligent and well-informed people I know are religious believers." Nagel's statement drives at the heart of the wider debate about atheism vs. theism. Given all the advances in science and everything humans now know about life and our universe in the modern age, why do highly intelligent people continue to believe in God?

The conflict between believers and non-believers has been churning for centuries. In today's world, religion continues to endure and even swell in popularity, posing this paper's titular question: "*Is Atheism Implausible?"* In this paper, plausibility refers to the degree to which a framework can reasonably be accepted as a viable interpretation of reality. This assessment involves three primary criteria: scope, or the range of phenomena the framework seeks to address; coherence, or the internal consistency and conceptual integration of its claims; and explanatory reach, or its capacity to illuminate not only empirical data but also existential, moral, and experiential dimensions of human life. As German philosopher Paul Tillich argues, a belief system requires a worldview that responds to our "ultimate concerns," as those existential questions that shape how people live and understand themselves (*Tillich, 1952, 82*).

This paper investigated atheism's reliance on evidence-based science as the be-all and end-all, and concluded that as a belief system, it leaves vital questions about existence and the universe unanswered. By weighing scientific atheism against a scientific theism, this paper evaluated which worldview offers a more complete and compelling

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account of reality. To guide this evaluation, this paper employed a comparative plausibility scale, ultimately proposing that scientific atheism rates a 3 out of 10, while scientific theism rates a 9 out of 10.

To fully explain Thomas Nagel's self-professed uneasiness vis-à-vis the atheism/religion debate, this paper briefly examines the history of atheism and its relationship to science. During the Enlightenment, philosophers such as David Hume and Baron d'Holbach began to employ reason and observable evidence as a way to explain reality; this line of thinking undermined religion and set the stage for science to become the primary means of understanding the world. Thus, science-based atheism, or what henceforth this paper will call "scientific atheism", was born – the belief that the natural sciences are not only exclusive but dependable in producing knowledge (Dawkins, 2006, 15).

Charles Darwin's *The Origin of the Species,* published in 1859, became the scientific atheist's unofficial Bible. This seminal work provided a natural explanation for life's complexity without invoking a designer. Fast forward to today, and the British biologist and author Richard Dawkins has taken Darwin's theories a step further. In his book *The God Delusion,* Dawkins argues that belief in God is "a scientific hypothesis like any other" – one that must be evaluated by evidence and reason rather than faith (Dawkins, 2006, 50). He proposes a scale of **"**theistic probability**"**, whereby he places himself at a 6.9 out of 7, meaning he does not claim absolute certainty, but considers God's existence extremely improbable (Dawkins, 2006, 51). According to Dawkins, life does not require a maker or divine power and can be explained entirely through organic mechanisms such as random mutation, genetic variation, and natural selection.

But Dawkins' opponents argue that science alone fails to address the complex, inner dimensions of human life, namely ethics, morality, and reason. Furthermore, issues of scientific measurement – radiation, expansion rate, the precise calibration of constants such as gravity – seem highly improbable without intelligent design. British philosopher Richard Swinburne, along with the geneticist Francis Collins, states that it is "incredibly unlikely that by chance there should have occurred these regularities eventually leading to us." (Swinburne, 1979, 41).

The Irish theologian Alistair McGrath offers a compromise between Dawkins and his critics in what he defines as "Scientific Theism." Scientific theism (as used here) refers to the view that theology can be conducted in a manner analogous to the natural sciences—drawing on the assumptions, methods, and critical rigor of scientific inquiry to investigate theological claims about God and reality (McGrath, 2001, 38). In his book *Science and Religion,* McGrath argues that science explains our mechanical world while religion satisfies the search for meaning, respectively; thus, scientific theism explains the rational nature of our universe while allowing theism to retain its greater explanatory power in terms of purpose. In McGrath's framework, moral values are grounded in objectivity due to theistic transcendence, thus providing an explanation of greater scope and aptitude (McGrath, 2009).

Scientific theism not only embraces the natural world, but also coherently addresses moral realism, existential meaning, and metaphysical depth – thus providing a more comprehensive investigative framework than scientific atheism.

2. Counterarguments to Atheism's Implausibility

While scientific atheism does not fully address humanity's metaphysical and moral dimensions, it is worth noting that not all forms of atheism are based on scientific principles. These variations do not alter the plausibility of scientific atheism, but allow a broader comparison of kinds of atheism.

Existential atheism, for instance, rejects the existence of God on the basis that faith negates freedom. Jean-Paul Sartre famously commented that "We are condemned to be free," meaning that without a divine blueprint, humans must create their own value and purpose. For Sartre, the rejection of God liberated the heart and mind.

Another branch of atheism is moral realism, which claims that moral truth exists independently of the divine and that morality is real and objective. Thinkers such as Erik Wielenberg argue that moral facts, like mathematical truth, can be objective and necessary without requiring a God. From this perspective, right and wrong are grounded in a natural moral code, rather than religious doctrine.

Friedrich Nietzsche, on the other hand, completely deviated from the discussion of God's existence, focusing his criticism on religion's assertions about the afterlife. While Nietzsche acknowledged the existential burden that comes with the "death of God,' he also saw it as a call to human creativity and strength, an "affirmation of life" in all its

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tragedy and beauty.

Sartre, Wielenberg, and Nietzsche offer cogent, though controversial explanations of morality and meaning, subjects glaringly absent from Dawkins' brand of scientific atheism.

3. Counterarguments to Scientific Theism

But challenges remain in scientific theism as well. Is turning to God to explain the unexplainable too easy or convenient? If core theistic claims cannot be tested or observed, can they rightly be called scientific? Finally, science and theology subscribe to different truths – can they really be reconciled, or are they diametrically opposed?

Then lies the issue of morality. Theism posits that objective moral truths are fundamentally grounded in God's nature, but if this is true, are good deeds honorable because God commands them, or does God command good deeds because they are honorable? If the former is true, who could accurately verify that God's commands are not arbitrary? If the latter is true, then God's nature and morality act independently of each other, uncovering a logical fallacy in theism's very foundation.

The problem of evil is the problem that, if assuming God is all-powerful, omniscient, and good, Furthermore, when examining the subject of evil, people notice specific cases of the prosperity of the wicked and suffering of the innocent. If God were truly omnipotent and good, why do good people suffer while wicked people prosper? If God is all-powerful, why reward those who are antithetical to his principles? One possible solution to this challenge is the idea of non-interventionist scientific theism, which states that God may not be all-powerful or that being good may not imply wanting the world to be as good as possible. These two variants address the problem of evil by denying one of its premises.

Scientific theists argue that these are not fatal blows against their belief system; rather, they fuel ongoing philosophical and moralistic debate, the hallmarks of any robust worldview.

4. Conclusion

At its core, this debate is about which worldview is more believable and complete – scientific atheism or scientific theism. To determine which of the two provides the most satisfying exploration of reality, this paper awarded each of them points based on three key categories: existential purpose, moral realism, and cosmic origins. The evaluative categories employed in this analysis—existential purpose, moral realism, and cosmic origins—were selected because they correspond to three enduring questions at the intersection of philosophy, science, and worldview formation: how human life acquires meaning, whether moral values are objectively grounded, and why the universe exists in its present form.

Scientific atheism limits knowledge to empirical observation alone and lacks the scope of scientific theism, which endorses both scientific and metaphysical inquiry. In Dawkins' view, science is the only means of obtaining knowledge, and that knowledge is unfalsifiable; McGrath, in contrast, deems this one-dimensional, leaving unanswered some of our most profound existential questions, summed up in the title of the famous Gauguin painting: *Who Are We? Why Are We Here? Where Are We Going?*

Scientific theism incorporates scientific discoveries into a theistic framework, expanding its scope and exposing atheism's shortsightedness. Because of this, this paper gave scientific atheism 1 point and scientific theism 3 points in their respective ability – and willingness – to explain existential issues such as our purpose and reason for being.

When examining moral realism, scientific theism offers a greater philosophical foundation than scientific atheism. Theists base morality on the will of God, preserving objectivity between right and wrong actions. While some sects of atheism view morality as objective, many claim it is a social byproduct of evolution, acting as a necessary means of building connections for survival. However, theism's explicit guidelines between right and wrong and its reliance on the afterlife to guide believers' actions create a more rigid code of conduct. Therefore, on the subject of moral realism, this paper awarded scientific atheism 2 points and scientific theism 3 points.

Despite an absolute certainty that God does not exist, scientific atheism has a long list of unknowns, especially when it comes to our cosmic origins. For example, scientific atheists offer no explanation for what created the Big

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Bang, even though the celebrated theoretical physicist and cosmologist Stephen Hawking, himself an atheist, acknowledged in his book *The Grand Design* that "something cannot come from nothing." Generally, scientific atheists seem to view life and our universe as mere byproducts of chance. Theists, in contrast, seek to ground the creation of our universe in the existence of a creator deity, trading random chance for a philosophically grounded – and relatable – explanation. Considering these points, this paper awarded scientific theism 3 points and scientific atheism 0 points, respectively, for their explanations of cosmic origins.

In conclusion, on the plausibility scale, scientific theism earned 9 points for its comprehensive scope, philosophical grounding, and existential reasoning. Scientific atheism earned 3 points for its empirical strength, but ultimately lacked depth in non-empirical dimensions. While such an approach allows for comparative assessment where empirical adjudication alone is insufficient, it also carries inherent limitations. Judgments of plausibility inevitably reflect background assumptions about what counts as a satisfactory explanation, and alternative evaluative criteria—such as pragmatic success, sociocultural function, or strict empirical minimalism—may yield different conclusions.

While both belief systems have valid principles, when put under philosophical scrutiny, scientific atheism fails to answer profound questions about the nature of reality. When addressing plausibility, it is perhaps a given that every belief system has its flaws. However, in totality, scientific theism provides fundamental arguments regarding human purpose, knowledge, meaning, and origin while still acknowledging scientific, metaphysical, and theological reasoning, finalizing atheism's dubious status as a comprehensive worldview.

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