

# Arguments for Atheism?: Mark Vernon

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## Transcript - Long

### Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Mark, I take very seriously the arguments of atheists. I hope it's not true. I would love to believe in God, but I don't want something that works for me, makes me feel good; I want something that's real, even if it makes me feel lousy. Now, you were an atheist and now have become an agnostic. I'd like to understand why.

### Mark Vernon:

Well, perhaps I should be completely honest here and say that not only was I an atheist, but before then, I was actually a priest. And what happened was I was ordained in the Church of England, but I became disillusioned with the church. Particularly, I became disillusioned with the arguments that go on in the church these days, and I began to read humanistic philosophers as a result of that and became convinced by them, and so, although people would say I lost my faith, it didn't feel like that at all. I felt like I was growing up, that I was able to shed these paternal authorities and to breathe the freedom of the enlightenment, as it were.

### Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

How far did you take your atheism? I mean, is it something that you were serious about, or something you just –

### Mark Vernon:

Oh sure. I mean, when I say I read humanistic philosophers, I actually did a Ph.D. and so on. I proceeded pretty hard. But what also happened though was I began to feel that atheism itself entails a kind of Puritanism, and in a sense, a kind of dishonesty. Let me be clear about that. There is a sort of atheism which just says, well, I don't really know, and the idea of God doesn't really matter to me one way or another, and in a sense, there's no arguing with that; that's what people feel. But increasingly, there is a kind of militant atheism, which wants to actually proselytize people and to persuade them to become atheists, too. And I think that what the mistake that those atheists make is that they pretend that something's certain when it's not. They pretend that you can prove that God doesn't exist, when you can't prove that. God's just not that kind of thing. And unless you take that on board, you're not really getting to grips with things. So my agnosticism is – it comes from, actually, from T.H. Huxley, who is the chap that invented the word agnostic. And what Huxley said, it was a rebuke, in fact, both to the religious believers of his day, who presented their beliefs as if they're verifiably true, but also to the scientists of his day, who thought that science could disprove God, too. Huxley said, no, the question of the existence of God will never be settled, and so what I want to claim I am is an agnostic, and I think that that is the most honest scientific position, in fact.

### Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Well, science would say that – that as they learn more, and in the last century, the enormity of what we've learned in physics and cosmology and even biology, molecular genetics, is filling in every hole that God used to live in, and soon there will be no place left for God to hide. And we can see that, and some people would say we're already there, and there's absolutely no need for God, no room for God, and God is not only an anachronism but a burden on humanity.

### Mark Vernon:

Yeah, I mean, I – I don't want to present arguments for the existence of God. I'm an agnostic, and I take that very seriously, but what I would question with that picture of science is just what science can, in fact, answer. Science has been a tremendous success, a triumph, and it has – sure, it's asked and answered an enormous number of questions, but it hasn't asked all questions, let alone answered them all. You remember Donald Rumsfeld's famous distinction between the known knowns and the known unknowns, and the unknown unknowns. Well, it's those unknown unknowns particularly, I think, that science can't grapple with. But even without getting particularly metaphysical about it, science, for example, doesn't even really have a good idea about what a lot of things are within its own domain. You take something like light. Light is famously described as both a particle and as a wave. Now, those two things are incompatible, and although science has very sophisticated equations for describing how

light might behave, it can't ultimately say what light is. So even within its own domain, I think, science needs to recognize its limits.

**Robert Lawrence Kuhn:**

When you hear the atheistic arguments, the militant ones, normally by scientists, some philosophers, do you think that the problem is that they're unable to explain everything, or does it go beyond that, and that there are areas of human – or areas of existence that are truly real, truly profound, whether it's morality or existence itself, that science doesn't deal with, that – that in essence, would undermine atheism?

**Mark Vernon:**

Yeah, my worry with militant atheists is actually the worlds that they're creating, as it were. It seems to be a world where things like morality, things like spirituality, they either – they either steer clear of them, or they explain them away. A lot of explanations that are given about morality become a kind of cost-benefit analysis. And I think it's no coincidence that these ideas about how morality works and so on have arisen in a late capitalist society. We're very persuaded by cost-benefit analysis in that way. But this is a very narrow conception of what it is to be a human being. You know, we don't weigh things out. Altruism really exists, for example. It's not just a game which we play because we know it's going to benefit us in the end, and people genuinely even die for other people for no other reason than the fact that they do it.

**Robert Lawrence Kuhn:**

Well, you could argue that there's some evolutionary psychology today. That you could look at an ant colony when they cross a river, and some ants will roll up in a ball and they die so that the species can perpetuate itself. So, I mean, you can make arguments to show that all of the human so-called higher characteristics of morality and personality have a simple biological evolutionary basis.

**Mark Vernon:**

Well, my short answer to that is that I don't find that convincing, and I don't find that convincing because they don't actually relate to the experience that they claim to describe.

**Robert Lawrence Kuhn:**

Where, then, is the core problem with the atheistic arguments? What – what – are they contributing or not contributing to human development?

**Mark Vernon:**

Well, there is a kind of atheism that paradoxically, I think, does actually contribute to the religious quest. And this is the kind of atheism that sheds bad gods, if you like, that – atheists are good at identifying gods which really aren't worthy of any worship or following, and in that sense, many atheists have done us a service.

**Robert Lawrence Kuhn:**

So who are some of these bad gods that atheists are properly shedding?

**Mark Vernon:**

For example, the god that would condemn homosexuals to eternal damnation. I would say that's a very bad god, it's a god who's subhuman. And so the atheists are doing us a favor with that. But what the mistake is, is to think that by shedding the bad gods, you therefore shed the question of God completely. And to my mind, as an agnostic, I would say that's got to remain open. You've got to learn to live with the fact that that question can't ultimately be answered, and the reason why that's a good thing is because it's a reflection of the human condition. It's a reflection of the fact that we are limited creatures, that we are finite, not infinite, and that there's something about embracing that that's actually nurturing of our humanity. Augustine, St. Augustine, had a very nice expression here. He said that we're between the beasts and angels, that we're not ignorant like the beasts, but we're not wise, as it were, like the angels, should they – should they exist. And the point is how we can live with that understanding of our own ignorance in certain parts of life, perhaps the most important parts of life. And so the good religion, the good, as it were, search for God, is the side of life that can cultivate that consciousness of living between beasts and angels.

**Robert Lawrence Kuhn:**

Atheists don't want to impoverish the human condition by taking out morality or great art, music, culture. Just the opposite. They want to enrich it by taking out the problem, which is God, and allowing human beings to freely address and imbibe all of these wonderful things, but the problem is God, because that infests all of this good emotion and creativity with an artificial concept that is – is untrue, and is divisive, and takes people in completely the wrong directions.

**Mark Vernon:**

I think that the trouble insisting that there is no God, and that morality and creativity can have nothing to do with God is you actually cut yourself off from one of the mainstays of the moral and creative tradition. Sure, identify what's bad – what's bad religion, but don't, in so doing, knock out what's good and valuable.

**Robert Lawrence Kuhn:**

But how much of the valuable is there really?

**Mark Vernon:**

I think that the reason why religion is of value is because it's – it's the – it's the tradition that's engaged most seriously with the limits of what we know, and unless you can do that, you're in danger of hubris, you're in danger of overreaching yourself, and so that's why, even as an agnostic, I would hope that the religions can continue, and will flourish. I hope that they'll flourish in different ways than they often are today, but I do hope that they will, because I think ultimately it's good for the human condition.