

The Materialist Atheist Worldview
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In recent years we have witnessed the surge of the so-called New Atheists. Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, the late Christopher Hitchens, and a host of others have attacked Christianity and other belief systems. In the place of belief in a god, these writers view the world in strictly materialist terms; life is a series of physical and chemical interactions and no more. Science, and especially neuro-science and evolutionary biology, can provide the answers we need to life's great questions of purpose, meaning, and ethics. My biggest beef with these authors is that they spend too much time in polemics tearing down a straw man Christianity and not enough time in constructive thought. The implications of their assumptions are troublesome or downright dangerous, to me at least.

What is the goal of being human in a materialist world? One answer is reproduction. Your goal as a species is to reproduce. If you reproduce and your offspring reproduce, you have achieved your evolutionary goal. If this is the case, I should be heading to my nearest sperm bank post haste. I would suggest you do the same. Use modern science to spread your genetic material as far as you can.

Another goal of being human would be to maximize your level of personal satisfaction, which can be measured in the chemical composition of your brain. This, of course, extends beyond mere pleasure to encompass the Epicurean ideal of happiness, broadly considered. Success, pride, a good workout, time spent with friends or family, all of these would increase your level of personal satisfaction. In a materialist framework, we could achieve these ends scientifically through the use of drugs which mimic the real life experience of happiness. The end goal would be the same whether achieved through actions or drugs, ideal brain chemistry. The logical extension of this would be to spend your life in a virtual reality machine that is hooked up to your brain. That way you could avoid the vicissitudes of life while having the best of experiences, as least as far as you know. After all, it's all about brain chemistry.

In addition to non-conventional life goals, a materialist viewpoint leads to interesting ethical standards. According to an evolutionary biologist, humans are naturally altruistic because it helps you and your tribe to live longer. A certain degree of human cooperation leads to better results, in terms of long term survival, for all in the group. That is the ethical norm by which actions should be judged, long term survival for you and your group. Should you help others in need? Only if they fit into your group and only if it will lead to long term survival. Since there are scarce resources on the planet, the best course of action is to hoard those resources for you and your cronies even if it means suffering for others. In the United States, we are already quite good at this. Ayn Rand uses similar reasoning to develop her own ethical system. She errs by considering the ideal group to be a group of one, which is not, in terms of evolution, how we are wired to operate.

In short, if we want to embrace a materialist viewpoint, we should tweak our allocation of resources as a society to better align with our goals. Moreover, a clearer ethical standard

would clear up some of the political mess that we find ourselves in now. Perhaps that should be Sam Harris next book.