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TAKEN FROM THE BLOG OF BIOLOGY PROFESSOR P.Z. MYERS,

Why are you an atheist?

Once again, I have proven my ability to drive people into a frothing rage against me. Only this time it isn't a mob of religious fanatics and anti-choicers who have called me pond scum who will go to hell, an insect souled vile man, a black-souled amoral monster, pure evil, morally depraved, with a depraved mind, descend[ing] down the various stages into madness, and so forth…but I have this time managed to antagonize a bunch of atheists. Feel my pain.

PZ, BEEN THERE - DONE THAT.

All right, to be honest, it really doesn't sting that much.

The godless raged at me on youtube and twitter, thanks to the recent broadcast of my talk in Montreal. I have a tangent in that talk where I deplore Dictionary Atheists, going so far as to say I hate those guys, because they're so superficial.

PZ, WE ALL UNDERSTOOD THAT YOU DIDN'T REALLY MEAN "HATE" IN THE DICTIONARY SENSE.

SEE, DICTIONARY ATHEISTS CAN BE UNDERSTANDING.

Apparently some people identify with shallow atheism, because they took it personally and got rather upset.

PZ, I DON'T THINK THAT HAPPENED. I DON'T THINK THEY GOT UPSET BECAUSE THEY TOOK IT PERSONALLY - I THINK THEY GOT UPSET BECAUSE THEY TOOK YOU LITERALLY.

I had to think about this. Should I back down and apologize, and maybe revise my opinion of this subset of the atheist community? Have I gone too far?

Nah.

Obviously what this calls for is an escalation. I think I need to summarize all the things about atheism that bug me, and that I wish people would stop doing. There simply aren't enough atheists angry at me now. So let's get to it and piss everyone off! It'll be fun! Here's a list.

Dictionary Atheists.

Boy, I really do hate these guys.

PZ, WHAT ARE YOU DOING? I TRIED TO PROVIDE YOU AN EXCUSE AND NOW YOU GO AND BLOW ME OUT OF THE WATER.

You've got a discussion going, talking about why you're an atheist, or what atheism should mean to the community, or some such topic that is dealing with our ideas and society, and some smug wanker comes along and announces that "Atheism means you lack a belief in gods. Nothing more. Quit trying to add meaning to the term."

PZ, I COULDN'T HAVE PUT IT BETTER MYSELF. COME ON, YOU DON'T REALLY HATE ME FOR THAT DO YOU?

DON'T I AT LEAST GET CREDIT FOR BEING A SMUG WANKER?

As if atheism can only be some platonic ideal floating in virtual space with no connections to anything else;

PZ, WHO SAYS ATHEISM CAN ONLY BE A PLATONIC IDEAL FLOATING IN VIRTUAL SPACE? I HAVE NEVER HEARD ANYONE CALL IT THAT.

AND JUST BECAUSE THE DEFINITION STATES THAT ATHEISM IS AN ABSENCE OF BELIEF IN GODS, DOESN'T MEAN THAT IT HAS NO CONNECTIONS TO ANYTHING ELSE. IF DEFINITIONS INCLUDED ALL THE CONNECTIONS THAT WORDS HAVE TO EVERYTHING ELSE, COMPILING A DICTIONARY WOULD REQUIRE A THOUSAND YEARS JUST TO GET THROUGH THE LETTER 'A'.

as if atheists are people who have attained a zen-like ideal, their minds a void, containing nothing but atheism, which itself is nothing.

PZ, WHY DOES REJECTION OF RELIGION IMPLY THAT OUR MINDS ARE VOID?

HOW CAN A MIND CONTAIN ONLY A REJECTION OF RELIGION AND NOTHING ELSE? THAT IS IMPOSSIBLE. IN MOST CASES, FOR ONE TO REACH A POINT WHERE ONE REJECTS RELIGION, THAT REQUIRES QUITE A BIT OF INFORMATION; JUST THE OPPOSITE OF A MIND CONTAINING NOTHING ELSE.

ATHEISM IS NOT "NOTHING." IT IS SOMETHING: IT IS THE BELIEF THAT THERE IS NO EVIDENCE FOR THE TRUTH CLAIMS OF ANY RELIGION.

Dumbasses.

OKAY PZ, THAT PART WE AGREE ON. I HAVE GONE OUT OF MY WAY ON ALMOST A DAILY BASIS TO PROVE THAT YOU ARE RIGHT ON THAT POINT.

If I ask you to explain to me why you are an atheist, reciting the dictionary at me, you are saying nothing:

TRUE PZ. THE DEFINITION ONLY DESCRIBES AN ATHEIST. "WHY" SOMEONE IS AN ATHEIST REQUIRES AN EXPLANATION DESCRIBING A PROCESS.

asking why you are a person who does not believe in god is not answered when you reply, "Because I am a person who does not believe in god."

PZ, THAT IS NOT WHAT I WOULD REPLY. I WOULD REPLY THAT I AM AN ATHEIST BECAUSE NO RELIGION (OF WHICH I AM AWARE) HAS EVER PRODUCED ANY EVIDENCE TO JUSTIFY BELIEF IN THEIR CLAIMS.

And if you protest when I say that there is more to the practice of atheism than that, insisting that there isn't just makes you dogmatic and blind.

PZ, I THINK THE "PRACTICE" OF ATHEISM IS DIFFERENT THAN THE DEFINITION OF ATHEISM. I THINK IT WOULD BE MORE FAIR OF YOU TO ACCEPT THE ANSWER GIVEN TO YOU BY THE DICTIONARY ATHEISTS AND THEN FOLLOW UP WITH OTHER QUESTIONS RELATED TO THE PRACTICE OF ATHEISM.

In that Montreal talk, I explained that there is more to my atheism than simple denial of one claim;

PZ, THAT IS TRUE OF HOW YOU PRACTICE ATHEISM. BUT I BELIEVE THAT THE SIMPLE DENIAL OF RELIGIOUS CLAIMS, BASED ON LACK OF EVIDENCE, IS SUFFICIENT TO DEFINE ATHEISM.

it's actually based on a scientific attitude that values evidence and reason, that rejects claims resting solely on authority, and that encourages deeper exploration of the world.

PZ, THAT IS TRUE OF YOUR ATHEISM. HOWEVER, NOT ALL ATHEISTS SHARE YOUR SCIENTIFIC ATTITUDES, VALUE EVIDENCE, AND USE REASON. MANY ARE OFTEN VERY IRRATIONAL.

FOR EXAMPLE, MANY ATHEISTS BELIEVE IN ASTROLOGY, HOMEOPATHY, AND OTHER NONSENSE. BEING AN ATHEIST ONLY REMOVES ONE AREA OF IRRATIONALITY, AND IS NO GUARANTEE THAT THAT PERSON WILL BE RATIONAL IN ALL OTHER AREAS - IN WHICH CASE, WE WOULD THEN BE DESCRIBING A RATIONALIST.

My atheism is not solely a negative claim about gods, but is based on a whole set of positive values that I will emphasize when talking about atheism.

PZ, YOUR ATHEISM IS NOT A NEGATIVE CLAIM ABOUT GODS. RELIGIOUS PEOPLE TRY TO CLAIM THAT OUR REJECTION OF THEIR BELIEFS IS, IN ITSELF, A NEGATIVE CLAIM. IT IS NOT. REJECTION OF A CLAIM DOES NOT CONSTITUTE A COUNTER CLAIM. IT IS A TRICK TO TRY TO GET US TO ACCEPT THEIR BURDEN OF PROOF.

ALSO I DISAGREE WITH YOU, IN THAT I BELIEVE YOUR SET OF POSITIVE VALUES IS INDEPENDENT OF YOUR ATHEISM. YOU COULD HOLD MANY OF THOSE SAME VALUES EVEN IF YOU WERE A BELIEVER.

That denial of god thing? It's a consequence, not a cause.

PZ, I WOULD CALL IT A CONCLUSION.

Now I don't claim that my values are part of the definition of atheism — I just told you I hate those dictionary quoters — nor do I consider them universal to atheism.

PZ, NOW YOU'RE CONFUSING ME. IT SEEMED LIKE THAT IS WHAT YOU WERE SAYING. IN FACT, I WAS THE ONE WHO TOOK THE POSITION THAT YOUR VALUES WERE NOT PART OF THE DEFINITION OF ATHEISM.

I've met plenty of atheists who are in our camp over issues of social justice —

PZ, THERE ARE ALSO MANY PEOPLE WHO ARE IN YOUR CAMP OVER ISSUES OF SOCIAL JUSTICE ... WHO ARE NOT ATHEISTS.

they see god-belief as a source of social evils, and that's why they reject it.

PZ, SEEING "BELIEF IN GOD" AS A SOURCE OF SOCIAL EVILS WOULD NOT MAKE A PERSON REJECT GOD AND RISK ETERNAL TORTURE UNLESS THEY FELT PRETTY CERTAIN THAT HE DIDN'T EXIST. NO ONE ON EARTH WOULD BE THAT CRAZY. THAT KIND OF COURAGE CAN ONLY COME FROM THE BELIEF THAT GOD IS NOT REAL.

That is valid and reasonable.

PZ, I JUST EXPLAINED WHY IT WASN'T.

There are atheists who consider human well-being as the metric to use, and we call them humanists; no problem. There are also atheists who are joining the game because their cool friends (or Daniel Radcliff) are atheists; that's a stupid reason, but they are atheists.

My point is that nobody becomes an atheist because of an absence of values,

TRUE PZ. THEY BECOME ATHEISTS FOR MANY REASONS, BUT THE MOST IMPORTANT REASON IS BECAUSE THEY NO LONGER FEAR THE THREATS OF AN INVISIBLE GHOST.

AS LONG AS THAT FEAR PERSISTS, ATHEISM IS IMPOSSIBLE.

and no one becomes an atheist because the dictionary tells them they are.

TRUE AGAIN PZ. THEY BECOME ATHEISTS BY FINDING THE COURAGE TO REJECT BELIEF IN GOD.

THE DICTIONARY ONLY DEFINES WHO THOSE PEOPLE ARE.

I think we also do a disservice to the movement when we pretend it's solely a mob of individuals who lack a belief, rather than an organization with positive goals and values.

PZ, WHY DO YOU THINK WE ARE PRETENDING?

OUR LACK OF BELIEF IN RELIGION IS WHAT DEFINES US AS A GROUP.

I THINK YOU ARE ONCE AGAIN CONFLATING THE PRACTICE OF ATHEISM WITH THE DEFINITION OF ATHEISM.

Oh, on a related note, I also get a lot of comments that atheism is a privative attribute which strictly speaking, lacks any specific positive qualities.

PZ, THEY DON'T MEAN THAT ATHEISTS LACK SPECIFIC POSITIVE QUALITIES; THEY MEAN THAT THE POSITION OF ATHEISM REQUIRES NO SPECIFIC QUALITIES.

This is true of the dictionary definition. It is not true of atheism in its actual usage: it carries a lot of accreted baggage.

PZ, THE BAGGAGE HAS BEEN ADDED BY DETRACTORS. I THINK WE SHOULD KICK IT BACK OVER TO THEM WHERE IT BELONGS. THERE IS NO BAGGAGE ASSOCIATED WITH DISBELIEVING FAIRY TALES.

Babies are all atheists or I'm an atheist by default, because I was raised without religion.

Nope. Uh-uh. Same problem as the Dictionary Atheist — it implies atheism is simply an intellectual vacuum.

PZ, REJECTION OF A BELIEF DOES NOT IMPLY AN INTELLECTUAL VACUUM EXCEPT TO RELIGIOUS BELIEVERS.

AND WHY ARE YOU THROWING RELIGIOUS ARGUMENTS AT ATHEISTS? YOU ARE THE LAST PERSON I WOULD HAVE EVER EXPECTED TO DO THAT.

Babies aren't Christians or Muslims or Hindus, and they aren't atheists, either, because we expect at least a token amount of thought is given to the subject.

PZ, IN A WORLD WITHOUT RELIGION, EVERYONE WOULD BE ATHEIST, AND - THEY WOULD BE BORN ATHEIST.

THE DEFINITION DOES NOT REQUIRE A TOKEN AMOUNT OF THOUGHT; ONLY LACK OF BELIEF.

If babies are atheists, then so are trees and rocks — which is true by the dictionary definition,

HOW CAN SOMETHING WITHOUT A MIND ... DISBELIEVE?

but also illustrates how ridiculously useless that definition is.

PERSONALLY PZ, I FIND THE DEFINITION RIDICULOUSLY ACCURATE.

Babies might also have an in-built predisposition to accept the existence of caring intelligences greater than themselves, so they might all lean towards generic theism, anyway. Mommy is God, after all.

There are a fair number of adults who ought to know better who insist on the dictionary definition, too.

GUILTY PZ.

They've been brought up without god-belief, and some of them may not have even considered religion much at all. Unless they are real lightweights, genuine feathers adrift in the wind, they also carry a set of values that incline them towards godlessness…otherwise you'd expect them to fall on their knees and turn Christian the instant they first hear about Jesus.

PZ, I THINK THAT AN INCLINATION TOWARDS GODLESSNESS WOULD MORE LIKELY RESULT FROM A LACK OF FEAR OF THE THREATS FROM THE SPIRIT WORLD RATHER THAN FROM A SET OF VALUES.

They don't, and why? Probably because they learned some critical thinking skills from their parents. They carry positive values that make them resistant to the cheap promises of faith.

PZ, I THINK THE MOST POWERFUL POSITIVE VALUE ONE COULD HAVE TO RESIST RELIGIOUS THREATS OF ETERNAL TORTURE WOULD BE COURAGE.

AND AS LONG AS ONE BELIEVES GOD IS REAL, THAT COURAGE WILL REMAIN OUT OF REACH.

The "I believe in no gods/I lack belief in gods" debate.

I have heard this so often, the hair-splitting grammatical distinctions some atheists think so seriously important in defining themselves. All you're doing is defining yourselves as anal retentive freaks, people! Get over it. Either way, you're an atheist — and that goes for the over-philosophized fussbudgets who insist that they're agnostics, not atheists, because they aren't 100% positive there aren't any gods, only 99 44/100ths positive. Atheism is such a general club, and it's so easy to fall into the definition, that it's silly to sit around arguing about how close to the fence you're sitting.

TEN RING PROFESSOR MYERS ... TEN RING.

I don't care. Tell me what virtues you bring, what experiences brought you here, why your values matter to society. The fine-grained shuffling about to define yourself so precisely is simply narcissistic masturbation.

Science flies you to the moon. Religion flies you into buildings.

The second sentence is false. Religion does not turn you into a terrorist. The overwhelming majority of religious people have similar values to yours;

PZ, YET THEY ARE NOT ATHEISTS. THAT WAS THE POINT I MADE EARLIER.

my church-going grandmother would have been just as horrified at people using their faith to justify murdering people as the most hardened atheist, and there have been atheist individuals who also think they are justified in killing people for the cause. So stop saying this!

I would say, though, that religion does make one more susceptible to bad ideas. After all, if you've spent your whole life learning to dampen your critical faculties and avoid questioning the Holy Trinity and the Magic Mother of God, it's not so hard to accept that the people in the IRS building are plotting to put a mind-control chip in your head. I oppose religion because we can see its effects on even otherwise brilliant people: it short-circuits skepticism and leaves them open to dangerous and erroneous ideas.

PZ, NOW YOU'RE ROBIN HOOD. YOU JUST SPLIT YOUR OWN ARROW.

FINALLY, THIS IS THE PROFESSOR MYERS I HAVE COME TO ADMIRE. MAYBE YOU JUST NEEDED A LITTLE TIME TO WARM UP.

"I just believe in one less god than you do".

OK, I don't hate this one. There is actually a germ of a valid point in there: disbelief in itself is good and normal social practice, and even the most zealous theist actively disbelieves in many things. That's a good point to make in a world where people cite blind faith as a virtue.

But that's the only point that can be made from it, and it has its own perils. It implies many things that are not true. The theist you're arguing with did not go through a process where he analyzed his beliefs logically, and excluded 99% of all gods by reason and their lack of evidence; in fact, he probably never in his life seriously considered any of those other faiths (he is 99% Dictionary Atheist, in other words). He came to his personal faith by way of a series of personal, positive (to him!) predispositions, not by progressive exclusion of other ideas, and he's simply not going to see the relevance of your argument. Would you be swayed if someone pointed out that you disbelieve astrology, homeopathy, tarot, witchcraft, and palmistry, and he has simply gone one step further than you, and also disbelieves in evolution?

PZ, I WOULD SIMPLY INFORM THEM THAT NONE OF THE THINGS LISTED, THAT WE BOTH AGREED ON, HAD ANY SUPPORTING EVIDENCE TO JUSTIFY BELIEF IN THEM, WHILE JUST THE OPPOSITE IS TRUE IN EVOLUTION.

Similarly, you did not go through a list of religions, analysing each one, and ticking them off as unbelievable. I certainly didn't. Instead, you come to the table with an implicit set of criteria, like evidence and plausibility and experimental support, and also a mistrust of unfounded authority or claims that are too good to be true, and they incline you to accept naturalism, for instance, as a better explanation of the world. Turning it into a quantitative debate about how many gods we accept, instead of a substantial debate about the actual philosophical underpinnings of our ideas, is kind of lame, I think.

I could probably come up with a few more peeves — I am genuinely a world-class expert in finding fault — but let's stop there. My main point is that one general flaw in many atheists is a lack of appreciation for why they find themselves comfortable with that label, and it always lies in a set of sometimes unexamined working metrics for how the world works.

PZ, I FIND MYSELF COMFORTABLE WITH THE LABEL OF ATHEIST BECAUSE IT ELOQUENTLY AND PRECISELY DEFINES MY RELIGIOUS POSITION.

MY BELIEFS ABOUT HOW THE WORLD WORKS (SCIENCE) ARE SEPARATE FROM MY RELIGIOUS BELIEF.

You are an atheist — take pride in what you do believe, not what you deny.

ACTUALLY PZ, I TAKE PRIDE IN BOTH - BECAUSE I FEEL I CAN LOGICALLY DEFEND BOTH THE THINGS I BELIEVE AND THE THINGS I DENY.

And also learn to appreciate that the opposition hasn't arrived at their conclusions in a vacuum. There are actually deeper reasons that they so fervently endorse supernatural authorities, and they aren't always accounted for by stupidity.

BUT PZ, THERE IS ONE ANSWER THAT CAN EXPLAIN IT ... FEAR.

MY FINAL COMMENT:

AS WE GROW UP WE SHOULD COME TO REALIZE THAT OUR HEROES ARE, AFTER ALL, HUMAN. THAT MAKES THEM NO LESS WORTHY OF ADMIRATION. IT ONLY MEANS THAT WE NEED TO USE OUR CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS TO ENSURE THAT WE WEIGH THEIR WORDS ... AS CAREFULLY AS WE WEIGH THOSE OF OTHERS.

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THE SCIENCE SEGMENT

SMOKING CAUSES GENETIC DAMAGE WITHIN MINUTES AFTER INHALING

IN RESEARCH DESCRIBED AS "A STARK WARNING" TO THOSE TEMPTED TO START SMOKING, SCIENTISTS ARE REPORTING THAT CIGARETTE SMOKE BEGINS TO CAUSE GENETIC DAMAGE WITHIN MINUTES -- NOT YEARS -- AFTER INHALATION INTO THE LUNGS.

THEIR REPORT, THE FIRST HUMAN STUDY TO DETAIL THE WAY CERTAIN SUBSTANCES IN TOBACCO CAUSE DNA DAMAGE LINKED TO CANCER, APPEARS IN THE JOURNAL "CHEMICAL RESEARCH IN TOXICOLOGY," ONE OF 38 PEER-REVIEWED SCIENTIFIC JOURNALS PUBLISHED BY THE AMERICAN CHEMICAL SOCIETY.

LUNG CANCER CLAIMS A GLOBAL TOLL OF 3,000 LIVES EACH DAY, LARGELY AS A RESULT OF CIGARETTE SMOKING. SMOKING ALSO IS LINKED TO AT LEAST 18 OTHER TYPES OF CANCER. EVIDENCE INDICATES THAT HARMFUL SUBSTANCES IN TOBACCO SMOKE TERMED POLYCYCLIC AROMATIC HYDROCARBONS, OR PAH'S, ARE ONE OF THE CULPRITS IN CAUSING LUNG CANCER. UNTIL NOW, HOWEVER, SCIENTISTS HAD NOT DETAILED THE SPECIFIC WAY IN WHICH THE PAH'S IN CIGARETTE SMOKE CAUSE DNA DAMAGE IN HUMANS.

THE SCIENTISTS ADDED A LABELED PAH, PHENANTHRENE, TO CIGARETTES AND TRACKED ITS FATE IN 12 VOLUNTEERS WHO SMOKED THE CIGARETTES. THEY FOUND THAT PHENANTHRENE QUICKLY FORMS A TOXIC SUBSTANCE IN THE BLOOD KNOWN TO TRASH DNA, CAUSING MUTATIONS THAT CAN CAUSE CANCER. THE SMOKERS DEVELOPED MAXIMUM LEVELS OF THE SUBSTANCE IN A TIME FRAME THAT SURPRISED EVEN THE RESEARCHERS: JUST 15-30 MINUTES AFTER THE VOLUNTEERS FINISHED SMOKING. RESEARCHERS SAID THE EFFECT IS SO FAST THAT IT IS EQUIVALENT TO INJECTING THE SUBSTANCE DIRECTLY INTO THE BLOODSTREAM.

THIS STUDY IS UNIQUE. IT IS THE FIRST TO INVESTIGATE HUMAN METABOLISM OF A PAH SPECIFICALLY DELIVERED BY INHALATION IN CIGARETTE SMOKE, WITHOUT INTERFERENCE BY OTHER SOURCES OF EXPOSURE SUCH AS AIR POLLUTION OR THE DIET.

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FAMOUS QUOTES

THUCYDIDES (460 BCE – 395 BCE) 65 YEARS.

HE WAS A GREEK HISTORIAN AND AUTHOR OF THE HISTORY OF THE PELOPONNESIAN WAR, WHICH RECOUNTS THE 5TH CENTURY BCE WAR BETWEEN SPARTA AND ATHENS TO THE YEAR 411 BCE.

THUCYDIDES HAS BEEN DUBBED THE FATHER OF "SCIENTIFIC HISTORY" BECAUSE OF HIS STRICT STANDARDS OF EVIDENCE-GATHERING AND ANALYSIS IN TERMS OF CAUSE AND EFFECT WITHOUT REFERENCE TO INTERVENTION BY THE GODS, AS OUTLINED IN HIS INTRODUCTION TO HIS WORK.

HE HAS ALSO BEEN CALLED THE FATHER OF THE SCHOOL OF POLITICAL REALISM, WHICH VIEWS THE RELATIONS BETWEEN NATIONS AS BASED ON MIGHT RATHER THAN RIGHT. HIS CLASSICAL TEXT IS STILL STUDIED AT ADVANCED MILITARY COLLEGES WORLDWIDE, AND THE MELIAN DIALOGUE REMAINS A SEMINAL WORK OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS THEORY.

MORE GENERALLY, THUCYDIDES SHOWED AN INTEREST IN DEVELOPING AN UNDERSTANDING OF HUMAN NATURE TO EXPLAIN BEHAVIOR IN SUCH CRISES AS PLAGUE, MASSACRES, AND CIVIL WAR.

"WHEN A MAN FINDS A CONCLUSION AGREEABLE,

HE ACCEPTS IT WITHOUT ARGUMENT,

BUT WHEN HE FINDS IT DISAGREEABLE,

HE WILL BRING AGAINST IT ALL THE FORCES OF LOGIC AND REASON."