

Atheists & Skeptics Confess: We Can't Make Sense of the World Written and compiled by Mike Warren



Philosophers have debated the same basic issues for thousands of years:

- How do we know what we know? (Epistemology)
- What is the nature of reality? (Metaphysics)
- How should we live our lives? (Ethics)

After millennia of accumulated wisdom, one might assume that the brightest minds could give some definite answers to these questions. The fact is that leading modern atheist and skeptical thinkers have failed to do that. And every now and then, they will admit it; that they cannot prove the existence of an external world or even their own existence. They cannot explain how scientific knowledge is possible. They have failed to find a clear distinction between science and religion. They have failed to explain why we ought to be kind to one another, or kill each other, or care enough to do either.

Publicly, atheist intellectuals often claim to be on the cutting edge of societal evolution, leading the ignorant masses to a more enlightened and humane future. But in reality their attempts explain the world are characterized by irrationality, arbitrariness and their ultimate fruit, despair.

Here are some quotations from leading modern atheists, agnostics, and "freethinkers" in which they admit their failures and/or agendas and thereby exemplify the truth of Romans 1:22: "Professing to be wise, they became fools."

Logical Positivism

"The Vienna Circle did not accomplish all that they once hoped to accomplish. Many of the problems which they tried to settle still remain unsolved."

☞ A.J. Ayer in *The Revolution in Philosophy*, ed. Gilbert Ryle (New York: Macmillan, 1960) p. 86. Quoted in Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Theistic Evidence*, (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1978), p. 139-46. (Specifically referring to the "inner-outer problem" of relating language to external facts.)

"While for Hans Reichenbach or Bertrand Russell or Ernest Nagel, there was a commitment to clarity in the service of a scientific world-perspective, for post-positivist analytic philosophers, there is no clear rationale for their clarifications: there is no philosophical knowledge to be gained, no demarcation of science from metaphysics or ideology to be drawn, no

systematic representation of our concepts to be constructed or critique of our society to be made. Post-positivist analytic philosophers afford us no hope of the gaining of a framework from which such a critique could be carried out. There is no clear conception of what the demand for clarity should come to."

☞ Kai Neilson, "On Being Skeptical About Applied Ethics," in *Clinical Medical Ethics: Exploration and Assessment*, Ed. Terrence F. Ackerman and Glenn C. Graber, et al. (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1987), pp.107-08.

Morality

"The position of the modern evolutionist is that . . . morality is a biological adaptation no less than are hands and feet and teeth. Considered as a rationally justifiable set of claims about an objective something, ethics is illusory. I appreciate that when somebody says 'Love thy neighbor as thyself,' they think they are referring above and beyond themselves. Nevertheless, such reference is truly without foundation. Morality is just an aid to survival and reproduction . . . and any deeper meaning is illusory."

☞ Michael Ruse, "Evolutionary Theory and Christian Ethics," in *The Darwinian Paradigm* (London: Routledge, 1989), pp. 262-269.

"I hope I am a tolerably reflective chap but I don't know right of wrong any better, or for that matter, any worse than a tolerably reflective check-out clerk. . . .

It certainly should give anyone rather severe doubts that we have available to us a firmly articulated normative ethical theory that affords us a systematic knowledge of good and evil, right and wrong, such that it could give ethicists confidence that they have a moral expertise that will enable them to chart the way in applied ethics. . . .

Post-positivist analytic philosophy in short gave us no distinctive philosophical basis for a critical ethics. Instead the expertise of the post-positivist analytic philosopher is, as Richard Rorty has nicely put it, more like that of a lawyer."

☞ Kai Neilson, "On Being Skeptical About Applied Ethics," in *Clinical Medical Ethics: Exploration and Assessment*, Ed. Terrence F. Ackerman and Glenn C. Graber, et al. (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1987), pp.95, 100, 107.

"To say that there really are objective values out there, that there is a moral reality to be corresponded with, seems as pointless as saying that God is on our side."

☞ Richard Rorty, "Hermeneutics, General Studies, and Teaching"

"About 1880, some French teachers tried to set up a secular ethics which went something like this: God is a useless and costly hypothesis; we are discarding it; but, meanwhile, in order for there to be an ethics, a society, a civilization, it is essential that certain values be taken seriously and that they

be considered as having an *a priori* existence. It must be obligatory, *a priori*, to be honest, not to lie, not to beat your wife, to have children, etc., etc. So we're going to try a little device which will make it possible to show what values exist all the same, inscribed in a heaven of ideas, though otherwise God does not exist. In other words—and this, I believe, is the tendency of everything called reformism in France—nothing will be changed if God does not exist. We shall have made of God an outdated hypothesis which will peacefully die off by itself."

The existentialist, on the contrary, thinks it very distressing that God does not exist, because all possibility of finding values in a heaven of ideas disappears along with Him; there can no longer be an *a priori* Good, since there is no infinite and perfect consciousness to think it. Nowhere is it written that the Good exists, that we must be honest, that we must not lie; because the fact is that we are on a plane where there are only men. Dostoyevsky said, "If God didn't exist, everything would be possible." That is the very starting point of existentialism. Indeed, everything is permissible if God does not exist, and as a result man is forlorn, because neither within him nor without does he find anything to cling to. He can't start making excuses for himself."

☞ Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism," tr. Bernard Frechtman, in *Existentialism and Human Emotions* (New York: Citadel Press, 1957), pp.21-23. Quoted in Ed. L. Miller, *Questions That Matter: An Invitation to Philosophy*, 3rd Ed., (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1992), p. 396.

"While all this was going on [the rise of empiricist philosophy of law – M.W.], most likely conditioning it in fact, the knowledge of good and evil, as an intellectual subject, was being systematically and effectively destroyed. The historical fen through which ethical wanderings led was abolished in the early years of this century (not for the first time, but very clearly this time); normative thought crawled out of the swamp and died in the desert. There arose a great number of schools of ethics – axiological, materialistic, evolutionary, intuitionist, situational, existential, and so on – but they all suffered the same fate: either they were seen to be ultimately premised on some intuition (buttressed or not by nose counts of those seemingly having the same intuitions), or they were more arbitrary than that, based solely on some "for the sake of the argument" premise. I will put the current situation as sharply as possible: there is today no way of "proving" that napalming babies is bad except by asserting it (in a louder and louder voice), or by defining it as so, early in one's game, and then later slipping it through, in a whisper, as a conclusion.

Now this is a fact of modern intellectual life so well and painfully known as to be one of the few which is simultaneously horrifying and banal."

☞ Arthur Allen Leff, "Economic Analysis of Law: Some Realism About Nominalism," 60 *Virginia Law Review* (1974) pp. 454-55.

Empiricism

"Where am I, or what? From what causes do I derive my existence, and to what condition shall I return? Whose favor shall I court, and whose anger must I dread? What beings surround me? And on whom have I any influence, or who have any influence on me? I am confounded with all these questions, and begin fancy myself in the most deplorable condition imaginable, environ'd with the deepest darkness, and utterly depriv'd of the use of every member and faculty."

☞ David Hume, *Treatise on Human Nature*, ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1951; first published in 1739), p. 269.

"Academic philosophers, ever since the time of Parmenides, have believed that the world is a unity. . . . The most fundamental of my intellectual beliefs is that this is rubbish. I think the universe is all spots and jumps, without any unity, without continuity, without coherence or orderliness or any of the other properties that governesses love. Indeed, there is little but prejudice and habit to be said for the view that there is a world at all."

☞ Bertrand Russell, *The Scientific Outlook*, p. 98.

"In ontology, I start by accepting the truth of physics. . . . Philosophers may say: What justification have you for accepting the truth of physics? I reply: merely a common-sense basis. . . .

I believe (though without good grounds) in the world of physics as well as in the world of psychology. . . .

If we are to hold that we know anything of the external world, we must accept the canons of scientific knowledge. Whether . . . an individual decides to accept or reject these canons, is a purely personal affair, not susceptible to argument."

☞ Bertrand Russell, *The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell*, "Reply to Criticisms," p.33

"That scientific inference requires, for its validity, principles which experience cannot render even probable is, I believe, an inescapable conclusion from the logic of probability. . . . "Knowledge," in my opinion, is a much less precise concept than is generally thought, and has its roots more deeply embedded in un verbalized animal behavior than most philosophers have been willing to admit. . . . To ask, therefore, whether we "know" the postulates of scientific inference is no so definite a question as it seems. . . . In the sense in which "no" is the right answer we know nothing whatsoever, and "knowledge" in this sense is a delusive vision. The perplexities of philosophers are due, in a large measure, to their unwillingness to awaken from this blissful dream."

☞ Bertrand Russell, *Human Knowledge: Its Scope and Limits* (New York: Clarion Books, Simon and Schuster, 1948), pp. xv-xvi.

End Game: Despair

"All the labours of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast

death of the solar system, and that the whole temple of Man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins — all these things, if not quite beyond dispute, are yet so nearly certain, that no philosophy which rejects them can hope to stand. Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul's habitation henceforth be safely built."

☞ Bertrand Russell, "A Free Man's Religion" (1903), in *Mysticism and Logic* (Garden City, New York: Anchor, n.d.), pp. 45-46.

"There is darkness without and when I die there will be darkness within. There is no splendor, no vastness, anywhere; only triviality for a moment, and then nothing."

☞ Bertrand Russell, *Autobiography*, vol. 2 (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1968) p. 159

Philosophy in general:

"I am afraid we cannot get rid of God because we still believe in grammar."

☞ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, Ch. 2.

"Insofar as I had any project in mind, it was to reconcile Trotsky and the orchids. I only wanted to find some intellectual or aesthetic framework that would let me — in a thrilling phrase I came across in Yeats — 'hold reality and justice in a single vision.'

. . . As I tried to figure out what had gone wrong, I gradually decided that the whole idea of holding reality and justice in a single vision had been a mistake and that a pursuit of such a vision had been precisely what led Plato astray. More specifically, I decided that only religion -- only a non-argumentative faith in a surrogate parent who, unlike any real parent, embodied love, power, and justice in equal measure -- could do the trick Plato wanted done. Since I couldn't imagine becoming religious, and indeed had gotten more and more raucously secularist, I decided that the hope of achieving a single vision by becoming a philosopher had been a self-deceptive atheist's way out."

☞ Richard Rorty, "Wild Orchids and Trotsky" (1993).

"I have caught the Holy Ghost in the cellars and flung him out of them. Atheism is a cruel, long-term business: I believe I have gone through it to the end."

☞ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Words (Les mots)* (1964).

"There can be no doubt that the hope of finding reason to believe such theses as these [doctrines such as the essential rationality of the universe - M.W.] has been the chief inspiration of many life-long students of philosophy. This hope, I believe, is vain. It would seem that knowledge concerning the universe as a whole is not to be obtained by metaphysics."

☞ Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, reprinted 1973), p. 141.

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“For myself as, no doubt, for most of my contemporaries, the philosophy of meaninglessness was essentially an instrument of liberation. The liberation we desired was simultaneously liberation from a certain political and economic system and liberation from a certain system of morality. We objected to the morality because it interfered with our sexual freedom; we objected to the political and economic system because it was unjust.”

☞ Aldous Huxley, *Ends and Means: An Inquiry into the Nature of Ideals and into the Methods Employed for Their Realization* (Harper and Brothers Publishers, New York and London, 1937, fifth edition), pp. 316

Mathematics:

“The eternal mystery of the world is its comprehensibility.”

☞ Albert Einstein, *Out of My Later Years* (New York: Citadel Press, [1950, 1956, 1984] 1991), p. 61; quoted in James Nickel, *Mathematics: Is God Silent?* (Vallecito, CA: Ross House Books, 2001), p. 195.

“You find it surprising that I think of the comprehensibility of the world . . . as a miracle or an eternal mystery. But surely, a priori, one should expect the world to be chaotic, not to be grasped by thought in any way. One might (indeed one *should*) expect that the world evidence itself as lawful only so far as we grasp it in an orderly fashion. This would be a sort of order like the alphabetical order of words in a language. On the other hand, the kind of order created, for example, by Newton’s gravitational theory is a very different character. Even if the axioms of the theory are posited by man, the success of such a procedure supposes in the objective world a high degree of order which we are in no special way entitled to expect a priori. Therein lies the “miracle” which becomes more and more evident as our knowledge develops. . . . And here is the weak point of positivists and of professional atheists, who feel happy because they think that they have not only pre-empted the world of the divine, but also of the miraculous. Curiously, we

have to be resigned to recognize the "miracle" without having any legitimate way of getting any further. I have to add the past point explicitly, lest you think that, weakened by age, I have fallen into the hands of priests."

☞ Albert Einstein, *Lettres À Maurice Solovine* (Paris: Gauthier-Villars, 1956), pp. 114-115; quoted in Nickel, p. 210.

"Mathematics is the subject in which we never know what we are talking about, nor whether what we are saying is true."

☞ Bertrand Russell, "Recent Work on the Principles of Mathematics," *The International Monthly*, 4 (1901), p. 84; quoted in Nickel, p. 195.

"I wanted certainty in the kind of way in which people want religious faith. I thought certainty is more likely to be found in mathematics than elsewhere. But I discovered that many mathematical demonstrations, which my teachers expected me to accept, were full of fallacies, and that, if certainty were indeed discoverable in mathematics, it would be in a new field of mathematics, with more solid foundations than those that had hitherto been thought secure. But as the work proceeded, I was continually reminded of the fable about the elephant and the tortoise. Having constructed an elephant upon which the mathematical world could rest, I found the elephant tottering, and proceeded to construct a tortoise to keep the elephant from falling. But the tortoise was no more secure than the elephant, and after some twenty years of very arduous toil, I came to the conclusion that there was nothing more that I could do in the way of making mathematical knowledge indubitable."

☞ Bertrand Russell, *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell*, 3 vol. (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1969) 3:220; quoted in Nickel, p. 195-96.

"The question of whether it is possible to make some kind of ontology the basis of modern mathematics is left open by most people working in mathematical fields. Fearing to introduce into mathematics arguments of a metaphysical nature, the philosophically minded mathematician will avoid as much as possible reference to mathematical existence independent of human thought. In general it can be said that under the impact of the pragmatist attitude, for the philosopher of mathematics the workability of mathematical systems rather than their interpretability has become the central point of view. Reflections of an epistemological nature as well as reflections regarding for example mathematical truth are not readily undertaken by mathematicians of the pragmatistic type."

☞ Willem Kuyk, "The Irreducibility of the Number Concept," *Philosophia Reformata*, 31 (1966), 37; quoted in Nickel, p. 211.

"None of the three forms of the foundations of mathematics, the intuitionist, the formalist, or the logistic, is capable of completely rationalizing the relation between tautological systems and (extra-mathematical) experiences, which is its very purpose, i.e. to make this relation a part of the mathematical system itself."

∞ Richard Von Mises, "Mathematical Postulates and Human Understanding," *The World of Mathematics*, ed. James R. Newman (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956), 3:1754; quoted in Nickel, p. 206.

"What makes mathematics so effective when it enters science is a mystery of mysteries, and the present book wants to achieve no more than to explicate how deep this mystery is."

∞ Salomon Bochner, *The Role of Mathematics in the Rise of Science* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), p. v; quoted in Nickel, p. 207.

"How a mathematical structure can correspond to nature is a mystery. One way out is just to say that the language in which nature speaks is the language of mathematics. This begs the question. Often we are both shocked and surprised by the correspondence between mathematics and nature, especially when the experiment confirms that our mathematical model describes nature perfectly."

∞ Remo J. Ruffini, "The Princeton Galaxy," interviews by Florence Heltizer, *Intellectual Digest*, 3 (1973), p. 27; quoted in Nickel, p. 209.

"Fundamentally, we do not know why our theories work so well. . . . The miracle of the appropriateness of the language of mathematics for the formulation of the laws of physics is a wonderful gift which we neither understand nor deserve. We should be grateful for it and hope that it will extend, for better or for worse, to our pleasure even though perhaps also to our bafflement, to wide branches of learning."

∞ Eugene Wigner, "The Unreasonable Effectiveness of Mathematics in the Natural Sciences," *Symmetries and Reflections: Scientific Essays* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 1970) p. 237.

"From all of this I am forced to conclude both that mathematics is unreasonably effective and that all of the explanations I have given when added together simply are not enough to explain what I set out to account for. I think that we --meaning you, mainly -- must continue to try to explain why the logical side of science --meaning mathematics, mainly -- is the proper tool for exploring the universe as we perceive it at present. I suspect that my explanations are hardly as good as those of the early Greeks, who said for the material side of the question that the nature of the universe is earth, fire, water, and air. The logical side of the nature of the universe requires further exploration."

∞ Richard W. Hamming, "The Unreasonable Effectiveness of Mathematics," *American Mathematical Monthly*, Vol. 87 No. 2 (1980).

"If the prospect of a dying universe causes us anguish, it does so only because we can forecast it, and we have as yet not the slightest idea why such forecasts are possible for us. A few figures scrawled on a piece of paper can describe the rate the universe expands, reveal what goes on inside a star, or predict where the planet Neptune will be on New Year's Day in the

year A.D. 25,000. Why? Why should nature, whether hostile or benign, be in any way intelligible to us? All the mysteries of science are but palace guards to that mystery."

☞ Timothy Ferris, *The Red Limit: The Search for the Edge of the Universe* (New York: William Morrow, 1977), pp. 217-18; quoted in Gary North, *Is the World Running Down?: Crisis in the Christian Worldview* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1988), p. 13.

Psychology

"I left there feeling, Well, I started this damned thing, and look where it's taking us; I don't even know where it's taking me. I don't have any idea what's going to happen next. And I woke up the next morning feeling so depressed, that I could hardly stand it. And I realized what was wrong. Yes, I started this thing, and now look where it's carrying us. Where is it going to carry us? And did I start something that is in some fundamental way mistaken, and will lead us off into paths that we will regret?"

☞ Dr. Carl Rogers, in a tape made with colleague Dr. William Coulson in 1976 after destroying an order of nuns with his non-directive therapy.
<http://www.cfpeople.org/Apologetics/page51a080.html>

Darwinian Materialism

"We believe it (evolution) because the only alternative is special creation, which is unthinkable."

☞ Sir Arthur Keith (1866-1955), a British anatomist and anthropologist who wrote 20 books in defense of evolution