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**No Invisible Means of Support:
Life Challenges and
The Atheistic Worldview**

A thesis
submitted in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the Degree of
Master of Social Science

at
Lincoln University
by
Joshua Huisman

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Abstract of a thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Social Science.

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Atheism is now a prominent belief system within Aotearoa (New Zealand) (Gendall & Healey, 2009) and its prevalence in our country calls attention to the need for a better understanding of this worldview. A worldview provides a descriptive model of the world we live in and is considered to be the fundamental cognitive orientation of any individual (Palmer, 1996).

My research examined a largely unexplored area of enquiry – the life-world of atheists in Christchurch, New Zealand, with the aim of achieving a better understanding of the ways in which atheists face, and attempt to overcome, a range of challenges. To the best of my knowledge, this is the first Christchurch-based study on atheism. Through the use of semi-structured, in-depth interviews, my exploratory study provides rich descriptions of the personal reflections of 12 Christchurch-based atheists in academic settings.

Consistent with previous work (Baggini, 2003; Harding, 2007; Ysseldyk, 2010; Michell, 2009), all of the atheists in my sample identified themselves as naturalistic materialists, repudiated belief in an afterlife, did not practice spiritual activities and did not see purpose built into a universe made entirely of matter-energy. These atheists provide themselves with alternative means of comfort in the absence of supernatural belief and expressed no desire for theistic explanations of currently unexplained phenomena; they preferred a world in which things went unexplained, and viewed the converse as boring. With the exception of two participants, all of those interviewed indicated that apostasy and the shift from theistic belief to positive atheism began in their adolescence, often lasted in excess of ten years and included a significant period of agnosticism. Many of the participants refuted

the “Divine Command” theory and provided alternative justifications for their own moral standards.

Generally, like previous work (Caldwell-Harris, Wilson, & Beit-Hallahmi, 2010; Vetter & Green, 1932) my research suggests that the atheistic worldview has been adopted for logical reasons. However, considering some of the results from my research, I also acknowledge the possibility of emotionally-charged psychological influences in the formation and dismantling of worldviews. Whatever the reasons why participants adopted their atheistic worldviews, their new interpretations of the world changed how they felt about and how they reacted to life challenges. Hence, once adopted, not only did their worldviews provide “both a sketch of and a blueprint for reality; describing what they saw and stipulating what they should see,” (Olthuis, 1985, p. 29) but feelings and reactions towards events also changed accordingly.

Keywords: atheism, atheist, worldview, weltanschauung, worldview formation, naturalistic materialism, belief, supernatural, comfort, afterlife, death, morality, support, god, father figure, life purpose, agnostic

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The well-known atheist Richard Dawkins visited the Christchurch Town Hall on Thursday 11th March 2010, to deliver a lecture on material from his latest book; *The Greatest Show on Earth: The Evidence for Evolution* (Todd, 2010). He received a standing ovation from the attendees at the end of his speech (Todd, 2010). Outside the event, however, a handful of Christians were preaching and handing out evangelical material.

Dawkins's visit fuelled a candid debate on the streets of Christchurch and in the media in the weeks surrounding his lecture (Broom, 2010; Erasmus, 2010; Fisher, 2010; Lynch, 2010; McQuillan, 2010; Todd, 2010). This debate included topics that ranged from the validity of evolutionary theory to normative ethics and soteriology. It also featured a level of aggressive rhetoric on both sides of the theism/atheism debate in opinion articles in Christchurch newspapers (see for example Morris, 2010; Saunders, 2010; Tarshis, 2010; Walsh, 2010a, 2010b). This debate indicated a city divided along strongly held atheistic and theistic positions.

Atheism is now a prominent belief system within Aotearoa (according to Gendall & Healey, 2009; approximately thirteen percent of New Zealanders do not believe in god(s)).¹ In addition, religious affiliation has been declining consistently for over fifty years in New Zealand and now approximately 45 per cent of the population do not identify with any religious profession (Hoverd, 2008; Statistics New Zealand, 1998; Fitzjohna et al, 2000). Indeed, it has been colloquially put that; “Godlessness is booming in Kiwiland” (Bryant, 2008, p. 31). The prominence of atheism in our country (Gendall & Healey, 2009) calls attention to the need to understand this worldview. A worldview provides a descriptive model of the world we live in and it is considered to be the fundamental cognitive orientation of individuals (Palmer, 1996). These guiding belief systems shape our behaviour. They attempt to provide answers to difficult questions such as: “Why are we here?” “Where are we

¹ The case distinction of the first letter in the term ‘God’ or ‘gods’ is dependent on the context in which it is used. When the term ‘God’ is used to refer to the name of a unique, singular or personal entity (as it is often used in monotheistic religions) then ‘God’ is considered to be a proper noun, hence the first letter is capitalised; just like any other name. When the terms ‘god’ or ‘gods’ are used to refer to a class of entities (for example, where subjects are god-like), then these terms are common nouns and the first letter is not capitalised. In this thesis I make frequent use of the term ‘god(s),’ where the bracketed plural morpheme is used to incorporate the possibility of belief in a singular God or a number of gods. In such instances, the first letter has not been capitalised.

heading?” “What should we do?” “How should we attain our goals?” and “What is true and false?” (Aerts et al., 1994).

Previous research, as I will show, has concluded that theism provides roles for people such as comforting believers in their suffering and allaying their fear of death, explaining things that cannot otherwise be explained and encouraging group cooperation in the face of trials and enemies (Dennett, 2006, pp. 102-103). This raises the question *inter alia* as to how atheists respond to significant life-events.

Empirical evidence further suggests that religious affiliation has beneficial effects on physical health behaviour such as reduced smoking, lower risk taking, compliance with authority and conformity with social norms (Ysseldyk et al., 2010, p. 62). There is also considerable evidence correlating strong religious identification with mental health benefits such as enhanced self esteem, higher levels of subjective well-being and higher life satisfaction (Greenfield & Marks, 2007; Koteskey, Little, & Matthews, 1991; Lim & Putnam, 2009, March; Talebi, Ysseldyk, Matheson, & Anisman, 2009, February; Ysseldyk, Matheson, & Anisman, 2009, 2009, February).

Given this literature, my interest was in how the non-believer in Christchurch copes from day to day without the support of a religious group or theistic belief system. Does an atheistic worldview confer adequate benefits to its affiliates by providing purpose and meaning to life as well? How do atheists deal with the problems of death and unexplained phenomena? In addition, what provides comfort and assurance for local atheists in the absence of theistic belief?

“Although the ideological gap between “religious traditionalists and secular humanists” (Jost, 2007) has been widening for decades, few researchers have examined the social identification of atheism” (Ysseldyk et al., 2010, p. 65). My research examines a largely unexplored area, especially in a New Zealand context. To the best of my knowledge, this is the first Christchurch based study on atheism.

1.1 Research Aims and Objectives

Due to the lack of previous research, my study aimed to provide an exploratory study of the lives of 12 Christchurch-based atheists. More generally, very little qualitative research has been undertaken on the subject of atheism and ‘rich’ descriptions are relatively scarce (Small 2009, p.345; Michel, 2009, p.3). This prompted my exploratory study that begins to address this gap in the literature. This thesis aims to explore participants’ reflections on major life

issues. My research questions investigate the life histories, moralistic principles and existential reflections of these atheists. The objectives of my study are summarised as follows:

- To examine the Social Science research literature relating to the position of atheism with a view to set the scene, provide a theoretical framework for my research and guide my questions.
- To analyse Christchurch-based atheists' personal reflections on major life issues.
- To compare my results with the existing research on the subject.

The above objectives can be translated into more specific research questions: Can particular past experiences or certain environmental factors predispose one towards an atheistic worldview? How does the atheistic worldview influence moral perspectives and moral behaviour? Do atheists fear death, and if so, how do they deal with this fear? How do atheists imagine death and discuss death with others? Where do atheists turn in a time of suffering and how do they comfort others? How do atheists approach the problem of currently unexplained phenomena? How do atheists justify morality without god(s)? What provides an atheist with value, purpose or meaning in life?

1.2 Thesis Organisation

This thesis is divided into six chapters. In Chapter Two, the literature review, definitions of atheism are offered and previous work reviewed: on atheism in history; worldview formation; morality; environmental explanations for the position of atheism; the "Compensator" theory of religion; the impact of life events on theistic certainty; and God as a 'father figure.' In Chapter Three, the methodology chapter, the applied research approach and procedure are described and ethical considerations addressed. The thematic results of the study that have been drawn from semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted as fieldwork are presented in Chapter Four. Extensive use is made of respondents' direct quotations. Chapter Five discusses the significance of these results via comparison with previous research on atheism. Acknowledgement of the limitations of my research and recommendations for further research are discussed in Chapter Six, which concludes my substantive discussion. Relevant appendices and a bibliography complete the thesis.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

Embarking on research involving atheists made for some diverse and engaging reading. Research exploring the personal reflections and social lives of atheists in rich detail are scarce (Small, 2009, p.345; Michel, 2009, p.3), which meant that reading ‘around’ the topic in related genres has contributed to the contextual and theoretical framework required. The material found in this literature review draws on a number of academic disciplines including Religious Studies, Philosophy, Sociology, Psychology, Evolutionary Biology and Anthropology.

I introduce the concept of atheism by providing a working definition of the term and explaining its main tenets. I then offer a very brief history of atheistic thought which highlights the growing popularity of the position despite its traditional social ‘undesirability.’ The concept of “Weltanschauung” or worldview is then presented and the literature on how worldviews affect people’s lives, how they are often formed and sometimes dismantled (as many atheists have had to do with their prior beliefs) is explored. Various theories concerning what it is that contributes to the formation of an atheistic worldview are then explained and discussed before I conclude with a summary of the chapter.

2.2 Defining Atheism

The word ‘atheist’ branches etymologically from the Greek word *aJeoV* which literally means ‘without a god’ (Corveleyn & Hutsebaut, 1994, p. 40). Originally the word was used to denote heretics who would not adhere to the ruling religion of the day. For example, in the Roman Empire, rebellious Christians who would refuse to worship the emperor were called atheists (Corveleyn & Hutsebaut, 1994). In later years, the term atheist was used by the Catholic Church of the Middle Ages to denote persons who did not espouse a belief in the Christian tradition (Corveleyn & Hutsebaut, 1994). Thus the varied applications of the term ‘atheist’ in history seem to have created considerable confusion regarding its definition, despite the etymological simplicity of the word.

Cliteur (2009) makes the point that even in recent years, the term ‘atheist’ is often misunderstood. He proposes that the most useful definition of atheism is a negative one (defining it in terms of what it is not). The ‘a’ in a-theism is an *alpha privans* in that it denies

what follows (Cliteur, 2009, p. 2). Therefore, Cliteur (2009, p. 2) offers us the following definition: “An atheist is someone who does not subscribe to the central tenets of theism.” Following this reasoning, in order to understand atheism, we are also required to establish what the central tenets of theism are and this presents as many problems as it solves. Much of the confusion is concerned with whether theism should be defined in a narrow or a broad sense, and to how certain someone needs to be in their disbelief in order to warrant the term atheist. (Martin, 1990). I will discuss both of these issues in turn.

The term ‘theism’ is derived from the Greek word *theos* which means a superhuman, immortal being possessing considerable power, or in other words, a god (Inge, 1948). A god could be thought of by the above definition as existing in isolation (as Yahweh or Allah or God is in the monotheistic religions of Judaism, Islam and Christianity respectively) or in the company of other gods (as Zeus, Horus and Thor were in Ancient Greek, Egyptian and Norse polytheism respectively).² A god could be interested in intervening in human affairs (as suggested by many religions) or the god could be remote and uninvolved. The latter perspective on god(s) is generally referred to as Deism or Monodeism (Polydeism for multiple gods) and has traditionally been popular amongst the intellectual elite and ‘closet atheists’ in the past, seeking to avoid persecution (Baggini, 2003; Bainbridge, 2005; Dawkins, 2006; Hitchens, 2007; Martin, 2007; Miller, 2004a, 2004b). Because gods have not been made ‘known’ by objective or scientific methods in the physical world, theists require a form of ‘belief’ or ‘faith.’

What does it mean then, to believe in something? The term ‘belief’ is often recognised as a ‘slippery’ term (Miller, 2004a; Southerland, Sinatra, & Matthews, 2001). According to the philosopher Colin McGinn (as cited in Miller, 2004b), when we say we believe in something such as God, it simply means we are committed to the idea and hence we take it as granted when we act. Beliefs of this type are usually contrasted with accepted ‘knowledge’ by being more personal, subjective and affective in their nature (Alexander & Dochy as cited in Southerland et al., 2001, p. 335). Theists are therefore committed to the idea that god(s) exists and this belief is likely to be emotion-laden and will often affect the way they act.

² Hinduism has been excluded intentionally here because this religion’s view of god(s) is very complex and some say it consists of both polytheistic and monotheistic tendencies (Pargament, 1997; Park, 1994, 2007; Varshney, 2000). Hinduism is often considered to be polytheistic because of the many ‘godlike’ personalities that are worshipped (Pargament, 1997; Park, 1994, 2007; Varshney, 2000). However, scholars suggest that it cannot be considered purely polytheistic because Hindu leaders have repeatedly stressed that the ‘supreme being’ is one, although His forms (such as Vishnu, Shiva and Ganesh) are many (Pargament, 1997; Park, 1994, 2007; Varshney, 2000).

Despite the many applications of the term *theos* and the varieties of gods that people do believe in, it is surprising that theism is still defined in the Western literature as belief in the singular God who is also the Creator of the Universe (Martin, 1990, 2007; Smart & Haldane, 1996). Perhaps this narrow and restrictive definition prevails in Western literature due to the dominance of Christianity in post-Constantine, European history. When atheism is used to refer to an absence of belief in the singular God, Martin makes it clear that we are referring to *narrow atheism* and by this definition, we would be labelling all Deists, Buddhists, Pagans and Wiccans, believers in ancient religions and participants in tribal religions as atheists. However, by all statistical records encountered in the work of this thesis, atheists have been clearly distinguished and counted separately from these groups. Hence this classification of narrow atheism is both confusing and unsuitable for the purposes of this thesis.

In contrast, some authors define theism in a more comprehensive sense to include multiple gods (Baggini, 2003; Harding, 2007; *The New Oxford Dictionary of English*, 1998). This is a broader understanding of what theistic belief means. Therefore, when we are referring to atheists as those people who do not adhere to the central tenets of monotheism, polytheism, deism or any other belief in which any number of gods are involved, then this is known as *broad atheism* (Martin, 1990, 2007). This classification of broad atheism appears to be more in line with statistical records (Cooperman et al., 2010; Martin, 2007) and the popular usage of the term (Backhouse, 2010; Baggini, 2003; Dawkins, 2006; Hitchens, 2007; *The New Oxford Dictionary of English*, 1998; Randerson, 2010). It is a classification suitable for the purposes of this thesis and, from this point onwards, it should be understood that when the term ‘atheist’ is used, I am referring to atheism in the broad sense.

The ‘strength’ of one’s absence of belief in god(s) is also important when classifying an atheist. An atheistic position can either involve either a positive or a negative statement (Martin, 1990). A *negative atheist* is defined simply as someone who lacks belief in god(s) which is a non-subscription to the central tenets of theism (Cliteur, 2009; Martin, 1990). A negative atheist could say “I have no reason to believe in gods,” or “I lack belief in gods.” Non-believers of all kinds (broad and narrow), in addition to most agnostics (those who are unsure whether or not they believe in god(s)) fit into this category. It is important to note that the negative atheist does not have to actively disbelieve because lacking a belief in gods is different from believing that gods do not exist. Active disbelief would be identified by such statements as “I believe there are no gods,” or “Gods do not exist.” These are statements attributed to the *positive atheist* who disbelieves in any forms of *theos* (Cliteur, 2009; Martin, 1990). Given this definition, agnosticism is incompatible with positive atheism despite its

compatibility with negative atheism (Martin, 1990). In addition, all positive atheists are also negative atheists by definition, but not vice versa.

We now have two dimensions of atheism that are crucial to my working definition of an atheist. The first dimension is the ‘width’ of atheism and is concerned with whether or not theism is defined in the broad or the narrow sense. The second dimension is the ‘strength’ of atheistic certainty, which concerns whether the atheist makes a negative or positive statement when indicating their atheism. These two dimensions create a four by four matrix of possible atheist types or ‘varieties’ (attributable to Martin, 1990). They have been represented in the table below:

Table 1 The Varieties of Atheism*

	Positive	Negative
Narrow	Believes that there is no personal being who is omniscient, omnipotent, and completely good and who created Heaven and Earth.	An absence of belief in an omniscient, omnipotent, and completely good personal being that created Heaven and Earth.
Broad	Actively believes that all and any gods do not exist. (All atheists interviewed for the purposes of this thesis identify with positive atheism in the broadest sense).	An absence of belief in any gods, not just the absence of belief in a personal God.

*This table has been revised and adapted from the original source: Martin (1990, p. 465).

It is important to stress that, according to this definition; atheism does not necessarily entail any associated political, moral or philosophical stance.

An atheist may be a capitalist or a communist, an ethical objectivist or subjectivist, a producer or a parasite, an honest man or a thief, psychologically healthy or neurotic. The only thing incompatible with atheism is theism (George Smith as cited in Harding, 2007, p. 103).

We can also distinguish between organic and coercive atheism. Where non-belief has been forced upon a population it can be referred to as ‘coercive atheism,’ whereas atheism that has emerged without coercion is called ‘organic’ (Martin, 2007). With respect to the case

of disbelief among those born in New Zealand, it is most probable that their atheistic position has developed organically given New Zealand's democratic history. With regards to those born overseas, however, this may not always hold.

2.3 Atheism in History

The first known stirrings of atheistic thought can be found in Ancient India with the development of Buddhism, Jainism and the Samkhaya sect of Hinduism (Harding, 2007, pp. 42-43). According to Harding (2007), although possessing some spiritual elements, these religions have no gods (powerful, superhuman and immortal beings) and they are therefore atheistic. The Samkhaya sect of Hinduism even espouses that the Universe resulted from unconscious evolution (Harding, 2007, pp. 42-43). However, these religions are still incompatible with naturalistic materialism as they acknowledge a supernatural realm with spiritual beings possessing limited powers. The supernatural realm here refers to the concept of anything existing outside of the natural, physical laws of the observable Universe.

In the Western tradition, it is the Ancient Greco-Roman philosophers who are associated both with the development of atheistic thought and naturalistic materialism (Baggini, 2003; Harding, 2007; Miller, 2004a, 2004b; Thrower, 1971). Philosophers such as Epicurus, Aristotle, Archimedes, Thales, Cicero, Lucius Annaeus Seneca and Lucretius were known to be critical of religion, producing significant doubts about both the existence and the powers of the gods and, in addition, questioning widely held assumptions about life after death (Baggini, 2003; Harding, 2007; Miller, 2004a, 2004b; Thrower, 1971). It was in this Classical Age that the great schools of scepticism, naturalistic materialism and cynicism were born (Harding, 2007; Thrower, 1971). Nevertheless, open avowals of atheism and complete denials of the divine were rare even amongst the most critical philosophers (Thrower, 1971). The possibility of being charged with impiety was a very real threat (Harding, 2007; Miller, 2004b; Thrower, 1971) and in the Western tradition at least, atheism has a history of being socially undesirable (Martin, 1990; Miller, 2004a, 2004b). The Roman philosopher Cicero (106-43 BCE) recognised this state of affairs rather well and he has been quoted as follows: "In this subject of the gods, the first question is do the gods exist or do they not? It is difficult, you may say, to deny that they exist. I would agree if we were arguing the matter in a public assembly but in a private discussion of this kind, it is perfectly easy to do so" (as cited in Miller, 2004b).

If it was socially undesirable to deny polytheism in the Classical Age, then it was suicidal (literally) in most of Europe to openly deny the monotheistic God of the Middle

Ages. In these times, cruel penalties (including torture and eventual death) existed for anyone that did not espouse belief in the Christian God and did not accept the authority of the Catholic Church (Harding, 2007; Miller, 2004b). It is for these reasons that atheistic discourse did not reappear again until the Renaissance, when the wide reading and study of classical texts was revived (Thrower, 1971). Nevertheless, public avowals of atheism did not become well known until the Enlightenment. Even then, many of the great writers during this time such as Denis Diderot, Voltaire and the Marquis De Sade, were imprisoned for writing books with atheistic themes (Harding, 2007, p. 57).

Atheists have continued to be subjected to discrimination and persecution in many societies up until very recent times. For example, until the mid-nineteenth century, an atheist could receive the death sentence for not believing in God under the prevailing blasphemy laws in England (Miller, 2004a). In addition, atheists were denied the right to testify or give evidence in courts of law until 1869 in England and 1871 in Tennessee, USA (Martin, 1990, pp. 4-5). In Vetter and Green's study (1932), 58 per cent of participants claimed their atheism interfered with either their social or business life (often both).³

Atheists have also often been publicly ridiculed for their disbelief by notable intellectuals and politicians. A recent example was provided by former president, George Bush Senior (1987) who has been quoted as questioning the very right of citizenship in the case of American atheists: "I don't know if atheists should be considered as patriots, nor should they be considered as citizens" (as cited in Miller, 2004c). In many societies today, there is still a prevailing view that atheists live meaningless lives without value, act immorally and behave dishonestly as 'libertines' (Baggini, 2003; Edgell et al., 2006; Harding, 2007; Lacroix, 1965, p. 41; Martin, 1990, p. 4; Vitz, 1999; Alidoosti, 2009). "Atheists are America's least trusted group (Edgell et al., 2006) and popular stereotypes portray them as non-conformist, sceptical, cynical, and joyless, lacking the experience of awe and a basis for morality (Jenks, 1987; Harris, 2006a)" (as cited in Caldwell-Harris et al., 2010, p. 3). This is despite research findings that suggest otherwise: non-believers are equally sensitive to both feelings of awe and tragedy when compared with believers (Herzbrun, 1999), non-believers find meaning in life by helping people and contributing to society (Michel, 2009; Herzbrun, 1999) and atheists themselves also tend to believe that ethical behaviour is possible without a god or a cosmic purpose (Michel, 2009).

³ I acknowledge that this reference is very old but it is widely cited in the current literature and as part of that ongoing discourse it needs to be covered in this thesis.

Although most legal restrictions and overt forms of persecution against atheists have now been removed in the West, a subtle unspoken bias and suspicion still remains against the position (Baggini, 2003; Caldwell-Harris et al., 2010; Martin, 1990; Miller, 2004a, 2004b). Atheists usually hold minority identities and can sometimes feel subordinated by more dominant groups such as Christians (Church-Heal, 2008). In a recent study, the author refers the issue of “Christian privilege” and the marginalisation of minority groups (such as atheists) in American society:

It is according to the students’ understandings, there seems to be a three-tier structure of power and privilege in society. Although none of the students individually spelled out the whole structure, their dialogue together combined to describe a hierarchy featuring Christianity at the top and atheism at the bottom (Small, 2009, p.340).

For reasons such as the ones cited above, atheism is often ‘invisible’ because it is difficult to detect or elicit honest avowals (Martin, 1990; Miller, 2004a). An example of this ‘invisible’ atheism can be found in a recent American newspaper which reports the story of two active Southern Baptist ministers who have now become atheists and are too afraid to tell their parish members and/or family and friends (Harris & Woo, 2010). Therefore, it has been suggested that there may be far more atheists than is apparent in official data (Edgell et al., 2006). Vetter and Green (1932, p. 193) found that 18 per cent of atheists in their sample did not openly avow their position around peers.

It is now estimated that atheism is growing in popularity. It has been suggested that between approximately 500 million and 750 million humans do not believe in god(s) (Martin, 2007, p. 141). In certain societies, such as Canada, Australasia and most European countries, organic atheism is increasing rapidly (Martin, 1990, 2007). Thrower (1971, pp. 2-3) suggests that we may now be experiencing a transition from a theistically orientated culture to one dominated by a philosophy of naturalistic materialism. New Zealand is no exception. In fact, New Zealand is said to have one of the highest rates of organic atheism in the world (Martin, 2007). An International Social Survey Programme on religion administered by Massey University, found that 13 percent of New Zealand citizens did not believe in god(s) (Gendall & Healey, 2009). This is rather high when compared to countries such as the United States of America or Ireland, for example, where the figure is believed to be less than five percent (Martin, 2007, p. 56), although the caveat offered above re the accuracy of official calculations should be born in mind. In addition, religious affiliation has been declining consistently for over fifty years in New Zealand and now approximately 45 per cent of the population do not identify with any religious profession (Hoverd, 2008; Statistics New

Zealand, 1998; Fitzjohna et al, 2000). While it might be an embellishment to suggest, for most New Zealanders, that “God is dead” or that “we have killed him” (Nietzsche, 1882, as cited in McConnell, 1993, p. 163; Grimshaw, 2005), it has been colloquially put by a local author that “Godlessness is booming in Kiwiland” (Bryant, 2008, p. 31). Socially desirable or not, atheism is now a prominent (dis)belief system within New Zealand. Its popularity calls attention to the need to understand this worldview.

2.4 Weltanschauung

Weltanschauung is a German word used by Immanuel Kant in 1792 that translates literally to mean ‘world-perception’ or more commonly, ‘worldview’ (Hebel, 1999; Lavender, 2009). The word was first used in English literature by William James in the middle of the nineteenth century (Hebel, 1999; Wolters, 1983). ‘Worldview’ generally refers to one’s basic philosophy of existence (Southerland et al., 2001) or a “global outlook on life and the world” (Wolters, 1983, p. 15).

A worldview provides a descriptive model of the world we live in and is considered to be the fundamental cognitive orientation of any individual (Palmer, 1996). A worldview is a unified system of thought that also filters the information we perceive and the information that we decide to make an effort to understand (Hebel, 1999; Olthuis, 1985, p. 258). For example, if a programme appears on television that contests our worldview, we can always change the channel to find something that does not. In this sense, a worldview provides “both a sketch of and a blueprint for reality; it describes what we see and stipulates what we should see” (Olthuis, 1985, p. 29).

2.4.1 Two Major Types of Worldviews

Following the direction of Freud, Nicholi (as cited in Southerland et al., 2001) states that worldviews can be divided into two major categories: those that involve a supernatural element and those that do not. In the supernatural category is placed all beliefs that involve a transcendent or spiritual realm and this is applicable to all forms of theism (Southerland et al., 2001). However, it is possible that some atheists may well indeed fall into this category, as I will explain later on. The other major worldview category is known as materialism or naturalistic materialism and is more popular amongst atheists.

2.4.1.1 Supernatural worldviews

Supernatural worldviews are those systems of belief that involve a spiritual or theistic element. There is now an extensive array of literature dedicated to how they might have

originated, written from the perspective of naturalistic materialism (a type of worldview that is in direct contrast to supernatural belief). This body of literature is most commonly known as the “Naturalistic Account of Religion” and involves contributions from evolutionary biologists, psychologists, philosophers, anthropologists and other social scientists. These authors claim that the development of belief in supernatural phenomena can be explained by purely biological causes.

Belief in the supernatural is said to arise when agency is erroneously detected in places where there is none. This, it is claimed, is due to a misfiring of an overly-sensitive cognitive device that was originally advantageous to human survival (Saler & Ziegler, 2006). Originally, this device aided humans and other mammals in hunting prey and avoiding predators by detecting movement and attributing it to agency. However, because the HADD (hyperactive agency detection device) is so sensitive, it continually misfires and detects agency where there is none. The HADD therefore initiates the apotheosis of agency and consequently biases the human towards supernatural belief (Saler & Ziegler, 2006). This is not difficult to imagine. Once agency began to become (sometimes erroneously) detected in tree movements, gusts of wind, shadows and the like, it may not have been long before myths about spirits and weather gods developed. These beliefs would have been eventually passed on to successive generations, albeit refined each step of the way (Saler & Ziegler, 2006).

In our own time, worldviews that incorporate supernatural elements have been known to confer benefits on those who believe. Previous research has concluded that theism provides roles for people such as comforting believers in their suffering, allaying the fear of death, explaining things that cannot otherwise be explained and encouraging group cooperation in the face of trials and enemies (Dennett, 2006, pp. 102-103). Nevertheless, belief in the supernatural can also form cognitive dissonance in its own right. With reference to victims of cancer, Peteet (2001, p. 188) explains that “Individuals with a spiritual or theistic world view often feel that someone cares about their pain and that they are not ultimately alone. However, they may also be struggling with the concept that a god(s) who is powerful enough to have spared them illness did not choose to do so.”

Despite the aforementioned quandary, empirical evidence suggests that, overall, supernatural worldviews have positive effects on physical health behaviour. This includes reduced smoking, lower risk taking, greater compliance with authority and conformity with social norms on the part of believers (Ysseldyk et al., 2010, p. 62). There is also considerable evidence correlating strong religious identification, church attendance or belief in the afterlife with positive mental health outcomes such as enhanced self esteem, higher levels of

subjective well-being, purpose in life and higher life satisfaction scores (Greenfield & Marks, 2007; Koteskey et al., 1991; Lim & Putnam, 2009, March; Steinitz, 1980; Talebi et al., 2009, February; Ysseldyk et al., 2009, 2009, February). These data raise questions related to a major focus of this thesis: How do atheists and naturalistic materialists cope with life's ills?

2.4.1.2 *Naturalistic materialism*

Naturalistic materialism holds that all that exists in the Universe is matter-energy and all phenomena (including consciousness) are the result of material interactions (Mills, 1995). In addition, this worldview espouses that nature is all there is, that life has developed from non-life through natural, chemical processes and that all basic truths are truths about nature (Mills, 1995). "Naturalism is polemically defined as repudiating the view that there exists or could exist any entities or events which lie, in principle, beyond the scope of scientific explanation" (Danto, as cited in Martin, 1990, p. 469). This view of the world leaves no room for a transcendent, spiritual or supernatural realm of any kind (Baggini, 2003; Harding, 2007; Southerland et al., 2001) and by definition is incompatible with most world religions such as Hinduism, Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Jainism and Buddhism.

Baggini (2003) and Ysseldyk, Matheson and Anisman (2010) note that atheism usually coincides with an interpretation of the world that is in line with naturalistic materialism. This relationship is so prominent that some academics have gone so far as to build materialism into their definition of atheism (Harding, 2007, p. 150). Madelyn Murray O'Hair, founder and president of American Atheists, stated that "Atheism is based upon a materialist philosophy, which holds that nothing exists but natural phenomena. There are no supernatural forces or entities, nor can there be. Nature simply exists" (Harding, 2007, p. 22). Taking this into consideration, most atheists do not believe in an afterlife and this changes how they interpret death (Hapsanto, 2010). For example, previous qualitative research has shown that atheists do not believe in Heaven and Hell and reincarnation and so on, therefore, they generally feel ambivalent towards death (Hapsanto, 2010).

Although holding the view of naturalistic materialism would require one also to be an atheist, the reverse is not necessarily true (Martin, 1990, p. 470). A naturalistic materialist worldview is not a necessary prerequisite for the positive atheist given our working definition (even in the broadest sense). A positive atheist could believe in human beings with supernatural powers (such as psychics and mediums) or spirits susceptible to death who hold very limited power (such as those 'devas' in Hinduism and ancient Buddhist traditions), yet still not believe in any beings that are god-like. Atheists may also participate in religious activities without believing in a supernatural god. This then implies that one may be religious,

yet still an atheist, contrary to the popular notion that atheism is anti-religious. An interesting example are secular theologies such as Christian atheism or ‘godless’ Christianity, which have become prominent in discussions in the West, particularly since the “death of God” discourse of the 1960s (Flick, 2006; Grimshaw, 2009, 2008, 2005). These theologies tend to reject the conventional view of a supernatural deity and chose to re-imagine and re-interpret the concept of ‘God’ in other non-theistic terms whilst retaining confidence in many of the other principles derived from the Christian tradition (Flick, 2006; Grimshaw, 2009, 2008, 2005). In fact, one of the positive atheists who participated in my study (David) identified himself as a Christian, was a long standing member of a Presbyterian church, defined his concept of ‘God’ in terms of love, and openly shared his disbelief in a supernatural God with other members of the congregation. Thus this reaffirms that one may be religious, yet still an atheist.

Meaning and purpose in life is strongly associated with well-being (Chamberlain and Zika, 1992). Individuals who hold to a naturalistic materialist or atheistic worldview often do not see purpose built into the Universe (Peteet, 2001, p.189). Despite this, previous qualitative work suggests that atheist believe that life can be meaningful and worthwhile without belief in God, though this type of meaning tended to be viewed as something highly subjective and transitory (Michel, 2009; Herzbrun, 1999). In addition, non-believers have also been found to be equally sensitive to feelings of awe when compared with believers (Herzbrun, 1999). Rather than relying on cosmic meaning, atheists tend to turn to ‘terrestrial’ meaning, which refers to “...sources of meaning that are in secular in nature, and which make no claims of being absolute or universally applicable” (Michell, 2009, p.2). For example, where someone with a theistic view of the world identifies with their deities in order to feel less alone or even more dignified in their suffering, atheists cannot do so. Instead, to help with anxiety, atheists often turn to their intellectual honesty, human relationships, integrity, stoicism or the legacy of their work to provide ‘terrestrial’ meaning in times of pain and loss (Michell, 2009; Peteet, 2001).

2.4.2 Worldviews and Morality

Worldviews also play an explanatory role in our lives. They create meaning, they help to form identities and they attempt to provide answers to difficult questions such as: “Why are we here?” “Where are we heading?” “What should we do?” “How should we attain our goals?” “Why are we suffering?” “What is the remedy to suffering?” “What is true and false?” and “What is good and what is evil?” (Aerts et al., 1994).

As the last question listed above suggests, worldviews also inform our sense of morality (Small, 2009, p.338). This link has been stressed by the sociologists Emile Durkheim and Max Weber. For example, Durkheim noted that societies with a complex division of labour tended to be more individualistic and in possession of a diminished “collective consciousness” (Jensen, 1997, p. 327). According to Durkheim, these societies emphasised individual rights in their cultural norms as a result (Jensen, 1997, p. 327). In contrast, “repressive punishment” was perceived to be popular in societies with a strong “collective consciousness,” and a simple division of labour where moral laws are seen as “transcendent, absolute and inviolable” (Jensen, 1997, pp. 326-327). Weber emphasized the impact of the Protestant worldview and its emphasis on hard work as helping to give rise to the growth and spread of capitalism in Western Europe (Jensen, 1997, p. 327).

Contemporary sociologists have also emphasised the link between worldviews and morality (Small, 2009, p.338). For example, attitudes toward abortion have been found to depend ultimately on worldviews, especially those beliefs surrounding the existence or non-existence of god(s) (Luker, 1984, as cited in Jensen, 1997, p. 327). In a study in the United States, Jensen (1997) also showed through his own research that moral attitudes toward euthanasia, gender roles, suicide, familial authority and childhood education depend heavily on the worldview (either progressive or orthodox Baptist) held by each participant. A New Zealand study of young adults found that participants who participated in religion were far more like to abstain from pre-marital sex than non-religious participants (Fitzjohna et al, 2000), thereby implying a link between morality and worldviews. Additional research shows that when compared with fundamentalists, those with atheistic worldviews are found to be more accepting of gays and lesbians as well as other outsiders and minority groups (Wulff, 2007). Furthermore, Lavendar (2009) links worldviews with morality by emphasising the existence of a dominant worldview of “American exceptionalism” in the United States, which condones “redemptive violence” and consequently excuses very high levels of military spending, foreign involvement and warfare.

2.4.2.1 “Divine Command” theory

Those who hold a supernatural worldview usually also hold the view that their deities provide moral guidance. Often the god(s) advises the faithful on what is permissible and beneficial for individuals and for society (Baggini, 2003; Dawkins, 2006; Lacroix, 1965; Martin, 1990). This can be achieved by way of direct revelation (experience based) or indirect revelation (through scripture and religious authority). God(s) often also gives advice to these same people on what is not permitted, morally corrupt or ‘unclean,’ which gives rise to the

notion of 'sin.' The philosophical position in which moral standards are set and justified by the authority of one or more deities is commonly referred to as the "Divine Command" theory (Baggini, 2003; Martin, 1990, 2007).

The "Divine Command" theory encounters a serious philosophical problem that Plato made clear in a dialogue known as Euthyphro. The Euthyphro dialogue has been summarised as follows:

Plato's protagonist Socrates posed the question, do the gods choose what is good because it is good, or is the good 'good' because the gods choose it? If the first option is true, that shows that goodness is determined independently of the gods. But if the second option is true, then that makes the very idea of what is good arbitrary. If it is the gods' choosing something alone that makes it good, then what is there to stop a god choosing torture, for instance, and thus making it good?
(Baggini, 2003, p. 38)

The first position, which emphasises the inherent nature of goodness in an object, is not often used by "Divine Command" theorists because it implies the autonomy of ethics. The autonomy of ethics necessitates that morality is beyond the control of god(s), and thereby, it compromises the prevalent doctrine of omnipotence, making it unpopular with many theists (Martin, 2007, p. 153). Specifically, traditional monotheists such as Jews, Christians and Muslims have particular qualms with this moral tenet given the widely accepted view of a personal, all-powerful God (Martin, 2007, p. 153). For these reasons, The "Divine Command" theory generally assumes the second position mentioned above, which is also known as Moral Voluntarism (Martin, 2007). This position claims that the 'goodness,' righteousness or permissibility of a certain act depends ultimately on the authority of god(s) and is not inherent in the object of interest. This in turn, makes the very notion of 'goodness' capricious. A believer may reply that their deity displays all the qualities of 'goodness' and therefore would not choose to make permissible something that is morally repulsive. This reply, however, is not available to the voluntarist for it would require 'goodness' to be determined independently of the god(s); hence it undermines the very principle of voluntarism (Martin, 2007, pp. 152-153). In addition, if 'goodness' was determined independently of the god(s), then theism would no longer be necessary when justifying morality. The "Divine Command" theory, therefore, seems to flounder when it approaches these problems.

Lacroix (1965) also criticizes The "Divine Command" theory for promoting inner guilt in believers through the use of the concept of 'sin.' Lacroix (1965) accuses this theory of causing much negativity in people because of the self-denial that it encourages. Joylessness follows the denial, which brings with it repressed feelings, aggression and 'inwardness' in the

adherent (pp. 72-74). Friedrich Nietzsche is renowned for making similar remarks: “He who scorns himself, prides himself as a scorner,” (as cited in Lacroix, 1965, p. 80). Nietzsche thought that theistic belief was “anti-life” or “life-denying” and that theistic morals are psychologically damaging to the individual. According to Nietzsche, they prevent individuals from achieving their true creative potential, promote weakness, encourage “slave-like” attitudes and erode sociality by creating paranoia in the individual (Lubac, 1963; Luijpen, 1964; Magnus & Higgins, 1996; Schilling, 1969). Supposedly, this paranoia develops out of the theist’s obsessive concern with their own behaviour and their trepidations they hold regarding the moral conduct of others (Lubac, 1963; Luijpen, 1964; Magnus & Higgins, 1996; Schilling, 1969).

Regardless, in the face of the claims and speculations of Nietzsche and Lacroix, recent empirical research results maintain that belief in the supernatural correlates considerably with psychological and physical health (Greenfield & Marks, 2007; Koteskey et al., 1991; Lim & Putnam, 2009, March; Steinitz, 1980; Talebi et al., 2009, February; Ysseldyk et al., 2009, 2009, February). The “Divine Command” theory also remains popular amongst believers despite its associated philosophical dilemmas.

2.4.2.2 *Godless depravity?*

Many moral voluntarists fear the inverse principle derived from the “Divine Command” theory (Bryant, 2008; Harding, 2007; Martin, 1990). The inverse implication is, as Dostoevsky’s Ivan Karamazov stated: “Without God, anything is permitted” (as cited in Baggini, 2003, p. 37). Nietzsche is well known for his aforementioned criticisms of theistic belief, nevertheless, he also envisaged that nihilism, amorality and chaos might follow from a rapid and complete embracement of atheism, despite the liberation we would receive as the “assassins of God” (Lubac, 1963; Luijpen, 1964; Schilling, 1969). Bryant (2008) admits that moral decline is a ‘slippery’ concept; however, he believes that we are experiencing one in New Zealand and blames increasing levels of atheism and agnosticism for this. He holds a very gloomy view of a future society without belief in the Christian God (Bryant, 2008).

Regardless of such fears, numerous philosophers have long argued that the supernatural realm is not needed to justify moral behaviour (Baggini, 2003; Martin, 1990, 2007). If voluntarism is rejected, then the autonomy of ethics is established. There are good reasons for rejecting voluntarism, such as the Euthyphro dialogue presented earlier. Therefore, atheism does not compel us to nihilism or moral relativism (Martin, 2007, p. 162). Naturalistic materialist accounts for the origins of what we call morality have been offered which emphasise the concepts of ‘reciprocal altruism’ or ‘mutual advantage’ in terms of

human survival and replication (Dawkins, 2006; Flick, 2006; Martin, 2007). In addition, empirical findings show that atheists, agnostics and those unaffiliated with religion are more willing to help the poor and have lower crime rates than do believers (Lomboso, 1911, Ross, 1950, Bonger, 1943, von Hentig, 1948, as cited in Martin, 2007, p. 306). Qualitative research also suggests that atheists themselves also tend to believe that ethical behaviour is possible without a god or a cosmic purpose (Michel, 2009). These findings suggest that although moral standards may change (as worldviews do), the fears of amorality and anarchy in a coming “Godless Age” (Bryant, 2008) are not supported by current research. One of my research questions aims to identify potential links between the atheistic worldview and participants’ moral behaviour and moral justification.

2.4.3 Worldview Formation

If worldviews are so powerful in influencing moral behaviour, interpreting major life events and giving meaning to suffering and pain, then the question arises as to how they are formed. This is a difficult question to answer as no one factor can be said to be the creator of a “Weltanschauung” (Olthuis, 1985, p. 28). I will, therefore, list some of the most often cited influential forces known to have an effect on worldview formation, as found in the academic literature.

Worldviews are unified systems of thought that are used to justify decisions and behaviour in life and in this way they also provide purpose (Hebel, 1999). Worldviews are built on value systems and childhood emotional experiences (Hebel, 1999; Olthuis, 1985). The behavioural patterns that reveal our value systems and develop into worldviews are said to be based on a ‘life-script’ of experiences encountered in the first seven years of our lives (Hebel, 1999). The types of emotions that we feel during these first seven years are crucial to the type of worldview we form. “In our early childhood experiences, certain patterns of emotional response are formed, which, if unhealthy, promote life-denying, rather than life-affirming, worldviews” (Olthuis, 1985, p. 34). Particular worldviews, such as the identification with either atheism or religion or another supernatural belief system, whilst influenced by early childhood experiences, have generally been known to ‘resolve’ and consequently ‘strengthen’ in young adulthood (Small, 2009, p.334; Herzbrun, 1999; Orozak, 1989).

Worldviews are seldom formed entirely by individuals but rather they are formed, maintained and reproduced in the context of a community (Dawkins, 2006; Jensen, 1997, p. 329). Worldviews are built upon history, collective memory, symbols and myths, societal

institutions, scientific knowledge, schooling, mores, family, friends and sexuality (Olthuis, 1985, p. 33). Karl Marx believed that worldviews were formed in the context of socioeconomic conditioning (Olthuis, 1985; Schilling, 1969); therefore, an individual's societal status may also affect their worldview (Olthuis, 1985).

2.4.4 Dismantling and Modifying Worldviews

Problems arise when the purpose provided by worldviews is not maintained or people find that their views are contradictory, ambiguous or even in direct conflict with another view. Such cognitive dissonance can lead to disorientation, confusion, frustration or even depression (Hebel, 1999). For like reasons (often subconsciously), information that does not support the position of a strongly held worldview will often be rejected or ignored (Hebel, 1999). Persistent negative feelings, cognitive dissonance or unresolved issues in personal or communal life can cause an inconsistency between what is confessed as a worldview and what is acted out in reality (Olthuis, 1985). Such incongruence, if not addressed by a modification of one's worldview, can in extreme cases lead to delusions and schizophrenia (Olthuis, 1985, p. 34).

2.4.5 What an Atheist Sees

The literature suggests that a 'godless' sketch of reality is entirely different from a theistic one. The atheist's perceptions and explanations of the world are in direct contrast with those offered by theists. Atheists generally believe in the autonomy of ethics and refute claims that disbelieving in god(s) implies moral relativism or nihilism. An individual's atheism usually coincides with a naturalistic materialist perception of the world. Without belief in deities and often also without spirits, an afterlife or any other supernatural phenomena, the atheist behaves and interprets major life events differently to others. For example, where theists might allay the fear of death with faith and the prospect of Heaven, atheists generally tend to feel ambivalent towards death due to their lack of belief in the afterlife. Where theists turn to god(s) for comfort, an atheist often turns elsewhere to internal qualities, values and mores that provide motivation. What then can be said of the factors that contribute to whether or not someone becomes an atheist?

2.5 Environmental Explanations for the Position of Atheism

Earlier I referred to a "Naturalistic Account of Religion." This theory claims that the origins of supernatural beliefs are due to the continual misfiring of a hyperactive agency detection device (HADD) formerly advantageous to human survival. Justin Barrett, an

evolutionary psychologist, employs this theory to explain contemporary disbelief in god(s). He applies the same assumptions as made in the “Naturalistic Account of Religion” to describe environmental conditions that may allow atheism to thrive in some parts of the world and wane in others.

Barrett (2004) maintains that certain environmental conditions make atheism more likely among some populations. In such special environments, conditions exist that “thwart or reduce the theistic-consistent outputs from the agency detection module” (Saler & Ziegler, 2006, p. 20). A number of these output-thwarting conditions are necessary in order for atheistic thought to flourish. Firstly, situations that potentially threaten human survival heighten the sensitivity of the HADD, therefore, in environments that offer employment within occupations that do not produce anxiety related to survival, atheistic views are more likely to develop (Saler & Ziegler, 2006). Secondly, being surrounded by agents that are obviously human (and not animal), as is the case in urban environments, also has the same effect by way of reducing the necessity of the HADD (Saler & Ziegler, 2006). (This premise, of course, assumes that humans are not seen as dangerous which in fact is far from the case in many societies). Thirdly, non-theistic alternatives for belief that can satisfy promptings from the cognitive device must also be provided (Saler & Ziegler, 2006). Such is the case in societies where evolutionary theory is commonly accepted as an explanation for life. Fourthly, environments that foster atheistic belief are also likely to be pluralistic, where opportunities for reflective thought prevail (Saler & Ziegler, 2006).

Already we can notice that the combined conditions amenable to atheism, as outlined above, are rare and this may be part of the reason why atheists have usually been the minority. These conditions are found predominately in developed countries, mostly amongst intellectuals and the privileged elite (Saler & Ziegler, 2006). Such people are usually found in:

[P]luralistic, urban environments where natural selection is widely accepted as the agency responsible for the myriad forms of life known, where there are rewarding opportunities for employment in occupations that do not create anxiety related to survival, and where there is ample opportunity for reflective thought within a community of non-theistic others who are also given to reflective thought (Saler & Ziegler, 2006, p. 21).

The data support this theory as countries with the highest rates of organic atheism in the world tend to be in Northern Europe and Scandinavia, such as Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Finland, France, Germany, Belgium, Britain and the Netherlands (Martin, 2007, p.

56). In these societies, many of the aforementioned conditions exist because they are some of the most urbanised, wealthy, healthy, well-educated, pluralistic societies on earth (Martin, 2007, p. 57). They offer plenty of opportunities for reflective thought and have the highest levels of societal security and well-being (Martin, 2007, p. 57). Japan and South Korea could also be added to this list as they display the conditions amenable to atheism and feature high levels of organic atheism (Martin, 2007).

The importance of urbanisation in the development of atheism is stressed by Vetter and Green (1932) who conducted a study of atheists nearly 80 years ago in the United States of America. At that time, over 50 percent of the population of the United States resided in rural locations - living on farms and in small villages (Vetter & Green, 1932, p. 190). However, 77 percent of the atheists in the sample reported living in towns of a thousand people or more (Vetter & Green, 1932). Hence, “the old saying about God having made the country and man or the devil the town seems to be not entirely unfounded” (Vetter & Green, 1932, p. 190).

The conditions amenable to atheism can also be found in micro-level social environments. Barrett (2004) asserts that these conditions (low physical risk, rewarding employment, opportunities for reflective thought and plenty of non-theistic alternatives) are commonly found in academia and this assertion is backed by research that shows that the percentage of atheists among academics in the United States is far greater than that among the U.S. population at large (as cited in Saler & Ziegler, 2006, p. 21). Vitz (1999) would also add that atheists make up a significant portion of the governing class. Caldwell-Harris et al (2010) claim that part of this may also come down to the possibility that atheism is less stigmatised in these professions, due to the nature of these social environments.

Some of the environmental conditions conducive to disbelief also exist in New Zealand society and this may help explain the prominence of atheism within this country (Gendall & Healey, 2009). Following the implications of overseas literature, atheists are also more likely to be found in higher frequencies in New Zealand’s urban environments within academia and amongst privileged circles (Barret, 2004; Vitz, 1999). In such socio-economic enclaves, an evolutionary psychologist would claim that the theistic-consistent outputs from one’s cognitive agency detective device are less likely to be triggered (Saler & Ziegler, 2006).

It is important to note that this theory is probabilistic and not determinative (Saler & Ziegler, 2006). The existence of such conditions may increase the maximum likelihood of atheists existing in a particular environment, but their presence does not guarantee it. In

addition, the theory fails to explain differences in belief and disbelief amongst individuals in any one society that is amenable to atheism (Saler & Ziegler, 2006).

At the individual level, Saler and Ziegler (2006) propose that an inheritable biological factor may be involved in determining whether or not someone is an atheist. They maintain that the “...variations in the activation threshold or sensitivity of the agency detection module *could* stem from a genetic mechanism” (Saler & Ziegler, 2006, p. 25). This genetic mechanism is likely to be passed on by way of polygenic inheritance, featuring a number of small but cumulative effects by a large number of genes (Saler & Ziegler, 2006). Therefore, receptiveness to atheism could be determined by both environmental and biological factors (Saler & Ziegler, 2006).

For more insights into the determinants of atheism in an individual, we will now turn to the psychological factors that are thought to predispose one to disbelief.

2.6 Supernatural Compensators and the Position of Atheism

Bainbridge (2005) provides sociological explanations for the position of atheism which are rooted in the “Compensator” theory of religion. Bainbridge (2005) deduces that the absence of social obligations encourages disbelief in god(s). The “Compensator” theory states that humans live in a dangerous yet resource-abundant world and seek rewards and attempt to avoid costs (Bainbridge, 2005). More so than other animals, we use our minds, that are capable of language, investigation and planning to identify problems and find solutions (Bainbridge, 2005). Our mind also develops explanations that determine future actions which state how and why rewards may be acquired. Our minds also provide information on how and why costs are incurred (Bainbridge, 2005, p. 2).

As humans use cooperation to survive, such explanations are communicated from human to human via the use of language (Bainbridge, 2005). Explanations that are acquired through trial and error are grounded in personal experience (Bainbridge, 2005). Explanations that are exchanged, however, rely on trust, at least until we can put them to the test by way of experience and some of these explanations may not be immediately verifiable: “Some explanations, especially those that tell us how to obtain very general, valued and relatively unobtainable rewards, can be very difficult to evaluate” (Bainbridge, 2005, p. 3).

In situations where a desired reward is not available, explanations are accepted which imagine a reward (or a compensator), obtainable in the distant future or in another non-confirmable context (Bainbridge, 2005, p. 3). Compensators for these rewards are those

explanations that are not vulnerable to unequivocal assessment (Bainbridge, 2005, p. 3). “The most general compensators can be supported only by supernatural explanations” and “religion refers to systems of general compensators based on supernatural assumptions” (Bainbridge, 2005, p. 3).

Theism is costly to the individual, therefore, people will not act religiously unless it fulfils a number of their desired rewards (Bainbridge, 2005), such as explanation, comfort and social cohesion (Dennett, 2006; Rubin & Rubin, 2005). People who are healthy, affluent and unworried have less need for compensators (Bainbridge, 2005). Bainbridge hypothesises that if people had all of the rewards that they desired provided for them, they would be more likely to tend towards atheism (Bainbridge, 2005). This is perhaps another reason why members of the governing class, privileged elites, intellectuals and other highly educated individuals are over-represented among atheists and why nations with the highest levels of disbelief are also the wealthiest, healthiest, well educated, pluralistic and freest societies on earth (Martin, 2007, pp. 57, 300-313; Vetter & Green, 1932). However, with regard to whether or not theists are happier or less anxious than atheists, the literature seems to be divided (Jenks, 1987, as cited in Caldwell-Harris et al., 2010, p. 8; Herzbrun, 1999, p.2) and this ambiguity does little to support the “Compensator” theory, at least in this respect.

According to Bainbridge (2005), most people do not have all the rewards that they desire and, therefore, compensators are a necessity. Compensators can be further categorized into two groupings (Bainbridge, 2005, p. 4). *Primary compensators* are those compensations that replace rewards that people want for themselves (Bainbridge, 2005). For example, primary compensators are the ones active when a person is in danger or approaching death. Therefore, as a person becomes closer to their encounter with death, compensators based on supernatural assumptions are expected to become more salient. The findings that disbelief is more prevalent amongst the young (Bainbridge, 2005) and that apostasy and atheistic conversion commonly occur before an individual turns thirty (Caldwell-Harris et al., 2010, p. 8; Vetter & Green, 1932, p. 188), are consistent with this theory (Bainbridge, 2005). Thus, as Bainbridge (2005) explains: “Primary compensation reminds us of the aphorism that there are no atheists in foxholes” (p. 4).

Secondary compensators come into play when a person is unable to provide a socially obligated reward to another person who expects or desperately wants (or needs) the reward (Bainbridge, 2005). Belief in the divine compensates for rewards that a mother or sister or friend cannot realistically provide. Bainbridge (2005) gives us a good example:

[M]y great-grandmother sang hymns to her brother over the painful weeks when he was dying from typhoid. It would require a very dogmatic atheist in such a situation to say, "Well, I'm sorry there's no God or an afterlife, but we'll really remember you fondly after you've died" (pp. 4-5).

A reduced need for secondary compensators is likely to be amenable to atheistic thought in an individual (Bainbridge, 2005). For this reason, research has found that people with a lack of (or weakness in) social obligations are more likely to be atheists (Bainbridge, 2005; Jagodzinski & Greeley, 2004). For example, studies have found that women are less likely to be atheists than men (Bainbridge, 2005; Martin, 2007; Vetter & Green, 1932; Vitz, 1999). The proposed reason for this is that traditionally, and perhaps biologically, women in general, are more nurturing than men and they often have more direct social obligations for care-giving within the family (Bainbridge, 2005). "They [women] might have more occasion to resort to secondary compensation when they cannot materially provide the help or other rewards they are obligated to give" (Bainbridge, 2005, p. 5). Likewise, atheists are more likely to be found amongst those with few or no children, the alienated and the unsociable (Bainbridge, 2005; Martin, 2007). Kilpatrick (2005) found that those who display an avoidant attachment style (uncomfortable when close to others) are more likely to be atheists (as cited in Martin, 2007, p. 303) and this seems to conform with the claim that atheism is negatively related to the extensiveness of one's social obligations (Bainbridge, 2005).

2.7 Major Life Events and Theistic Certainty

A major part of this thesis will be exploring themes that are apparent from the life-histories of atheists in my sample, given that experiences are known to affect one's belief systems. What then can be said of the existing literature on major life events and their effects in relation to atheistic beliefs?

Sherkat (2008) proposes that pivotal life events weigh heavily in the process of informing beliefs about the existence or absence of divine beings. For example, the aging process is expected to have a positive impact on theistic certainty because, in the event of impending death, faith in a divine being offers the believer a considerable supernatural reward: existential certainty of a favourable afterlife (Sherkat, 2008).⁴

Having children is also negatively related to an atheistic worldview. The child-rearing process produces strong desires in parents, such as concern for the safety and health of their children and some of these desires go beyond what parents can realistically offer their

⁴ This is an example of a primary compensator: (Bainbridge, 2005).

children. Hence, “gods are quite useful for providing comforting explanations about the well-being of our future, and that of our children,” thereby also positively contributing to theistic certainty (Sherkat, 2008, p. 441).⁵

Not all life events, however, generate stronger faith in the existence of divine beings. Whilst it is true that some experiences will incline one towards a belief in a supernatural realm, others, will tend to push one away from faith. For example, widowhood may lead the sufferer to question the existence of the god(s) that would allow such human pain (Sherkat, 2008). In the same vein, the experience of struggle, torment and suffering in the event of a divorce may force the divorcee to adopt a more doubtful, sceptical and this-worldly approach to life, in light of their uncertainty and pain (Sherkat, 2008). Hence, such events tend to decrease theistic certainty and are often positively associated with the position of atheism (Sherkat, 2008).

The process of higher education also tends to be positively associated with atheism (Martin, 2007; Vitz, 1999; Willits & Funk, 1989; Orozak, 1989; Wuthnow & Mellinger, 1978) and numerous studies have emphasised such a correlation (Caldwell-Harris et al., 2010; Cooperman et al., 2010; Vetter & Green, 1932). In addition, elite universities in the United States have higher percentages of atheist students than do lower-ranked ones (Goldsen et al., 1960, as cited in Martin, 2007, p. 307). There are a number of possible reasons put forth for these findings. In both university and graduate professional environments, there may be a number of ‘theistic-thwarting’ environmental conditions present, as mentioned earlier (Barret, 2004). Higher education may also reduce the need for supernatural compensators as it generally provides many non-theistic explanations for life and the Universe (Willits & Funk, 1989; Wuthnow & Mellinger, 1978). Students may be more likely to come from affluent families and graduates may gain higher rewards such as high incomes in some countries, thereby also reducing the need for supernatural compensators. A major additional aspect will be the influence of higher education in promoting critical thought, increasing knowledge and intellectual capacity (Willits & Funk, 1989; Wuthnow & Mellinger, 1978).

When atheists are asked what made them lose faith in god(s), most emphasise intellectual reasons. For example, based on a sample of 42 atheists recruited from the American Atheist’s website, Caldwell-Harris et al (2010, pp. 7-8) found that the most common replies to this question are that religion didn’t make logical sense (47%) or that it didn’t fit in with Science (12%). Additionally, analytical and questioning personalities have been found to be major factors predisposing people towards and atheistic worldview

⁵ This is an example of a secondary compensator: (Bainbridge, 2005).

(Alidoosti, 2009). Logical consistency and scientific knowledge are generally developed with education, and the rejection of god(s) on an intellectual basis requires a certain level of skill in one or both of these aptitudes (Willits & Funk, 1989; Wuthnow & Mellinger, 1978). It is not surprising, therefore, that atheists have higher levels of education than believers do. Ironically, atheists also have higher levels of knowledge in comparative religions than believers, even when education is held constant (Cooperman et al., 2010).

2.8 God as a ‘Father Figure’

Earlier I noted that the emotions we feel during our childhood years are crucial to the type of worldview we form (Olthuis, 1985). It has been suggested that most people have a ‘God concept’ from an early age and that an individual’s relationship to that conception is conditioned by both pleasurable and painful experiences with important others, such as friends and family members (Rizzuto, as cited in Peteet, 2001). Parenting, therefore, plays a significant role in determining whether or not an individual will develop an atheistic perception of the world. Vetter and Green (1932) found that a large number of atheistic participants described themselves as unhappy in childhood and adolescence and this suggests that unpleasant upbringings can predispose someone to associate negative feelings with their ‘God concept.’

Freud often referred to theistic beliefs as childish illusions, projections of unconscious desires and wish-fulfilment fantasies (Luijpen, 1964; Vitz, 1999). He also believed that God could be imagined as the ultimate, exalted ‘father figure’ (Schilling, 1969; Vitz, 1999). Given this preceding notion of a ‘God concept,’ it is possible that the feelings that one has in their relationship with their primary ‘father figure’ could also be projected onto their deity. Freud himself remarked: “The personal attitude of man toward God depends on his attitude toward his human father and that it changes and evolves accordingly” (Luijpen, 1964, p. 210).

Vitz (1999) claims that atheism is a reaction towards losing one’s father by way of death or a troubled relationship. His theory states that disbelief in god(s) is generally made for non-rational, psychological reasons that are emotionally charged (Vitz, 1999). This hypothesis obviously contrasts with the research of Caldwell-Harris et al (2010, pp. 7-8) in which intellectual reasons were most often cited by research participants in explaining why they had lost faith. To his credit, Vitz (1999) provides biological data from a large number of prominent atheists who had non-existent, defective or extremely painful relationships with their fathers. Additionally, Ullman (1982) emphasised the influence of father absence in the process of apostasy in general. Furthermore, some of Vetter and Green’s (1932) findings are

consistent with Vitz (1999). In a survey of 350 members of the American Association for the Advancement of Atheism, Vetter and Green (1932) found that half of the younger atheists had lost one or both parents before the age of 20. They note that this is at least twice the normal mortality rate for that age group. In addition, 73 percent of the participants also reported feeling more congenial towards their mothers than with their fathers (Vetter & Green, 1932).

The intense suffering that comes with the loss of a father can also be interpreted as logically and emotionally incompatible with the child's conception of a 'good' god(s). "It may be that although the majority of individuals turn to religious explanations at the boundary conditions of life, a smaller number find belief in a personal, loving God impossible to square with events such as the death of a parent at so young an age" (Pargament, as cited in Peteet, 2001, p. 161).

2.9 Chapter Summary

This literature review has provided a discussion of what it means to be an atheist and it has identified some of the characteristics of those who might hold an atheistic position. As the working definition for this thesis, I have adopted the positive atheist (in the broadest sense): 'an individual who disbelieves in all gods.'

Atheists generally believe in the autonomy of ethics and refute claims that disbelief in god(s) implies moral relativism or nihilism. An individual's atheism usually coincides with a naturalistic materialist perception of the world. Without deities and often also without spirits, an afterlife or any other supernatural phenomena, the atheist behaves and interprets major life events differently to those who hold theistic views

Although in many societies it courts disapproval to be recognised as an atheist, disbelief seems to be growing in popularity. It is especially prominent in urbanised and developed societies with high living standards, such as Northern Europe and Scandinavia. The literature suggests that this is the case because in such environments, rewarding opportunities for employment in occupations that do not create anxiety related to survival exist. In addition, there is also ample opportunity for reflective thought within a community of non-theistic others, thereby also thwarting outputs from the HADD (Saler & Ziegler, 2006, p. 21). Such environments can also be found in New Zealand and, correspondingly, there is a significant group of atheists living here.

According to the literature reviewed, individuals may lean towards atheism for a number of factors including inheritable genes, analytical and/or questioning personalities,

education, being male, experiencing painful life events, and earning high incomes. Having few social responsibilities seems to predispose one towards disbelief because in such cases there is less need for supernatural compensators. The loss of a 'father figure' by way of death or a defective relationship also seems to be correlated with an atheistic world view.

Many of the findings discussed in this chapter have been contradictory. For example, Bainbridge suggests that those with more rewards in life require less supernatural compensators and are, therefore, more likely to become atheists. This is not supported by evidence of mixed views in the literature as to whether or not atheists are psychologically healthier than believers (Jenks, 1987, as cited in Caldwell-Harris et al., 2010, p. 8; Herzbrun, 1999, p.2).

In addition, much of the literature presented in this review remains hypothetical. The suggestions put forth are reasonable; however, there is often insufficient or simply no empirical research to support the hypotheses. In addition, many of the studies referred to rely heavily on survey research to investigate the social phenomenon of atheism. I also note that the current social science literature relating to atheism still relies on some very old references (such as Vetter & Green's widely cited 1932 study). Why does this field still rely on research conducted almost 80 years ago? In my view, it reflects the scarcity of research which explores the personal reflections and social lives of atheists.

There seems to be very little qualitative work being undertaken and as such, 'rich' description of atheists reflecting on their position and the impacts it has on their lives is missing from the literature. The scarcity of qualitative research in this field has also been emphasised by Small (2009, p.345) and Michel (2009, p.3). Because I wished to analyse local atheists' personal reflections on major life issues, and quantitative studies tend to produce impressionistic results in such an area, I chose to undertake an exploratory study, employing the use of in-depth interviews.

The literature review raises many interesting questions about atheism and atheist worldviews and my research took a special interest in several of these: Can particular past experience or certain environmental factors predispose one towards an atheistic worldview? How does the atheistic worldview influence moral perspectives and moral behaviour? Do atheists fear death, and if so, how do they deal with this fear? How do atheists imagine death and discuss death with others? Where do atheists turn for comfort in a time of suffering and how do they comfort others? How do atheists approach the problem of currently unexplained

phenomena? How do atheists explain their morality without god(s)? What provides an atheist with value, purpose or meaning in life?

In my next chapter (Chapter 3), I will explain the methodology I utilised in an attempt to ask and answer these questions. I explain the qualitative approach and justify my use of in-depth interviewing whilst describing the processes of participant recruitment and sample selection. A brief summary of sample characteristics is given and is followed by an overview of the data collection method. Ethical considerations are then discussed and a summary is offered at the conclusion of the chapter. In Chapter 4, the thematic results of my in-depth interviews are presented and quotations from local atheists are used to illustrate these findings. Chapter 5 interprets and discusses the significance of the results in light of previous research whilst Chapter 6 provides a conclusion for the thesis and offers some recommendations for future research.

Chapter 3

Methodology

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter I consider the research approach adopted for my study. The approach was based on a qualitative research methodology and used intensive, semi-structured interviews to gather data. As mentioned in the preceding chapter, very little qualitative research has been undertaken on the subject of atheism, hence ‘rich’ descriptions of the personal reflections, social lives and worldviews of atheists are scarce (Small, 2009, p.345; Michel, 2009, p.3).

The aim of my research was to complete an exploratory study that begins to address this gap in the literature, and contributes new information to the knowledge base. My research focuses on several unanswered questions about atheism which have been discussed in the previous chapter (Chapter 2, Section 2.9). The objectives of my research were to examine the Social Science research literature relating to the position of atheism, analyse local atheists’ personal reflections on major life issues and compare the study results with any existing research on the subject. Qualitative methods are suitable for these research objectives because they aim to elicit ‘thick’ descriptions from participants (Laimputtong & Ezzy, 2005, p. 2). Personal reflections on how and why one becomes an atheist, participants’ experiences with religion, meaning in life and the problems of death and the unexplained are extremely complex. As a corollary, quantitative methods such as surveys are less suitable for exploring these themes.

This chapter is organised as follows: Section 3.2 explains the qualitative approach and why it was used in this study; Section 3.3 describes how in-depth interviews were used as a technique in this study to provide ‘rich’ and ‘thick’ descriptive data; Section 3.4 explains how participant recruitment and sample selection was carried out; Section 3.5 provides descriptions of the sample characteristics; Section 3.6 addresses the data collection process; Section 3.7 outlines ethical considerations associated with the study; and Section 3.8 explains the data analysis process in detail.

3.2 The Qualitative Approach

Recent trends in social research have challenged the positivist position that there is a fixed, single, measurable reality ‘out there’ ready to be captured (Merriam, 2002; Vallance,

2002), and there is no longer a dominant social scientific paradigm which consists of a single path towards understanding (Davidson & Tolich, 1999).

Social Science researchers should choose the epistemological position and techniques that best suit their intended research objectives (Laimputtong & Ezzy, 2005; Vallance, 2002). My objective was to complement existing literature on atheism by analysing Christchurch-based atheists' personal reflections on major life issues and exploring what was involved in the development of their atheistic worldview. For the purposes of my research, an interpretive, qualitative approach that looked to "understand and describe meaningful social action" (Davidson & Tolich, 1999, p. 27) was judged best suited to satisfy this objective.

Because previous qualitative studies in this area are rare, I took an exploratory approach to social enquiry. Qualitative approaches are open towards the objects of study and hence they are more capable of performing exploratory tasks than quantitative studies that tend to rest on the testing of predetermined hypotheses (Flick, 2006).

Qualitative research, "aims to elicit the contextualised nature of experience and action, and attempts to generate analyses that are detailed, 'thick', and integrative (in the sense of relating individual events and interpretations to larger meaning systems and patterns)" (Laimputtong & Ezzy, 2005, p. 2). Qualitative methods consider "learning how individuals interact with their social world" and finding "the meaning it has for them" (Merriam, 2002, p. 4). In-depth interviewing is therefore an important method used to gain access to individual's feelings, interpretations and meanings. However, because in-depth interviewing is time consuming, the number of responses that may be obtained with this method is limited.

3.3 In-Depth Interviews

I decided to explore the personal views of atheists by employing the technique of in-depth interviewing. The interview experience was directed towards understanding the informants' perspectives on their life experiences. These perspectives were obtained by way of capturing informants' expressions in their own words.

Interviews were conducted face-to-face and used open-ended questions. Open-ended questions cannot be answered with a simple "yes" or "no" answer, or with a specific piece of information. Open-ended questions give the interviewee scope to reveal what they believe is the most appropriate information (Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured style. Interviews are said to be semi-structured when the interviewer uses predetermined questions as a guide for the interview but

is free to deviate from that guide. For example, a semi-structured interview style would allow an interviewer to probe the participant for further information regarding a response to a predetermined or guided question (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). I utilised this technique frequently in the course of the data collection process in order to obtain relevant information.

The semi-structured interviewing style provided for a more flexible and informal type of interview. Semi-structured interviews allows informants to express their own perceptions in a language that is familiar to them without having to respond with, or chose from, prescribed answers (Sarantakos, 2005). A continuous and flexible style of interview helps the informant to feel, act and respond naturally (Bruederle, 2010). I believe that the semi-structured approach that I used helped to make my respondents feel more relaxed in the interview situation. This is crucial in obtaining data when the interviewee is answering questions relating to the personal and often sensitive subjects of death, spirituality, familial relationships and suffering. At the conclusion of the interviews, many of the participants mentioned that they had enjoyed the experience of participating in the research process. (Interestingly enough, Small (2009, p.336) found that atheists, more so than religious participants, expressed appreciation with regards to the chance that they were given to share their perspectives).

3.4 Participant Recruitment and Sample Selection

Participant recruitment and sample selection of Christchurch-based atheists were carried out between the months of July and November, 2010. Potential participants were recruited using the snowball (or chain) sampling method. This is where an initial group of respondents is asked to suggest others who may be willing to participate in the research (Laimputtong & Ezzy, 2005). By way of email correspondence, I asked this initial group of potential participants to inform friends and family members (who might fit the research profile) to contact me if they were interested in participating in the study. This method is useful when the people are difficult to approach directly, as was the case with my research. For example, potential participants may be difficult to approach directly because of low avowal rates due to the social undesirability of atheism, as mentioned in the literature review (see Chapter 2, Section 2.3).

Unfortunately, the snowball sampling method fails to produce random recruitment and hence it does not necessarily deliver an even distribution of cases across different participant characteristics (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003, p. 55). Considering this insufficiency and the small size of my sample, numeric results from my study should not be used to make

inferences about larger populations of atheists. However, the aim of my work was not to test quantifiable, pre-determined hypotheses but rather to complete an exploratory, qualitative study. Hence, a random selection of participants was not required and the selected methodology proved to be excellent with regards to the purposes of my thesis.

To obtain the initial group of respondents, signs advertising for research participants were posted on the Lincoln University Campus and at events where atheists were expected to attend (see Appendix A). One such event was when the prominent biologist and atheist Richard Dawkins spoke at the Christchurch Town Hall in 2010.

Prospective interviewees were men and women aged 18 years or older residing in the wider Christchurch area at the time of my study. After responding to my adverts, these potential interviewees were emailed with the general content, purpose and confidentiality details of the interview process (see Appendix B). The selected participants were asked whether or not they fitted my working definition of an 'atheist' (see Chapter 2, Section 2.2). Prospective interviewees had to be atheists in the broadest sense by way of a positive statement of disbelief. Willing participants who qualified for the study were asked politely if they would be willing to participate. It was tactfully explained to those who did not meet the above criteria, why they would not be included in the study sample.

The recruitment process was more successful than anticipated, demonstrating a willingness on the part of these atheists to talk about their position. With regards to the sample size of the interviews, the following passage can be referred to: "When the researcher is satisfied that the data are rich enough and cover enough of the dimensions they are interested in, then the sample is large enough" (Laimputtong & Ezzy, 2005, p. 49). I followed the lead of other 'qualitative' and 'exploratory' studies and recruited until such time as no significant new themes emerged in the data. Because I saw significant repetition in the answers offered by the 12 interviewees, the sample size did not need to increase beyond this. For example, when I asked about what the participants believed happened to an individual after death, participants consistently repeated that their entire experience of existence would end at the point of their physical passing. Considering the limited resources of this study, the sample size was considered large enough to attain thematic saturation as strong, consistent themes had emerged by the end of the data collection period. Before each interview commenced, the participant was presented with an information letter (Appendix C) and a consent form (Appendix D).

3.5 Sample Characteristics

I conducted 12 interviews inclusive of one preliminary trial interview. The age of participants in the study ranged between 19 and 62 years. Because of the snowball recruitment method utilised and the location of most of the research participant advertisements, many interviewees had an affiliation with Lincoln University by way of work or study. As mentioned in Section 3.4, the snowball sampling technique does not necessarily deliver an even distribution of cases across different participant characteristics (Bruederle, 2010, p. 55). Four participants were female and eight were male. The higher proportion of male participants is consistent with the literature which claims that males are much more likely to be atheists than females (Bainbridge, 2005; Martin, 2007; Vetter & Green, 1932; Vitz, 1999). Two of the participants were international students. One originated from China and the other one from Iran. One student had married and immigrated to New Zealand from the United States. The remaining nine participants were all New Zealand born and raised.

3.6 Data Collection

The preliminary trial interview took place on May 27th, 2010 whereas the remaining interviews were conducted between September 18th, 2010 and November 19th, 2010. Following the analysis of data obtained in the preliminary interview, alterations were made to the interview schedule so that the data obtained was compatible with my research objectives, and could be acquired in a way that was comfortable for interviewees. Participants were given the choice of preference between public cafes and households for the location of the interview. All but one participant consented to the digital voice-recording of the interview, the exception being a respondent who feared potential persecution. The interview length ranged from 52 to 175 minutes with an average length of each interview was 79 minutes. These long interviews provided rich and descriptive data with plenty of narratives. The interviews were semi-structured and based on an interview guide with open-ended questions (see Appendix E) in which there was flexibility in the ordering of the questions. The questions were designed to elicit information from the participants that revealed their reflections on major life issues, thereby addressing my research questions outlined in the previous chapter.

The interview guide was divided into six sections. The questions in each section were designed to work from broad to narrow in sequential order, asking about the ‘general’ before the ‘specific.’ The first section aimed to develop an understanding of the individual’s life situation. Questions were directed at eliciting the age, occupation, upbringing, education and a brief overview of the life story of each participant. Asking ‘straightforward’ questions at the

beginning was a way to encourage interviewees to feel comfortable and thereby prepare them for the more complex and personal questions which followed. The second section focused on the participants' reflections on suffering. These questions looked at how atheists attempt to comfort themselves in times of suffering and if and how they try to console significant others who suffer. The third set of questions was designed to explore the participants' thoughts on death. I asked participants what they believe happens to an individual after they die, whether or not they fear death or the process of dying and how they talk about death with other people. The fourth section of the interview schedule was concerned with how the problem of unexplained phenomena was approached by the interviewee. A fifth set of questions asked about how morality is justified without belief in god(s) and what the main tenets of the interviewees' moral systems were. The final question was concerned with the possibility of a purpose in life without belief in god(s) and probed to obtain examples of things in participants' lives that provided them with value or meaning. These interview questions were designed specifically to match my research questions as they are listed in the previous chapter (see Chapter 2, Section 2.9). The responses to all of these interview questions are presented in Chapter 4.

Although the questions in the interview guide were grouped into different sections and in a particular order, it was only used as a guide and at many times the interviews did not follow this prescribed plan. Questions evolved around the interviewees' responses and were followed up with appropriate probing rather than relying completely on the interview guide. At all times I attempted to maintain the flow of conversation, redirecting when necessary in order to ascertain the most relevant data for my study.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

This research was conducted according to Lincoln University ethical guidelines at all times. The sample selection, participant recruitment, data collection, analysis and presentation of results from the study adhered to these ethical standards. The study was reviewed and approved by the Lincoln University Ethics Committee in May, 2010.

As explained in Section 3.4, participation in the study was based on informed consent. The use of pseudonyms ensured the anonymity of participants throughout the research process. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study, including withdrawal of any information they had provided by the 1st December 2010. They were also given 3-4 days from the date of first contact to consider their possible involvement in the study before any further contact was made.

Once the participants had agreed to participate, an interview time and location was arranged at their convenience. The participant was then provided with an information sheet that reiterated the details of the email correspondence and also included the following additions: written consent would be required to participate in the project; interview data would be number coded for data entry; data recording would be stored safely in lockers located at Lincoln University with no available access to the public; consent forms would be stored separately in a secure location at Lincoln University; and the results of the research would appear only in aggregate form in order to maintain anonymity.

Before interviews commenced, participants were informed that they had the right to decline to answer any questions. In anticipation of possible psychological risks, contact details of counsellors and chaplains were to be made available during interviews if needed or requested by the interview participants. At all times, I was conscious of any verbal or non-verbal communication which might indicate that the respondent was under stress. In such a case, I would have moved away from that question topic; however, this did not happen at any time during the data collection process.

With the interviewee's consent (and with the exception of one respondent referred to in Section 3.6), interviews were transcribed verbatim from digital voice recordings. The participants were informed and given the right to review any transcripts and exclude any information from the transcript if they so desired, provided any deletions were completed before 1st December 2010. However, no participants asked to pursue this right.

3.8 Data Analysis

Data analysis had already begun part way through the data collection process. As indicated in Section 3.6, upon completion of the first preliminary trial interview, the transcription was screened to assess the compatibility of the interview guide with my research requirements. Following the implementation of this trial, the sequence of the existing questions changed with the goal of ensuring that respondents felt more comfortable in responding. In addition, some superfluous questions that were not directly related to my research objectives were removed. These related to the areas of atheist groups and the social desirability of atheism. Two questions were added to the amended interview guide that asked for the participants' ages and vocations. The amended interview guide, as described in Section 3.7, was used to carry out the remaining 11 interviews (see Appendix E). Upon completion of the interview process, the interview data became the subject matter of an in-depth analysis.

The interview data were transcribed into a computer document format using the recordings from an Olympus DSS player. From here I coded and catalogued emergent themes and concepts and analysed them for use in regards to my research aims and objectives.

Coding was achieved without the assistance of computer qualitative analysis data software such as NVIVO. Rather, the data were coded by reading each transcription and demarcating segments within it. Each research question was explored separately in the analysis. Segments of transcriptions were read until text relevant to each specific research question was identified. For each research question, text was identified and searched for repeating ideas. Repeating ideas are found when different participants use words, phrases and narratives in order to express similar concepts (Bruderle, 2010, p. 37). When groups of repeating ideas were found to have something in common they then formed a theme. “A theme is an implicit topic that organises a group of repeating ideas” (Bruderle, 2010, p. 38). Themes are also known as recurring regularities (Miles & Huberman, 1994) and can form the bases of theoretical constructs (Bruderle, 2010, p. 39). Thematic coding was aided by the concepts and questions that had already formed in my literature review. For example, concepts such as ‘supernatural compensators,’ ‘father figures’ and ‘naturalistic materialism’ were used in the coding of themes. There were, however, some surprises when my results occasionally seemed to contradict the existing literature (see Chapter 5), and in such cases these codes were not applicable. I explore the major themes identified in the analysis process with the support of direct quotations from interview data in Chapter 4.

3.9 Chapter Summary

The qualitative approach allowed me to provide rich descriptions of the lives of atheists that until now had been largely missing from the academic literature. Because qualitative studies in this area are scarce (Small, 2009, p.345; Michel, 2009, p.3), an exploratory social enquiry was undertaken. Twelve Christchurch-based atheists participated in semi-structured, in-depth interviews and allowed me to explore their perspectives on major life issues such as death, fear, suffering, unexplained phenomena and finding meaning in life. The consecutive interview transcription and coding process enabled me to conduct an in-depth analysis of the data. Demarcated segments of transcriptions containing text relevant to research questions were searched for repeating ideas. Consequently, major themes were identified and these are presented in the following chapter.

Chapter 4

Results

4.1 Introduction

Using in-depth interviews, this study aimed to explore Christchurch-based, avowed atheists' personal reflections on major life issues. Quotations from local atheists were used to illustrate the findings and where quotations have been used, pseudonyms consistent with the gender of respondents have been employed in order to ensure anonymity. The links between my thematic results and the existing literature will be discussed in the following chapter, Chapter 5.

This chapter is organised into seven sections. A profile of the atheists who participated in the study is presented in the first section and the remaining six sections are organised by theme: factors that may predispose one towards an atheistic worldview; the links between one's atheism and their sense of morality; how the atheist approaches the major life challenges of suffering, death and unexplained phenomena respectively; and the meaning-making process. A summary of the thematic results is then presented.

4.2 Profile of Atheist Participants

I conducted twelve interviews inclusive of one preliminary trial interview. All of the interviews were conducted on an individual basis. Therefore, twelve atheists in total were involved in the study. Four participants were female and eight were male.

A wide range of age groups was represented in the study. The youngest participant was nineteen years old and the eldest was sixty-two. Four participants were in their twenties, three were in their thirties, one interviewee was forty, three were in their fifties and one participant was sixty-two.

At the time of the interview, five of the twelve interviewees were married, two participants had been married but were now divorced and the remaining five interviewees had never been married. Five participants (three of whom were still married) had children whilst the remaining seven participants had no children.

Because of the snowball recruitment method utilised and the location of most of the participant recruitment advertisements, most participants had an affiliation with Lincoln University by way of work or study. Eight of the twelve participants were students (five were

postgraduates and three were studying at the undergraduate level). The remaining four participants were in paid employment: two were University Lecturers, one worked in the hospitality industry and one was an information-technology consultant.

With regards to the nationality of participants, nine were New Zealand born. One participant had immigrated to New Zealand from the United States to start her PhD and eventually married a local. The American immigrant and the nine New Zealand-born participants had in common that their major experiences with belief in God were framed by the Christian tradition. In fact, one of the atheists who participated in my study (David) still identified himself as a Christian atheist. David is a long standing member of a Presbyterian church, he defines his concept of ‘God’ in terms of human love and ‘terrestrial’ beauty, and he openly shares his disbelief in a supernatural god with other members of the congregation:

So what is my faith? Well it is not “pretending to believe things that I can’t believe” as I have heard faith described... Underpinning it all is love – the love I receive, the love I try to give and the love I too often fail to give. The love that understands, the love that forgives, the love that cares, the love that challenges, the love that corrects, the love that inspires, the love that lets me relax. That love is my god. (David)

Thus this reaffirms that one may be religious, yet still an atheist.

The remaining interviewees, who were both international students, provided two very unique and interesting cases of atheism. They had experienced completely different upbringings. One was from the Peoples Republic of China, which has a history of government-promoted atheist advertising which can be seen as a form of ‘coercive atheism,’ as mentioned in Chapter 2, Section 2.2 (Harris & Woo, 2010; Lavender, 2009; Southerland et al., 2001). The student, “Matthew”, mentioned that his atheistic worldview was supported by his family and developed within the school system. This differs from the childhood experiences expressed by all of the other participants.

Because atheism is very common in China, sometimes these religious guys would look very weird. From when I was educated starting at 6 years old in our formal school there was no such courses about religious things. We think that it is some kind of superstition. People think that that particular view is very stupid. (Matthew)

The other student was Iranian. In contrast to China, Iran is an Islamic state based on a theocratic constitution (Lavender, 2009; Steinitz, 1980). Some may interpret this as an example of ‘coercive theism’ (see Chapter 2, Section 2.2). In contrast to all of the other participants, the Iranian atheist kept his disbelief a secret even when he was in New Zealand.

He declined to have his interview recorded for fear of potential persecution by Muslims living in both New Zealand and Iran.

I know of friends who have lost their jobs because of questionable beliefs. People have died in my country for being suspected as atheists. (Hussein)

The interview length ranged from 52 to 175 minutes and the average length of each interview was 79 minutes. These long interviews revealed a willingness on the part of participants to talk freely about their atheist position, providing rich and descriptive data. At the conclusion of their interviews, many of the participants mentioned that they had enjoyed the experience of participating in the research process.

4.3 Determinants of Disbelief

Many participants in my study had been exposed to the concept of god(s) prior to their adoption of the atheistic worldview. Often this exposure to the concept of god(s) was made by way of religion, introduced in childhood. With the exception of the Chinese participant, all of my participants had inherited (or were at least offered) a theistic worldview in childhood or adolescence. As mentioned in Section 4.2, these experiences with religion were predominately Christian (Catholic and/or Protestant). This applied to all nine of the New Zealand born participants and the one immigrant from the United States. The Iranian was brought up in a culture dominated by Islam whereas the Chinese student's atheism was encouraged by his peers and teachers. With the exception of the Chinese student, participants had to dismantle their theistic worldviews in order for their atheism to develop.

The following sub-sections (4.3.1 to 4.3.4) explore themes within the life-stories of atheists that can be seen to be contributing factors on their journeys toward disbelief. These contributing factors can fall into two major categories: significant life-event that changed their view of the world and more general environmental circumstances that have predisposed them towards an atheistic worldview.

4.3.1 A Gradual Process

Participants found it difficult to articulate specific past experiences that swayed them towards an atheistic worldview. With the exception of two participants, one-off and life-changing events prompting a radical change in their worldview were not expressed. Rather, adopting atheism was seen to be the final step in a long and gradual process of deliberation. As part of this process, atheists had to dismantle a number of previously held theistic beliefs at different steps along the way. Often these theistic beliefs were well entrenched and layered

with emotion, therefore, much consideration and emotional processing was required in the process of adopting an atheistic position. Peter, who was raised as a Jehovah's Witness, articulated this very well:

It's not like a light switch. It was sort of more of a 'oh there is not necessarily a God' and then 'so there is not necessarily an afterlife.' You have been brought up your entire life up to that point to believe in something. Throughout my teenage years it became a stronger agnosticism and then atheism. It took until the time I was about nineteen or twenty until I identified with disbelief. It was a gradual process. (Peter)

Jenny came to the conclusion that the process of adopting atheism takes a long time because the topic of religion is rarely discussed in many social circles. Hence, whether or not god(s) exists is a question that rarely comes to mind.

It was a very gradual process and at times you don't even think about it at all and I guess it depends on who you mix with. I mean religion is not one of those things that is talked about. (Jenny)

In most cases, the gradual shift from theistic belief to positive atheism (or active disbelief) included a significant period of agnosticism. This agnosticism refers to a transitional state where the participant feels uncertain about the existence of god(s) introduced to them in childhood. Most of the participants spent many years in this situation. Peter was quoted earlier explaining that during his teenage years his agnosticism grew stronger until he reached a point in his late teens when he eventually declared himself as a positive atheist using a statement that indicated active disbelief (see Chapter 2, Section 2.2). Denis recalled a similar experience in his teenage years.

Throughout the High School years I guess I was kind of agnostic. I didn't really care. I just thought the whole religious thing was just nuts. (Denis)

Nick was raised as a Christian Baptist and when he started exploring the possibility that God may not exist, he experienced feelings of guilt. However, Nick managed to use his reason in order to help alleviate such feelings.

The first time I stopped praying I felt guilty but later on I thought 'forget about it.' I have no rational reason to believe these things and if He [God] is out there then He understands. I would pray "God, I don't know if you are out there, there are no signs of your existence so surely you cannot fault me for not believing!" Surely God can't fault me for being human. Why would he be jealous? There was a lot of relief after I stopped believing. (Nick)

Jenny expressed that she did not enjoy the uncertainty that came with her period of agnosticism: “It was one of those things that I couldn’t go on living my life without actually making a conscious decision about” (Jenny). Nick’s agnosticism also caused him anxiety because in this phase he experienced a large amount of uncertainty regarding his residual beliefs in an afterlife.

When I was agnostic I had even less certainty about death. Have I been good enough? Is it non-existence or is it something else? Is it reincarnation? Whereas with atheism most would say they are reasonably certain about non-existence. That doesn’t sound too bad to me! (Nick)

The gradual process of becoming an atheist often lasted in excess of ten years and began in late childhood or adolescence when theistic thoughts would often linger in the minds of these ‘questioning’ young people. Nick started questioning the existence of God in high school but would still continue to pray at dinner and before bed, “just in case God was listening” (Nick). Some children learned to apply their critical attitude towards theism into games, jokes and tests. Bradley remembered taunting and daring the Devil as a child in search of a proof that ‘He’ did not exist.

I remember when I was at Primary School and I would stay up all night challenging Satan to come out of the floor and grab me. He never did. (Bradley)

Peter decided to start his own religious cult in order to mock religion. He would manipulate his friends by rewarding loyalty to the cult by way of praise and promotional ranks and punishing unfaithfulness with social ostracism. His order became rather successful.

Primary School was about the time I realised that this religion stuff was ‘all shit’ and I made up my own cult. I got quite a good following. It’s actually quite easy. I got a lot of chocolate milk out of it! People fall for it! They will believe anything you tell them as long as the rest of the group does too. (Peter)

As part of the gradual process of adopting atheism, participants encountered significant barriers when dismantling theistic worldviews. These barriers further slowed their gradual transition to atheism and seemed to arise for participants when they were making their atheism known in action as well as in conviction. For example, Elle’s father was a staunch Catholic at times during her upbringing and was portrayed by her as an “on-again, off-again religious fanatic” (Elle). Described as a somewhat erratic character, Elle’s father fluctuated between periods of irreligiousness and devout Catholicism. Elle claimed that once when he found literature in her room that featured atheistic themes, he beat her severely and yelled

“this is against God! This is not right!” At that time, Elle was at a Catholic Secondary School in the United States and also experienced punishment from her teachers for her non-compliance with religious customs.

There's this special day [in Catholic tradition] and you have to go and stare at the body of Christ. We have this little chapel in school. A teacher volunteered me to go and I thought (being respectful and nice) I will decline because I don't believe in it. It turned out that I had to write a report whilst the rest of the class got to go. This was a punishment! I thought about it and you know I thought 'If I believed in God I wouldn't be in trouble.' I wouldn't have had these problems if I believed in God. But I didn't want to keep pretending with these people. My personal opinion was that I was being more respectful by not doing it. (Elle)

In addition, Elle perceived that she experienced alienation from her peers because of her growing disbelief. This was despite the fact that she believed most people at the school did not follow the religious behavioural standards associated with devout Catholicism.

I found out by the end of High School that so many of these people who said they were Catholic and said they followed the strict Catholic rules weren't. I mean it is High School and people are having sex, doing drugs and drinking. For me, well I was doing all of these things and I'm not even going to pretend that I'm Catholic. Why was everyone else there pretending? It made it hard because I didn't have many friends because of that. I was alienated by my disbelief and my defiance a little bit. People thought it was weird and they didn't want to hang out with 'the weird girl.' (Elle)

4.3.1.1 Exceptions

There were two exceptions to this theme of a gradual transition. Matthew was raised as an atheist in China and had very little exposure to religion throughout his life. More dramatically, Catherine (raised as a Catholic) experienced a one-off event in life that made her feel sure about the non-existence of God. Catherine's outlook changed so rapidly that she described her experience as a “light on the road to Damascus.” Ironically, Catherine is referring here to a New Testament passage in which Paul the apostle (then known as Saul) was converted instantly to the Christian faith ("Acts 9: 3-9,"). According to the fable, Saul was travelling on the road to Damascus to arrest Christians when he was confronted by a vision of the risen Christ. He fell off his horse, was blinded for a number of days and repented to God ("Acts 9: 3-9,"). In a similar vein, Catherine was a postal worker whilst she was at University and she was biking along a country road when she experienced her ‘reverse epiphany.’ She was not blinded, nor did she fall off her bike, but the change in Catherine's outlook was just as rapid as Paul's conversion. Her experience led her to reject the prospect of

God. She had been reading a philosophical novel before the incident that had made her aware of the possibility that God might not exist.

I had been reading a book about computers. They kept making bigger and bigger computers and it kept taking in all of the knowledge from the others. The Universe was firing down from entropy and the computer was gathering all of this information about all the consciousnesses of all the life forms. As the final star burnt out, its magic went into the computer and the computer said "Let there be light," and there was light. Then it all started again. I thought that that was real cool and as I was thinking about it on this bike ride I suddenly thought 'I don't have to believe in all of this crap' [Theism]. That was that: I became an atheist. (Catherine)

4.3.2 Inconsistency in Religion

Theistic belief does not necessarily imply adherence to a particular religion, but the vast majority of images, stories, songs and conceptions we have of god(s) have been presented to us by way of religion. Hence, religious institutions have in many ways become responsible for the representation of god(s). When religion is then seen by its followers to fail them by being inconsistent, theistic belief is often called into question as well.

Inconsistency can emerge from both within and between religious denominations. Participants who encountered inconsistencies found that they lost respect for the religion which had defined their concept of god(s). Such experiences were cited by participants as contributing factors in the dismantling of their theistic beliefs and the subsequent formation of their atheistic worldviews. This theme of inconsistencies in religion as a contributing factor to the adoption of atheism was identified as a strong one. There were no 'dissenting' or 'opposing' views, although some participants did not offer an opinion on the subject.

4.3.2.1 Religious texts

Religious texts are used by adherents of a particular religion to help define the concept of god(s). Perceived logical inconsistencies and contradictions found within religious texts can lead followers of religions to question the validity of these scriptures and subsequently, the existence of the god(s) that these texts are said to represent. Nick found that what he saw as contradictions in the Bible propelled him towards atheism.

I don't believe in God largely because of the contradictions in the Bible. For example, He is supposed to love us but He will send us off to Hell. If He loves us all and He is all-powerful then why is there suffering? That 'He is testing us' is not a valid reason nor is it a valid reason to explain dinosaur fossils away. (Nick)

Jenny found that contradictions from both within and between religious texts led her to believe that the scriptures were not divinely inspired, thereby lowering her respect for religion.

All of these religions are based on man-made interpretations. The Bible and the Koran were all written by Man. Apparently they were inspired by God but Man as we know is very faulty. So many people will pick out bits from the Bible or the Koran. The Koran is full of contradictions. The Bible is full of contradictions. But people just select out what they want and do so without even saying that this has been translated from at least one language into another language. They [religious texts] have been written by a lot of different people and a lot of them don't even agree with one another. Instead of actually questioning it, they [religious leaders] just pick out what they want and they use that to do what they want. (Jenny)

Peter found the Biblical story of the Great Flood (Fahy, 2005, 26 Feb) to be logically inconsistent with the doctrine of a benevolent and wise or omniscient God. The Great Flood is recorded in the Jewish Torah, the Christian Bible, the Koran and Mesopotamian myth (Fahy, 2005, 26 Feb; Wolters, 1983). It describes God's plot to eradicate human immorality, corruption and violence from the Earth (Fahy, 2005, 26 Feb). God creates a flood to destroy the entire human race with the exception of one virtuous man (Noah) and his extended family (Fahy, 2005, 26 Feb; Wolters, 1983). Noah is instructed to build an ark in order to keep his extended family safe from the flood (Fahy, 2005, 26 Feb; Wolters, 1983). He takes with him pairs (male and female) of all types of animals (both 'clean' and 'unclean' types according to religious law) onto the ark in order that the different species survive (Fahy, 2005, 26 Feb; Wolters, 1983). The remaining humans and animals are left to die in the flood (Fahy, 2005, 26 Feb). At a Church Summer Camp, Peter questioned both the humaneness and rationality of God's alleged intervention. (He also felt somewhat bitter that he had been taught such religious stories that he now believed to be un-true).

I remember at Summer Camp, they were telling me the story of Noah's ark. I remember thinking: 'Why did God have to kill them in such an awful way? Why did he have to kill the animals too? Couldn't he just have shot the people?' I remember asking a person that question in the scripture group. I guess I was expecting some sort of an answer but instead he just got incredibly angry at me. I was nine and a half at this time. When they got angry at me it just sort of dawned on me that maybe he just didn't know or maybe that he is angry because it is all a load of horseshit. It was about this time, about the end of primary school that I realised that this is all shit. (Peter)

4.3.2.2 The diversity of religion

Participants' robust knowledge of the many different belief systems which make universal truth claims seemed incongruent with the possibility that god(s) had revealed truth to any one of these religions. Alexander's adoption of the atheistic worldview occurred after he had spent some time travelling in India where he witnessed a number of different religious groups. These religions all had large numbers of devout followers and they co-existed in close proximity to other religious groups.

I would go to towns in India and you could see the Muslim area, the Christian area, the Hindu area and what I saw was organised religion here, organised religion there and organised religion there. I didn't see much difference in spirituality or behaviour. I just saw different forms of organised religion. (Alexander)

Alexander was bewildered by the many varieties of theistic belief present in India and how diverse they all were. The diversity of belief systems seemed to be incongruent with the possibility that god(s) had revealed truth to any one of these religions and this consideration impacted upon Alexander so much that he decided to discard theistic belief all together.

I remember a friend had came up to me and asked me; "What did you get from the trip?" I replied, "The main thing is that I don't believe in God anymore." When I came back that was just how I felt. The catalyst was seeing people behaving in a particular way, their take on deities and life and the importance of it in how they conducted themselves. After six months in India I just couldn't believe in this idea of God, looking down on us all because they all believe something so different. (Alexander)

Jenny expressed similar sentiments to Alexander, and for her, these thoughts had started at a young age.

Back when I was in my late teens and early twenties, I went through the process of going to different churches. I think the main question for me was that all religions think they are 'right' and how can that possibly be? How can one possibly be right at the expense of others? Therefore, if one is not right, can any of them be right? I actually think I started thinking this when I was about twelve. I remember we had religious education in schools when I was in Form One or Form Two and I'm not sure what I thought then but I have vague recollections of thinking even at that stage 'what about Buddhists?' But we didn't have the opportunity to follow the research up. Like how would go about finding out something about Buddhists without technology such as the internet and so on? (Jenny)

4.3.2.3 The behaviour of “Religious People”

Participants indicated that when the actions of “Religious People” were perceived to be inconsistent with the teachings of their religion, or with what they thought respectable behaviour to be, they themselves became less interested in theism. In a preceding quotation (Section 4.3.2.1), it was not just Peter’s apparent discovery of a logical inconsistency in the Bible that made him believe that the Christian Faith was “all shit” (Peter). It was also the religious leader’s inability to explain and his defensive stance on the issue which prompted Peter to lessen his regard for religion.

I learned just how vicious they could get if I asked any questions. How they could be so overly nice and welcoming and then turn so quickly when challenged. (Peter)

Elle didn’t agree with the way that “Religious People” portrayed and treated women and children. She gave the limited civil rights granted to women in some contemporary Islamic states and in medieval Europe as an example: “They [women] always get the short end of the stick” (Elle). The indoctrination of children, in Elle’s view, was a form of “brainwashing” and she disliked “the fear that they [religious institutions] put into children” by promoting the doctrines of sin, judgement, death and punishment (Elle).

Jenny provided a number of examples that represented her disappointment with the behaviour of “Religious People.” For example, Jenny first refers to the hypocrisy and aggressiveness of a Muslim man (although accepting hearsay as evidence of his alleged misbehaviour). She mentions a ‘Draw Muhammad Day’ in the following quotation. (The ‘Draw Muhammad Day’ was an organised event in Christchurch in which attendees gathered in public places to sketch caricatures of the revered prophet. The aim of the event is to promote freedom of speech and press following controversial events overseas. To put this event into perspective, depicting Allah (God) or His prophet in any form is strictly forbidden in Islamic law. It is often associated with severe punishment in Islamic countries and many Muslims find it very offensive).

Here is an example I heard the other day about a guy that was a Muslim. He doesn’t go to the Mosque, he drinks alcohol and he probably womanises. He was saying that someone had a ‘Draw Muhammad Day’ and apparently he was talking to his office mates about it and he was saying that he would kill for Allah. This doesn’t make sense to me. If you believe in a religion then you should believe in the rules and live by the values of that religion. However, to not do that but then be prepared to go and kill another human-being in the name of that religion doesn’t make any sense to me at all. (Jenny)

Bradley was of the opinion that religious activity is often inconsistent with what he deemed to be sane and respectable behaviour. He cited the following incident as a contributing factor to his atheistic stance.

When I was about thirteen my brother joined the youth group and became very 'hardcore' about religion. He came back one day after a concert with his religious group and he said, "Oh yeah, everyone was speaking in tongues." It was like they were taking some serious drugs and just 'tripping out' on this 'Holy Spirit' stuff. (Bradley)

4.3.2.4 Restrictions associated with religious observance

Participants viewed the values represented in the behaviour of "Religious People" as life-denying and tediously restrictive. Jenny's experience with her family's Presbyterian Church was "very uninspiring" and she came to the conclusion that religion is for "very dull people" (Jenny). "They play the organ and it goes slower than you can sing" (Jenny).

Elle was of the opinion that the values associated with religious observance are life denying in that they encourage the unnecessary restriction of joy. Such denial of joy seemed incompatible with what she interpreted to be the social norms surrounding pleasure.

[I dislike] the punishment and guilt that comes with it. You restrict yourself from so many enjoyments because you feel you have to punish yourself for some reason. (Elle)

Catherine's reflections on her upbringing back up Elle's statement about the restriction of joy and punishment: "As a Catholic you always have a fair amount of 'Catholic guilt' hanging around" (Catherine).

4.3.2.5 The lessons of history

Anne found that she lost respect for religion because history questioned the infallibility of religious institutions. It was her knowledge of English history that contributed to her adoption of an atheistic worldview. She thought that because the Anglican Church was formed over such a fickle matter as King Henry VIII's annulment of his marriage to Catherine of Aragon, then it followed that religion lacked the credibility required in order to support the notion of God's existence.

The Seventh Form was a really defining time for me because I studied History which was the origins of the English Civil War. One of the key pillars of that time was looking at the establishment of the Anglican Church. It wasn't until I got to Seventh Form that I realised that King Henry created a Church just because he wanted a divorce. He wanted to be more powerful than the Pope so he created a whole Church to justify it. I didn't really believe in God at the point in time but that basically pushed me towards an atheistic worldview. It wasn't to a few

years after that I actually thought about it more and said ‘actually I am an atheist.’ (Anne)

4.3.3 Environments that Encourage Critical Thought

Participants cited environments that promoted critical thought as contributing factors to the adoption of their atheistic worldviews. With the exception of two respondents, participants were in High School or University when their journey towards the adoption of atheism began. (Matthew, who was raised as an atheist in China, and Alexander, who adopted atheism after travelling to India in his adult life, were the exceptions). Such environments aim to equip students with knowledge, encourage analytical thought and promote discussion, providing them with alternative explanations for the Universe and the confidence to question *a priori* beliefs. Participants felt that their theistic beliefs had been ‘taught’ to them by parents and Church members in childhood as if they were on par with scientific knowledge. The skills and knowledge acquired through educational institutions, in most cases, helped to dismantle theistic beliefs and provide alternative, atheistic worldviews. We have already discussed how Anne became disillusioned with theistic belief in her Seventh Form year after learning about the historical origins of the Anglican Church. For Peter, it was the acquisition of scientific knowledge in the fields of physics and biology that allowed him to challenge the strong theistic assumption of his upbringing.

At High School was the first time I learnt about things like the “Big Bang” theory and evolutionary theory which is kind of disappointing that you have to wait to High School until you actually learn that. I think that then it kind of hit me that there didn’t need to be a god for things; that there are other explanations for the origins of the Universe. (Peter)

David found that the process of meeting with other questioning intellectuals at University provided him with opportunities to debate the tenets of theism. He would discuss the works of Sir Lloyd Geering with his roommate. Geering is a controversial theologian who rejects the conventional view of a supernatural and personal God (Flick, 2006).

When I was a student at Canterbury I boarded with a person from Dunedin. We used to just argue about this a lot. You know it was at a time when Geering was doing his stuff in the Presbyterian Church. He was the Professor of Theology at Knox College then and he was writing, and still is, about a non-theistic God. In the late 1960s he was subject to heresy trial by the Presbyterian Church of New Zealand. So it was a big deal. I mean the churches were strong then and this was front page newspaper stuff. So we used to debate it. (David)

Participants in the study were self-selected for education because most of the advertisements for participants were located on the Lincoln University Campus. Participants

described themselves as being rational, practical, mechanical, sceptical and scientific. Such qualities thrive in environments that promote critical thought such as educational institutions. The data suggest that participants who require rational explanations for phenomena find it difficult to believe that things might exist outside of the natural laws of the physical Universe. Anne gives the following reasons for her atheism:

I was just always too practical and too rational. I never believed in the 'Tooth Fairy' or the 'Easter Bunny.' It [Church] was more about the community. It may be one of the reasons I got a degree in chemistry you know. I have always had that rational and logical thought pattern which is probably surprising considering I had no 'father figure.' (Anne)

Nick also enjoyed educational environments because of his inquisitive nature.

I guess I am just one of those people who are looking for explanations. I love knowing how things work. I'm always looking for the mechanisms behind things and the more you find out how things work, the less you need a god as a placeholder for things. (Nick).

Educational institutions were not the only setting mentioned as being amenable to atheistic thought. Some atheists found that critical thought in the field of religion was encouraged by non-theistic family members. Bradley's father is an atheist, with whom he can discuss his questions about religion. Similarly, Denis also discussed his queries about theism with a non-religious father from a young age. His father encouraged such scepticism:

My father has never been religious so I probably owe him a lot for how I got started into this [atheism]. I remember one day in scripture class my teacher taught me about Adam and Eve. God created Adam and Eve or Women were created to serve Man. I remember her saying it with not a very impressed look on her face. I personally didn't believe that girls were there to serve me. I saw the look on her face and realised that it was stupid. She obviously didn't believe it but she was saying it. So that kind of got me talking to my father about it. I remember Dad took me along a little bit more. We were questioning this, that and the other thing when I was about ten or so. (Denis)

Conversely, on the part of participants whose parents were theistic, the major assumptions of religion (such as belief in god(s)) were seldom discussed within the family discourse.

4.3.4 Strained Relationships with 'Father Figures'

A subtle environmental theme emerged in which strained relations with a 'father figure' or the absence of a 'father figure' were prominent features in the life narratives offered by half the participants in this study. A 'father figure' can be represented by a biological father, a step-father or other figures of male authority. As explained in the literature review, it

is possible that the relationship that one has with one's father could also be projected onto their deity (Vitz, 1999). Links between the thematic results presented here and the findings from the literature review will be discussed further in Chapter 5. For now, it is helpful to remember that a number of parallels have been made between the conventional view of God and the 'father figure' concept.

Some argue that an anthropomorphised God can be imagined as the ultimate, exalted 'father figure' for an individual (Schilling, 1969; Vitz, 1999). Freud himself remarked that "the personal attitude of man toward God depends on his attitude toward his human father and that it changes and evolves accordingly" (Luijpen, 1964, p. 210). Denis, without prompting, would explain to me his views on theism which were remarkably similar to those of Freud:

In many ways I see religion as a longing for paternal acceptance. You know 'God: our Father.' This need to say to someone or something: "I've done the right thing you know," or "I have done well." (Denis)

Male and female respondents mentioned strained relationships with their biological fathers or father substitutes. In general, half of my participants mentioned the failure of their 'father figure' or the absence of their 'father figure' due to death, divorce or neglect. (The other half of my respondents either had healthy relationships with their 'father figures' or failed to mention them in the course of the interview). Father failure was characterised by physical violence, emotional abuse and patriarchal attitudes. Peter's father left the family home when Peter was in High School and the relationship between the two of them was very strained. Recalling his upbringing, Peter exclaims; "I don't really have any affection for my father: He's a pretty shitty person."

Elle also experienced a strained relationship with her father. As mentioned previously, Elle's father was described earlier as an "on-again, off-again religious fanatic" who fluctuated between periods of irreligiosity and devout Catholicism. He was also described as "erratic" and had been physically and emotionally violent towards Elle and her mother in the past. He left the family when Elle was eleven and this seems to herald the beginning of her doubts regarding theistic belief. Elle contributes her love of reading partly to her father's abuse.

My father was a complete "son of a bitch" and it was probably a good thing when he finally left us. So that is probably why I turned to literature in a way. This was when I was eleven. (Elle)

Where Elle and Peter experienced strained relationships with their biological fathers, Anne and Peter experienced father absence. Anne's father had been alive but absent for her entire life. "I have never met my father," Anne would recall. She was born into a single-parent

family and claimed to have never experienced the presence of a ‘father figure.’ Jenny’s father’s absence, however, was caused by his death. He had died when she was “about ten or so” (Jenny) yet her memories of him are mostly positive.

4.4 Atheism and Morality

In this sub-section, I present results from my research on the moral behaviour and moral justification of Christchurch-based atheists. The relationship between morality and the atheistic worldview was explored through a number of interview questions with participants (see Questions 17 to 20 in Appendix E). The overarching theme in this section seems to be that participants perceive their moral behaviour to be very similar to that of believers; however, the justifications of their morality are very different.

4.4.1 Moral Behaviour

Participants believed that they held high moral standards. They indicated that they had a respect for life, that they desired to live in harmony with the world and that they were interested in having positive relationships with other beings. Respect for life often meant attempting to avoid harmful outcomes for other people and animals. Peter based his moral beliefs on the general principle of avoiding the causation of “unnecessary pain” to other living beings. Matthew’s desire to live in harmony with the world was expressed in the extension of his non-violent stance towards animals.

*I will not kill other animals or other creatures without any reason.
Just to make fun – I will not do that. (Matthew)*

Likewise, Nick would not harm an animal without good reason.

*I wouldn’t hunt an animal purely for pleasure. I don’t believe in
impeding the functioning or happiness of another organism unless it is
necessary. We have no more right to existence than any other animal.
(Nick)*

Elle believed that respect for other people was an important part of her morality and part of this moral standard meant not pressuring others to adopt atheism.

*Respect is a huge one. I don’t mean to disrespect people unless they
do something to really disrespect me. I have friends that are religious
but I don’t feel the need to push my atheism on them. It [religion]
makes them happy. They don’t push their religion on me and so it’s
just kind of a respect thing. (Elle)*

Elle defined her respect for other human beings in the following behavioural terms:

Not imposing your views and also not being forceful, manipulative, insulting, offensive and rude. You can disagree with someone but you really shouldn't call them names, yell at them or treat them like shit just because you disagree with them. (Elle)

Bradley also expressed the view that “being good means giving respect” and that honesty was a part of this.

I have always tried to keep strong morals such as ‘don’t steal’ and ‘don’t be mean if you don’t have to.’ I believe that you should be able to speak your mind and give your opinion and if someone asks, you should give an honest view without having to sugar coat it with adjectives. At the same time you have got to be nice. Respect is the basis of my morality. (Bradley)

Matthew emphasised that respect for elders was important for him. This was an ethic that he inherited from his parents in China.

You have to respect your elders. In China, it is that the elderly persons are wiser so you listen to them. You should show your respect to them because that is good. (Matthew)

By being honest and self reliant, Matthew also believed he was showing respect to other people. This was derived from his desire to have positive relationships with others.

You need to cooperate with other people. You can't rip off other guys – you can't steal. Don't do that. You need to be honest. You need to study hard and if you make money by yourself, you should be safe. (Matthew)

Many of the moral standards cited by atheists above, such as respect for life, honesty, harmonic relationships and the avoidance of causing unnecessary pain, have been echoed in religious scriptures. Such is the case with the ethic of reciprocity which is also known as ‘The Golden Rule.’ It is cited in the Christian tradition as a saying attributable to Jesus of Nazareth: “All things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do you even so to them,” (Mark 7:12 as cited in Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 418). The ethic is also established in nearly every other major (ancient and contemporary) religion (Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

Atheist participants in the study did not differ from theists with regard to the ethic of reciprocity. They indicated that their moral standards were compatible with this ethic and indeed their morality was based on it in many cases. Catherine’s partiality for empathy reinforced the principle.

Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. People feel similar things to me and I don't want to do anything to make them feel unhappy. (Catherine)

Jenny also emphasised her belief in the ethic of reciprocity. Being a keen environmentalist, she made the consideration of future generations an additional component of the rule.

You treat your neighbour the way you want to be treated and that whatever you do in life you should make sure that you are not harming anyone else. And your other obligation is that there are future generations to come, therefore, you should leave the Earth in a good as place as you found it, preferably better. (Jenny)

Most atheist participants believed that their moral behaviour did not differ in any significant way from that of theists. It is seemingly a difficult task to distinguish an atheist from, for example, a Christian, based on everyday moral behaviour alone. Differences are particularistic rather than general. For example, David continued to agree with most of the principles he had been taught in his Presbyterian Church, however, there were some minor exceptions.

I agree with the usual sort of things like treating others with kindness. I don't have a stance on the usual 'Churchy' things like 'no sex before marriage' and that sort of stuff. However, they are not stupid ideas! If the corollary is complete promiscuity then it is possibly not healthy (emotionally or physically,) but in itself it [sex before marriage] is not fundamentally bad. (David)

Some participants held the opinion that their adoption of atheism actually improved their moral standards. Peter believed he was less critical on account of his atheism: "I think being an atheist makes you a lot less judgemental of others because you are not always comparing yourself and others to religious rules" (Peter). Catherine believed herself to be more virtuous than others: "I don't have a god and I am more moral than most people." Denis presented his personal observations as evidence for the upstanding moral character of atheists: "I know tonnes of atheists, who I believe, live much more moral lives than some Christians I know" (Denis). David made a similar comment: "I know plenty of people who are atheistic who have very high moral standards" (David). Nick continued the theme:

There are loads of secular or atheistic people out there that are 'good people.' They help one another out. Even by Christian standards they are better than Christians. Better at being tolerant, better at helping others and better at offering forgiveness. You can't say that if God was gone then there would be chaos because the fact is that for many people, God is already gone and there is not chaos. (Nick)

4.4.2 The Justification of Morality

Although participants see their moral behaviour as very similar to that of believers; the justification behind such moral standards is very different. For example, Nick stated that his

“behaviour is similar” to religious friends and family members although he would “do it for different reasons” (Nick).

In Chapter 2 (Section 2.4.2.1), I outlined the main facets of the “Divine Command” theory, the position which affirms that morality is justified by the authority of one or more deities (Baggini, 2003; Martin, 1990, 2007). The implication of the “Divine Command” theory is that morality is not inherent in the object of interest but that gods have complete jurisdiction over determining whether or not a type of behaviour is acceptable. Many “Divine Command” theory voluntarists also fear the inverse principle derived from such a theory (Bryant, 2008; Harding, 2007; Martin, 1990). The inverse implication is that, as Dostoevsky’s Ivan Karamazov stated; “Without God, anything is permitted” (as cited in Baggini, 2003, p. 37). When participants in the study were presented with such a claim they disagreed completely with it, often in disgust. They believed, like Socrates (as cited in Baggini, 2003, p. 38), that goodness or morality must be inherent in the object or behaviour of interest: “It [the implication that without God, anything is permitted] is just insane,” Elle responded. Catherine also thought the implication was “a load of crap.”

Participants refuted the “Divine Command” theory as a justification of morality and preferred to view goodness as inherent in the object of interest, with the implication that morality is possible without belief in god(s). Atheists in my sample did not behave morally because of fear of a punishment or the promise of a reward by god(s). Rather, they viewed such behaviour, based entirely on the prospect of individual reward or retribution, as morally repugnant. Instead, atheists suggested that moral standards accrue benefits to societies and individuals that adhere to them and this was used as the justification for their morality.

Atheists would offer articulate refutations of the “Divine Command” theory in their defence of the autonomy of ethics (the view that morality is inherent in the object of interest and determined independently of god(s)). Denis managed to paraphrase Plato’s Euthyphro dialogue (see Chapter 2, Section 2.4.2.1) without prompting when interviewed. He continued:

What is good has to be independent of God otherwise God could declare rape to be good. That doesn’t mean we are all going to go get our ‘rape on.’ Morals don’t arise from that. On one case it makes goodness arbitrary and on the other case it makes God irrelevant. If good is independent of God then we don’t need God to live moral lives. So this claim is debunked. It makes no logical sense. (Denis)

Elle believed that goodness was inherent in the object or the behaviour of interest and that being an atheist made her take more pride in her moral actions. She felt that because her behaviour was not based solely on potential retribution, she became more autonomous - more

the author of her own moral behaviour. Rather than being told how to act by god(s), a religious institution or a sacred text, she decided what was good on her own terms and acted accordingly:

I think generally most people have the same idea about what is right and what is wrong. So I don't think being an atheist changes that. The only thing I think being an atheist changes for me, I think, is that I can own every way that I treat someone. I don't have to think that I helped someone today but I did it only so I could go to Heaven. I did it because I wanted to do it. (Elle)

Peter and Nick expressed similar sentiments for they did not fear consequences in the afterlife nor was god(s) required for their moral justification. For them, this reinforced the theme of confidence in the autonomy of ethics:

The behaviour is similar although I do it for different reasons. When I act morally, I do not fear the retribution of God or Hell. I do it because I recognise that it is the best way for us all to live. I think I understand the reason behind morals. (Nick)

If you are only being good because a god wants you to be good, it doesn't say much about your morality. If the only thing stopping you from being a child-raping murderer is your belief in a god, then essentially you are just a child-raping murderer who is too afraid of hell-fire to go and be a child-raping murderer. My thing with morality is – people should be nice to each other because it makes society much nicer. (Peter)

Elle told of a moral dilemma she experienced when she first came to New Zealand. She was initially lonely and entered into an affair with a man who later turned out to be married (albeit unhappily). This man was also the father of a young daughter. “Eventually, it got to the point where he started introducing me to his daughter and she started hanging out with us” (Elle). That is when the moral dilemma occurred to Elle. For Elle, it was not that the man was married that was the problem. Rather, it was Elle’s concern for the child’s psychological well-being that troubled her. She did not fear punishment of any kind for her involvement in an adulterous act; rather, it was her empathy for the child that directed her:

That [Empathy] is what I use as my moral compass. I wouldn't want to do this to my own kid. So why should I confuse this poor little kid? And that was my moral compass. It wasn't a higher power that told me to do this. I wasn't worried that adultery is against one of the Ten Commandments. (Elle)

Participants explained that the basis of morality need not be supernatural, as evolutionary theory provided alternative explanations. For example, Peter explained that

god(s) weren't required for the explanation of the origins of morality and his knowledge obtained as a science student helped him to articulate this view.

Yes, from a Darwinian perspective, of course we feel empathy for our own species. The more genetically related to something you are, the more you will empathise with it. It would have also helped in hunting situations. We evolved to be moral so we don't need God to explain morality. (Peter)

The explanations offered by interviewees for the origins of morality were similar to naturalistic materialist accounts mentioned in Chapter 2 (Dawkins, 2006; Flick, 2006; Martin, 2007; Miles & Huberman, 1994). "It just becomes ingrained somehow; it could be part of the evolutionary process where societies that develop these traits are more likely to succeed" (David). Participants placed additional emphasis on the concept of 'reciprocal altruism' or 'mutual advantage' in terms of survival and replication, in order to explain the evolutionary need for moral standards. Elle and Nick both emphasised that enlightened self-interest in the struggle for survival was the basis of moral behaviour.

It is all based on what helps us survive and what helps us reproduce. Morals are naturally selected. Having healthy environments make us healthier in turn, having greater diversity makes us more resilient, and having greater biodiversity helps us discover more things that help humanity. It is all very selfish but that is what morals are. It is all about helping our species survive. (Nick)

It has been shown that it is beneficial for us and our genetics to not go around killing everyone. It is more beneficial for us not to steal. You think of the "Group Behaviour" hypotheses and it's not beneficial for us to hoard something for ourselves. Rather, it is actually better in the long run for our genes to share it with somebody. If you don't steal from someone then people are less likely to steal from you. You're also less likely to get killed in a fight after attempting to steal. Selfishness (in a genetic sense) actually makes us pretty good. (Elle)

In order for humans to survive in the company of others, there is a need for humans to cooperate and socialise. In societies, according to Matthew, a "common consensus" about what is admissible and what is prohibited on moral grounds is required. Participants emphasised this aspect and claimed that morality had been humanly constructed to fulfil such a function. David mentioned that morality could potentially make human beings more successful in a society.

It is good in society for people to behave in a moral way. We have this sort of innate sense of what is the better thing to do. There is a social consensus, a sense of fairness. (David)

Bradley provided examples to reinforce a similar point:

The reason we need it [moral standards] is for socialisation. If I'm an asshole then no one will socialise with me. If you locked yourself in a room you would get no reputation, no work, no food and you would die. Even having a job is pretty social thing these days, so being respectful or moral is linked with my own survival. (Bradley)

As the results have shown, the intellectual justifications provided for moral behaviour by atheists differ significantly to theistic validations such as the “Divine Command” theory. Despite this dissonance, the moral outcomes that spur from the two justification processes seem overwhelmingly similar, with the exception of some minor differences (as in the area of extramarital sex). My respondents see their own moral standards, as reflected in their behaviour, as being comparable to, if not slightly more dignified than, that of theistic friends and family.

4.5 Life Challenges

The next three sub-sections are dedicated to an investigation of how atheists in my sample approach major life challenges. The data suggest that the atheistic worldview held by research participants informed their approach to life challenges such as finding comfort amidst suffering, the anticipation of death and dealing with unexplained phenomena. Nevertheless, the impact that the atheistic worldview had on participants varied according to the context of each challenge, as reflected in the following results.

4.5.1 Finding Comfort amidst Suffering

Previous research has concluded that theism provides an important role for believers in that it comforts them in times of suffering (Dennett, 2006, pp. 102-103). The anticipation of a better existence in the ‘next life’ could provide the theist with motivation to endure pain in this life. The question then arises as to where an atheist turns for comfort in difficult times. In my sample, all of the atheists found comfort amidst their own suffering through tangible or ‘terrestrial’ sources (Michel, 2009, p.2), such as their relationships with friends and family members, stoicism, proactivity, positive philosophies and scientific knowledge. (There were no ‘dissenting’ opinions offered by participants). They attempted to comfort others who were experiencing distress by offering practical help and reasonable advice and saw prayer as an attempt to remove personal responsibility from the situation. (I.e., prayer was interpreted as a substitute for practical help; an excuse to avoid confrontation with the issues associated with another’s suffering).

4.5.1.1 Self comfort

My respondents found alternative ways to comfort themselves in times of suffering and spirituality was not mentioned. Many participants interpreted belief in god(s) as an avoidance of the truth which in turn would make suffering more difficult for believers. Comforting feelings came from tangible objects and activities in the natural and physical realm. Predominantly, atheists indicated that deriving comfort from their relationships with friends and family members was helpful in difficult times. Catherine found it comforting that her friends and family took an interest in her feelings and opinions in times of distress:

Now where do I go? I go to friends and family. I just chat to real people and I am very lucky that I've got lots of good friends that listen to me. (Catherine)

Nick mentioned that the tangibility of human relationships is important to him, and that such relationships provide him with more comfort than sources of solace that require faith.

I would rely on friends. They are tangible, you can see them, they can relate to you and they can empathise. That's all you really need as a human being. I don't really see how you can derive so much emotional comfort from something that is illusory. (Nick)

Like Nick, David would also turn to friends for similar reasons:

I lost a job a few years ago and I turned to the people I loved. I didn't turn to God who had nothing to do with it. I didn't pray at all because that would be expecting supernatural intervention. (David)

Although recognising the utility of relationships with friends and family, some participants emphasised an individualistic approach in confronting suffering. Themes such as being self-reliant, spending time alone and 'working through' the problem appeared in the data. Jenny was stoic and seemed to feel proud of her self-reliance:

I am reliant on myself, on my own resources and on friends and family to what extent they can help me. I believe that those who need religion use it in a way that it is a crutch. It's a cliché but why can't we stand on our own two feet? Why do we think we need someone higher? A god who we think is going to either rescue us or be there to lean on? (Jenny)

Bradley and Peter both expressed similar sentiments but placed particular emphasis also on 'doing things' and being proactive.

When I lost my job in the recession I was caught in a loose end. I didn't really know what to do so I went into a period of a bit of depression for a little bit. I didn't want to go to anyone and tell them

that I was depressed so I just worked through it. I have always found that it is easier to solve a problem on your own. When the 'push comes to shove' it is what you do that matters. (Bradley)

According to Peter;

I remember as a kid if your grandparents die, it's OK, you just think they are in Heaven with Jesus. They almost become like an imaginary friend for you but when you don't believe, I think you just sort of have to deal with it. Life just happens and you're probably actually better off dealing with it than praying to nothing. For comfort, I don't do anything spiritual; I just take time by myself. I do the gardening, I go for a walk, I spend time with my animals and I do things that are relaxing. Instead of trying to imagine it away, imagining that they are in Heaven, imagining that there is some kind of benevolent plan behind it all, I just do stuff and move on. It's sad when someone dies but I think you have to be proactive. (Peter)

The use of positive thinking was utilised by atheists to comfort themselves amidst suffering and was especially important for those atheists who were individualistic in their approaches to finding comfort. Denis tells the story of an accident he had on the Port Hills where his positive self-talk and 'up-beat' attitude, as expressed in his motto, provided the necessary motivation he needed to confront the situation.

I had a motor bike accident on the Port Hills late one night. I was out there all by myself and I could barely get up because my back was sore. I guess for me when I get in a situation like that it is a matter of reflection. I don't always feel like I need somebody as I'm a very sort of introverted person. I find it easier to cope without other people around in difficult situations like that. It is just a matter of getting back up and I probably talk it through with myself. My motto is 'there is always a way out.' (Denis)

Alexander, knowledgeable in the field of Eastern philosophy, found that it was his realisation of the transient nature of suffering and other phenomena in life that allowed him to be optimistic. Such reflections would provide him with comfort in difficult times.

I usually turn to past successes really. I have been cut up, stitched up, bashed up, and kicked in the face, but I'm optimistic because I understand that everything changes. You might be down but then you come back up. I believe that it's natural. The sun comes up and then goes back down and the flowers will open and close. Everything seems to me to be stopping and starting. People have been conditioned by their upbringing to always avoid or dislike what is bad or unhappy. I think people can get really upset by what is 'bad' [suffering] that the 'bad' actually becomes worse. (Alexander)

Some atheists found scientific knowledge, particularly applications in the fields of medicine and psychiatry, to be comforting in times of uncertainty or suffering. For example,

Matthew found that when it came to physical and psychological suffering, the hope he put in the practice of medicine was more comforting than what he could obtain through belief in god(s).

Actually I just went to the hospital and talked to the doctor and hoped that they could cure me of my problems. I don't need to have this kind of group belief to make me feel better. (Matthew)

Likewise, in two separate narratives, Elle can be seen using the acquisition of scientific knowledge as her source of comfort. Elle first told the story of her initial manic episode and her subsequent diagnosis of bipolar disorder. She found that the logical explanations she could acquire from reading psychiatric journals comforted her and reduced her anxiety in the acceptance of such a diagnosis. Amidst her suffering, this “concrete” information was considered much more useful to Elle than what ‘invisible means of support’ a faith might provide her with.

The first time I dropped out of school I was diagnosed as bipolar and so my mum committed me. I lost school and I lost all income. When you go into a hospital situation you are surrounded by other patients who are very religious. What was more comforting to me was that I got on scientific databases and started reading psychiatric journals. It started making sense to me and helped me accept that I am going to be on medication for the rest of my life, that I may relapse at times, that I may have to change my medication, and that there are reasons why it [bipolar disorder] came on at the age that it did. I didn't have to turn to an imaginary friend to make me feel better because there is nothing there; nothing concrete. To actually know the process of something is so much more comforting to me. (Elle)

In addition, Elle's knowledge of Evolutionary Biology helped her to accept the termination of a long-term, intimate relationship. Her awareness that most mammals do not mate for life provided her with comfort, normalising the relationship failure.

I was in an eight year relationship before I came to New Zealand and then it ended. That's really hard I mean because I knew the person for ten years and I had lived with them for seven and a half. You know you are pretty much married at that point. You feel like shit and it sucks. Knowing now that in Evolutionary Biology we're not required to mate for life and only two mammals mate for life makes me feel better. It makes me feel normal and that's why I am so into science because it answers all these amazing questions. (Elle)

As mentioned above, in the absence of theistic belief, participants provided for themselves alternative means of comfort. In times of suffering, respondents have been shown to turn to human relationships, periods of introversion, positive self-talk and scientific knowledge to provide comfort for them. Nevertheless, some respondents could understand the

role of comfort provided by theistic belief, and in most cases, this was because they had previously derived comforting feelings from such beliefs. For example, Peter was quoted earlier saying that in the event of the death of a loved one, theistic belief implies that the deceased remain, in a sense, as an “imaginary friend for you.” Nick mentioned that although he had yet to lose someone close to him, he still “used to find the idea of Heaven quite comforting.” Catherine acknowledged the comfort she used to receive as a Christian and, therefore, supported that beneficial aspect of theistic belief in the lives of her friends.

When I was a teenager I got into the Christian thing much more than the Catholic thing and I did have a bout of depression and was not at all well and I did ‘lift up my eyes to where cometh thy help’ and it was a huge help. That was before the de-conversion. So I can understand that solace and that is why, if someone was getting a lot of comfort from it [theism] then I wouldn’t ever try to de-convert them. I would say “Oh go for it,” you know, comfort is comfort whether it is out of a bottle or a belief. Catherine)

4.5.1.2 Comforting others

All of my respondents found alternative ways to comfort friends and family members who were suffering and these comforting acts did not require a mutual belief in supernatural phenomena (as spiritual gestures might). Prayer was viewed as a substitute for practical help and an excuse to avoid confrontation with the issues associated with suffering. Respondents overwhelmingly preferred to comfort friends and family members by offering practical support. Peter took his nephews to the Zoo in an attempt to ease their suffering when his aunty died.

When my aunty had liver cancer, the main thing I did was help her kids and her family out so I arranged for the kids to come and meet the tigers at the zoo. I was just doing what I could. (Peter)

Denis said he would do “whatever it takes to help” a friend in suffering. Anne showed her love for her grandmother by helping with the maintenance of her property after Anne’s grandfather died.

Yeah well, Grandfather passed away and he was a huge influence in my life. I didn’t really try to minimise the suffering but I think the easiest way was just to do things. We are a very practical family, so we support each other by making sure that everything is done. We don’t really emotionally look after each other but we do show our love for each other. In this case, my Poppa’s [the grandfather] aim was to build Grandma her dream house so at that time there was a lot of stuff in the garden and we had to do the fences. So I showed my love by taking a week off work and just getting into the garden so that everything was done when he passed away. (Anne)

Elle told the story of a friend who was a Chinese immigrant with a daughter and an unstable marriage struggling to work on her thesis. Elle offered practical support by caring for the daughter and thereby allowing her friend to work. She believed prayer was as a waste of time.

She [the friend] finally got her daughter to come here. Her husband came also. He refused to take care of the daughter and I was over there at times when he just completely ignored his little girl.... She is here [in New Zealand] trying to do her Masters and her husband was angry that she was not there to feed the daughter, give her a bath and do everything for her. She hates this man and this man hates her. I couldn't comfort her and make her feel better, which is funny because the International Christian Fellowship told her if she would pray that it would all go away. She would tell me that, "I'm doing what they say but it's not doing anything for me." All I ever did was just go over to her house and I gave her daughter a bath sometimes. I took her daughter to play in the park and that's the most comfort you could do for her. Don't just pray for her – you need to help her. (Elle)

Some respondents used logic in an attempt to comfort someone who was suffering by trying to put the suffering into perspective. Nick would emphasise his views on the transience of suffering to his girlfriend when she was depressed and in the following case, his atheistic, naturalistic materialist worldview underpinned his advice to her.

Well my girlfriend gets fairly upset quite a lot so I quite often just talk to her. We both share the worldview that everything is ultimately pointless and once you die your consciousness is gone. So I kind of just remind her, trying not to trivialise the grief or suffering or whatever, but just remind her that it [the suffering] is not going to be there forever. It's not like Hell and it's not like she is going to be permanently suffering. It's not the end of the world. I don't say, you know, "It is okay, we are all going to die anyway!" But I just use that as my anchor. (Nick)

Alexander also emphasised the transience in life and expressed his own views on pain when he attempted to comfort the sick and the elderly in the course of his work.

I have been around a lot of dying people because of my work with the elderly. I always say to them the same thing actually! I always tell them that there is nothing to be scared of when you're sick and ill because nothing has really changed since when they were well. People fear death, I think, because of the unknown and this is what Christianity is built around. (Alexander)

Bradley was of the opinion that he could help people in distress by assisting them in solving their problems. He would use his logic in order to try and inform them of reasonable actions that could help them ease the suffering.

Logic: If someone has got an issue you break it down, good and simple, because it is a lot easier to just be straight up. So to help someone, I would try and get the best understanding I could of the situation, so I could give them advice or a good opinion on the matter. (Bradley)

With the exception of one participant, as I will explain, all of the interviewees expressed the view that suffering would not be made any easier if they believed in god(s). Many saw belief as an avoidance of the truth, which in turn made things more difficult.

How can you comfort people without religion or the topic of religion? I mean “I’m thinking of you” or “Can I do anything to help?” usually does not work. It is much easier to put it onto someone else and say “I will pray to God for you” and so on. It is an ‘out’ in a way. (Jenny)

I think everything would be easier for everyone if they faced the truth. The truth is we all crap. Ignoring it doesn’t make it any easier! So you deal with it. But it doesn’t have to be taboo and horrible. People want to believe it doesn’t happen and people don’t deal with things well because they don’t want to face things. Christianity lays down this moral code you see so people don’t get the truth and the truth is that there are a lot of horrible things. (Alexander)

Some respondents were of the opinion that theism would in fact make suffering more difficult because gods are usually conceptualised as having the power to intervene in human affairs. Reconciling the reality of suffering with belief in benevolent deities would, therefore, provide further anxiety.

I don’t know if it would be easier because then I would have to also believe that someone [God] chose to do ‘X’ to this or that person. I think it would just add another level of stress. Even on a trivial level it provides anxiety; “Is God watching me? Why has God done that?” (Peter)

I would be asking God ‘why?’ For me it just doesn’t add up. (Denis)

David was the exception to this theme and he thought difficult times would be made easier if he had a belief in God. He considered his son’s life to be easier than his for that very reason. Despite this, he viewed his son’s life (which was based on theistic belief) as being less authentic than his own: “My son and his family are in quite an evangelical church and we sort of say ‘life is pretty simple for them,’ but it is just not real” (David).

4.5.2 Death

The impact left by the death of a loved one is often interpreted as a major life challenge. Reflecting on the prospect of one’s own death and the process of dying can also produce a significant level of anxiety. The data used in my thesis suggests that the atheistic

worldview held by research participants did in fact impact upon their reflections on death and dying. Belief in the afterlife was removed with every participant's atheism, which subsequently allayed the fear that they had previously associated with the 'other side.' The participants' atheism also impacted on how they approached the often sensitive subject of death in conversations with others. Following the loss of their belief in god(s), they became more cautious about how, when, and with whom, they shared their personal opinions regarding death.

4.5.2.1 The 'other side'

Participants' reflections on what death meant were overwhelmingly similar. It would seem that atheists not only disbelieve in god(s) but they also lack belief in any form of an afterlife. This is despite the fact that our working definitions of positive atheism and belief in the afterlife are not mutually exclusive (see Chapter 2, Section 2.2 and 2.4.1). The afterlife mentioned here refers to the belief that the essence or personality of an individual survives the death of the body in this world by some supernatural means. In contrast to this view, all my respondents espoused the view that death entailed a state of eternal oblivion and the cessation of existence of any kind. The lack of belief in the afterlife coincides with an interpretation of the world that is in line with naturalistic materialism. "Naturalism is polemically defined as repudiating the view that there exists or could exist any entities or events which lie, in principle, beyond the scope of scientific explanation" (Danto, as cited in Martin, 1990, p. 469). Because life after death is beyond the scope of scientific explanation, it is incompatible with naturalistic materialism, although not necessarily out of the question with respect to other atheistic worldviews.

Atheists were asked what they believed happens to certain aspects of an individual in the event of death. The individual's experience of existence was believed to cease once and for all at the point of bodily death. "The consciousness or the spirit that makes us 'us,' ceases with death" (David). Catherine expressed that apart from the "...something of you that remains in the memories of people," death was 'the end' for an individual. Jenny likened her expectations of the experience of death to the unconsciousness of a "dreamless sleep." Other participants gave more detailed explanations of the point of death, emphasising the belief that consciousness was dependent on the brain.

When you officially die the electrical pulses to your brain stop so there is no more consciousness. Your heart ceases to pump so blood stops circulating through your body. Eventually you are either burnt or buried in a coffin made from light wood where the insects can get

in and decompose your body. When the electrical pulses stop to your brain, you are dead, so it is the same as being brain dead. (Elle)

Their neurology basically stops. Consciousness is dependent on your brain. When people that have near death experiences talk about seeing a bright light and experiencing calmness, they are talking of the experience of their brain releasing all the excess opiates which happens just before someone dies. I don't see the point of worrying about it when you are still alive. I don't think the afterlife is real, and I don't think that it is relevant. (Peter)

4.5.2.2 A finite existence

Respondents acknowledged the possibility that some people may find the notion of a finite existence depressing at first. However, on reflection, participants realised that this provided them with the opportunity to create meaning in their lives. The prospect of mortality is interpreted by some people as a 'gift' (Boyer, 2001; Mahoney et al., 2005) because it makes life more scarce and hence more valuable. It is as if respondents exhibit diminishing marginal utility for additional life experiences, rather as consumers do for normal goods and services, according to economic theory (Sarantakos, 2005). Considering very long time spans; the utility placed on additional life experiences could approach, or even fall below zero, because nothing is expected to be new, exciting, pleasurable or valuable in infinite quantities. Hence, the idea of Heaven or an alternative afterlife where humans are immortal was interpreted as "boring" by respondents:

I can't imagine anything more tedious really! If they thought about eternal life would they really want it? (Jenny)

If we exist once then we may as well make the most of it. If we live forever we would get used to it, nothing would excite you and it [life] would be very boring. (Nick)

One of the great, sad things about being conscious is that you know that life is limited and that you don't get to learn everything. Some people might find that depressing but I think that it makes you have to find a reason for existence. If you somehow made yourself immortal then what would be the point in existing? We take pleasure in finding out about the Universe. There would be nothing new to learn! (Peter)

Anne found that it was the expected finitude of her own existence that gave her inspiration to live well:

I take quite a lot of comfort in the fact that when I die 'that's it.' Instead of like getting into a rut and living through that rut in the hope that I will end up in a better place, I will make sure I am in a better place now. So my philosophy is that if I live with no regret then what do I have to fear? (Anne)

4.5.2.3 *The fear of death*

Atheists in the study did not fear death in itself for the lack of belief in an afterlife seemed to allay that fear. They did not equate the anticipated state of non-existence with anxiety. Because atheists did not anticipate any consciousness following their passing, the feeling of ‘being dead’ was not something that they expected to encounter. They were comfortable reflecting on failing to exist at some point in the future and non-existence was again, often paralleled with the familiar and rather comforting notion of a dreamless sleep:

I’m not worried about it because if I am dead I won’t care because I am not around to care. But death; which is non-existence or not being around: It is very hard to conceive of it yet everyone experiences this when we go to sleep because we all lose consciousness. I take solace knowing that suffering is not eternal. This is the complete opposite of what some religions offer you. They say; “Turn now or suffer for eternity.” (Nick)

My death, the unknown of it, well I’m not going to be there to experience it. You are not there to worry about being dead. If I am wrong and there is a Hell then I’m actually pretty certain that Satan would like me. (Peter)

Catherine imagined that death would be more worrisome if she believed in an afterlife because of the potential judgement associated with the allegory of Heaven and Hell.

I think I would worry more if I did have religion. If you haven’t done your confession lately you might miss out! (Catherine)

Although atheists did not necessarily fear the state of non-existence which they associated with death, neither did they welcome it: “Well I don’t fear death in that sense but I don’t think I’m ready for death yet either” (Jenny). Participants valued their current experiences and wished to prolong their life: “I have still got a lot of living to do in my opinion” (Bradley). The expected finitude of respondents’ existence seemed to increase the value they put on their lives and this prospect of mortality inspired David to take care of his health:

I don’t want to be not here. I value my life immensely. I have a whole lot of people and things that are very dear to me and not to have that interaction anymore is important to me. Thinking about not being here makes me want to preserve my life. I’m not a fanatic but you do think about things that will affect your health but I don’t think about what it would be like not being here. (David)

Although fear was not associated with death itself, reflections on the process of dying caused considerable anxiety for respondents. Interviewees expressed their fears surrounding

the anticipated physical and emotional pain leading up to the point of their deaths. “The process [of death], obviously, if it is unpleasant then I don’t want that” (Denis).

The process of dying I would fear. We have evolved to fear death. We want to survive and we want to keep going on but most animals don’t care. Unfortunately we have evolved more than most animals and we can think about death. (Nick)

Participants mentioned that they were cautious how, when, where and with whom they expressed their views about death. The assumption was that death is a very sensitive subject for some people and David, Nick and Anne mentioned that they would be honest yet tactful when they talked with a theist about their views on death. Elle and Catherine both embraced the virtue of honesty; however, they also saw merit in remaining quiet in some certain, sensitive situations.

My friend who did die from cancer was completely atheistic up until two weeks before she died. I kind of blame some of the people around her for that. Because she is obviously suffering greatly, she is on morphine and, therefore, she is not fully aware. At this point she had already been told that she was going to die and she was not even really lucid anymore. Someone said, “Oh no, you need to read the Bible, this is the only way that you are not going to be in pain when you die.” I only got to get back to see her three days before she passed away and she was talking to me about it. I didn’t want to destroy anything for her at that point that was making her feel any better, so I just listened, shook my head and moved on to another topic. She had so little left and I’m not going to burst her bubble. (Elle)

Are you saying; “Would I give comforting religious advice?” No I wouldn’t at all. But I wouldn’t say, “Oh by the way, you know there is no Heaven.” I mean the people I have seen dying always go off into some sort of coma and then die. I have never done the last five minutes yarning to somebody and the only young person I knew that died was an atheist too. But no, I wouldn’t say, “You are going to a better place.” I mean, if they said that they were going to a better place, I would say that that’s nice. I don’t think it is the time and place to stand up. (Catherine)

4.5.3 Unexplained Phenomena

Previous research has concluded that theism originated in order to provide certain functions for people, of which one was to provide explanations. Theistic beliefs would help explain, for example, puzzling natural phenomena, dreams, the origins of the Universe and the existence of evil and suffering (Boyer, 2001, p. 5; Dennett, 2006, pp. 102-103; Furseth & Repstad, 2006). Scientific knowledge now provides explanations for most phenomena; however, some things still remain unexplained. When theism has been justified by the existence of unexplained phenomena, it has been criticised by popular atheistic authors as

providing an apologetic for the ‘God of the gaps’ (Dawkins, 2006; Dennett, 2006; Hitchens, 2007). The implication of the ‘God of the gaps’ argument is that uncertainty (which unexplained phenomena provides) is undesirable and that belief in god(s) reduces this unwanted uncertainty by answering difficult questions. The question then remains: How does an atheist deal with the uncertainty that arises from unexplained phenomena?

At first, I asked atheists how they approached the problem of the “unexplainable” and it was not long before I was corrected by participants. “It is important to note the difference between the unexplained and the unexplainable” (Nick). What participants helped me to realise was that by using the term “unexplainable,” I was implying that there was no possibility of an adequate explanation being provided in the future for that phenomenon:

Things that can’t be explained right now might be able to be explained later. That is a truth. Sometimes something happens and you don’t know why it happened but sometimes it becomes apparent later on.
(Alexander)

The results from my inquiry about currently unexplained phenomena proved to be remarkably similar: All of my respondents preferred a world in which some phenomena went unexplained and they viewed the converse as boring; a universe devoid of mystery and challenge. They were comfortable with not knowing everything and did not fear the uncertainty related to unexplained phenomena. Elle, a biological scientist, found that unexplained phenomena excited her, as they provided her with a purpose for her scientific inquiries. When asked how she approached the problem of the currently unexplained, Elle responded:

With complete fascination! I love it when there is something I cannot explain. I don’t understand people who say, “How do you find beauty in the world if you don’t believe in God and you don’t understand things?” I like not understanding things. It is good because it provides you with questions and you think of science projects you could do to try and explain stuff. That is the whole driving force behind science. There would be no point to doing my degree if that was the case. It’s fantastic! (Elle)

Likewise, Jenny, Denis and Catherine relished the mystery that the unexplained provided them and believed that without it, life would become very dreary.

I don’t think that we have to have everything explained. I think that life would be extremely boring if we knew what caused everything and there was no mystery and ‘what not.’ (Jenny)

I don't find that scary. I find it a good thing. It is one of those things that make it worthwhile living. You know if everything thing was explained, life would become very boring. (Denis)

The fact that there are so many things that I can't comprehend is rather wonderful. The size of the Universe, where it came from, is there another one? Are there hundreds of them? (Catherine)

This celebration of curiosity is very much in accord with a modern outlook and a confidence in scientific progress and rationality. Respondents were very critical of situations where theism was justified by unexplained phenomena and/or was used to explain away 'holes' in the knowledge base: "I don't plug God in to fill the gaps" (David). Participants saw the 'God of the gaps' argument as one that encourages ignorance and shuts down the imagination. Participants could not understand why others were not as comfortable with the unknown as they were. When told that belief in god(s) has sometimes been used to explain things that are otherwise unexplained, Peter responded:

That's like saying that fairies or space aliens can help explain things. It's like saying, "I can't understand this thing, I'm not stupid, and I'm not ignorant, so therefore God did it." It's an argument from ignorance and basically they are just being a 'douche bag.' What is wrong with accepting that you can't explain everything? People should just say, "Why don't we look that up?" or "Maybe no-one knows – perhaps you will be the first to discover it!" That can actually encourage a child to think. (Peter)

Although Anne was comfortable and secure with the existence of unexplained phenomena, she recognised that others were not and that the product of this fear was the potential erosion of the imagination.

I think it is an incredibly liberating thing to say "I don't know." I think as a society we are afraid of that so we are afraid to tell children, "Hey I don't know the answer." So they fill in these gaps with God. It is shutting down the imagination and it is shutting down curiosity. (Anne)

Many of the respondents viewed theistic explanations for unexplained phenomena as destructive of the human imagination, curiosity and scientific inquiry. For such reasons, these participants opposed caregivers offering such explanations to children. Rather, most participants preferred to leave the question open, thereby encouraging inquisitiveness. When Peter was asked how he would respond to a hypothetical situation in which a child had asked a question that was as yet unexplained by science, he indicated that he would respond in the following way:

Basically I think the best thing to do with a kid is encourage curiosity. A curious kid is potentially a good scientist and a productive member of society. When a kid gets shut down every time he asks a question, then, well they are just your factory workers of the future. So if you actually care about the future of your child, you will actually take the five minutes or so to look it up or suck it up and say you don't know.
(Peter)

Nick also said he would encourage the curiosity of the child and promote inquiry by opting not to offer a theistic explanation.

It would differ from a theist in that I wouldn't make a claim that I couldn't back up. I would say, "Even the smartest people in the world don't know that," or something to that affect: "We might know soon or we might never know." It would depend on the child and their intellectual ability. I might say, "You could find out for us when you are older." If I used 'God' then it would defeat the point of inquiry.
(Nick)

4.6 Finding Meaning in Life

It has been suggested that belief in god(s) provides theists with a purpose or a meaning in life. Respondents were asked what provided them with a purpose in life. Participants responded that a specific purpose was not necessary, nor did it exist in their worldview: "I wouldn't argue that there is a purpose. Humans evolved for no more of a reason that a sand fly evolved" (Peter). Life was seen as valuable despite this and Nick believed that an 'over-arching' purpose in life was not a prerequisite for the pursuit and obtainment of joy

This is our only opportunity, as far as we know, to explore this bizarre and wonderful universe! Just take it for that. I don't think that you need a purpose to enjoy yourself. Make the most of it while you have it because at the end of it all, nothing matters. It [the Universe] is just matter floating around and when you are dead, you no longer exist.
(Nick)

Likewise, Elle did not have an anthropocentric view of the world but, rather, she believed she was fortunate to be here and was determined to attempt to acquire rewarding life experiences.

What's the purpose of a hippopotamus? We are just another mammal that happened to evolve consciousness. What is the purpose of a gorilla? There just isn't one. The Earth is still going to go on even after humans die out, which eventually we will because we are large mammals, and in the next mass extinction we will, as most large mammals, get taken out. There is no purpose to humans and we are not in any special place. We don't deserve any special attention. I think while I am here, I have consciousness, and I feel the results of doing positive things for other people and with other people, and that is the only purpose I have right now for myself, what I can contribute. I think it would be easier sometimes if I had a 'calling' or a god to

direct me but only because of laziness. It would be less rewarding that way also. (Elle)

Respondents found that although they could not speak of a purpose in life, they did talk of value and sources of ‘terrestrial’ meaning (see Chapter 2, Section 2.4.2.1) in life. Echoing results from previous sections, participants found that the finitude of existence they expected as the human ‘lot,’ increased the value that they put on life. “With no eternity the ‘right now’ is much more important” (Alexander). For Anne, the anticipated eventual termination of her existence motivated her to appreciate and savour her current experiences more fully: “The finite nature of life makes me put in more of an effort” (Anne). Likewise, Peter learnt to value life more on becoming an atheist because he began to expect a finite existence.

Meaning is... well life is what you make it. If I enjoy some things then I should try and live a life that makes me happy while I am here, rather than please some god or anything like that. The fact that most atheists get by without committing suicide is a testament to the idea that life is not this bleak thing without a god. Atheists tend to be quite happy and live prosperous lives too. The finitude of existence increases the value of life. If this is the only life you are going to get, then you might as well enjoy it. You actually appreciate being alive! (Peter)

Many respondents found it was their interpersonal relationships that they valued most in life. Such relationships also gave them a sense a meaning and made life worthwhile.

I get meaning out of what I do and the relationships I have with people. That is what makes life worth living, from my point of view. (David)

People give me meaning: The love of people who just love me for me. (Anne)

The relationships that were interpreted as most valuable by participants were informal ones with family and friends. Catherine emphasised that it was her relationships with her children and close friends that negated her need for a belief in God.

Friends give me meaning. I have got two kids and watching my kids grow; well there is nothing else. I don't need to talk to God: I have friends! (Catherine)

4.7 Chapter Summary

I conducted twelve individual interviews with Christchurch-based atheists from a number of different age groups, vocations and nationalities. The great majority of respondents identified with being most familiar with the Christian version of theistic belief. In fact, one of

the atheists who participated in my study (David) still identified himself as a Christian. Identifiable themes (or recurring regularities) were found by way of qualitative data analysis. Quotations by respondents were used to illustrate the findings.

Rather than a one-off life-changing event, the adoption of atheism was seen as the final step in a long and gradual process of deliberation. A number of situational factors were seen to predispose participants towards an atheistic worldview. Firstly, when religion was thought of as being inconsistent, theistic belief was often called into question by participants. Secondly, environments that promoted critical thought were found to contribute to the adoption of atheism as such environments allowed for the critique of *a-priori* assumptions learnt in childhood. Thirdly, strained relations with ‘father figures’ were prominent in a number of the life narratives offered by participants in this study.

The intellectual justifications provided for respondents’ morality differed significantly to validations used in the “Divine Command” theory (discussed in Chapter 2). Despite this dissonance, the two justification processes were thought by participants to produce similar moral outcomes.

In the absence of theistic belief, respondents provided themselves with alternative means of comfort that did not require acceptance of a supernatural realm. Rather, atheists turned to human relationships, periods of introversion, positive self-talk and scientific knowledge for comfort. In addition, participants overwhelmingly preferred to comfort friends and family members by offering practical support. With the exception of one participant, all of the interviewees expressed the view that suffering would not be made any easier by believing in god(s).

Participants lacked belief in an afterlife of any form. The individual’s experience of existence was believed to cease *ad infinitum* from the point of death, and the expectation of only a limited number of years made life more scarce and hence more valuable to participants. Although respondents did not necessarily fear the anticipated state of non-existence associated with death, neither did they welcome it. They valued their lives and wished to prolong them.

With regards to the problem of unexplained phenomena, atheists preferred a world in which some things went unexplained and they viewed the converse as boring; a universe void of mystery and challenge.

When respondents were asked what provided them with a purpose in life, they indicated that a specific purpose was not necessary, nor did it exist in their worldview. Life was seen as

valuable despite this lack of purpose, as participants found that the anticipated finitude of their existence increased the value that they put on life in the 'here-and-now.'

Now that the thematic results have been presented I can examine the significance of these findings. In the following discussion (Chapter 5), the results will be interpreted in light of the existing research on atheists presented in Chapter 2.

Chapter 5

Discussion

5.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter I presented the thematic results of my qualitative analysis. In this chapter, I will discuss the significance of these results, with particular reference to some of the questions and areas of debate identified in the literature review (Chapter 2). Here I am concerned with ‘strong’ themes (as they were presented in Chapter 4) but ‘dissenting’ views will also be acknowledged.

My research provided results relating to a number of questions identified in the literature review: Can particular past experiences or environmental factors predispose one towards an atheistic worldview? How does the atheistic worldview influence the justification of moral behaviour? Do atheists fear death, and if so, how do they deal with this fear? How do atheists imagine death and discuss death with others? Where do atheists turn for comfort in times of suffering and how do they comfort others? How do atheists approach the problem of currently unexplained phenomena? What provides an atheist with value, purpose or meaning in life?

I have organised this chapter into a number of sub-sections, each of which deals with one of these questions. In each sub-section, I present the research question, summarise previous work and discuss my results in light of this literature. I discuss the determinants of disbelief in Section 5.2, the basis of morality in Section 5.3, atheism as a worldview in Section 5.4, approaches to the life challenges in Section 5.5, and finding purpose in life in Section 5.6. To conclude the chapter, I provide a summary of the discussion in Section 5.7.

5.2 Determinants of Disbelief

Many participants in my study had been exposed to the concept of god(s) prior to their adoption of atheism by way of religion in childhood. My research question then became: With regards to people that are not raised as atheists, can particular past experiences or certain environmental factors predispose them towards an atheistic worldview?

5.2.1 A Gradual Process

With the exception of two respondents, all participants indicated that rather than a one-off life-changing event, the adoption of atheism was the final step in a long and gradual process.

Previous findings suggest that identification with either atheism or religion, whilst influenced by early childhood experiences, has generally been known to ‘resolve’ and consequently ‘strengthen’ in young adulthood (Small, 2009, p.334; Herzbrun, p.4; Orozak, 1989). Likewise, the participants in my sample mentioned that apostasy and the shift towards disbelief began in adolescence, often lasted in excess of ten years, included a significant period of agnosticism and resolved with the formation of an atheistic worldview in young adulthood. This also is consistent with previous research which suggests that apostasy and atheistic conversion commonly occur before an individual turns thirty years of age (Caldwell-Harris et al., 2010, p. 8; Vetter & Green, 1932, p. 188). The ‘rich’ and descriptive nature of my qualitative results underpins the cross-validation of these other quantitative studies. One exception to theme of a gradual transition was Matthew, who was raised as an atheist in China and had very little exposure to religion. The other exception was Catherine (raised as a Catholic) who experienced a one-off “light on the road to Damascus” event that made her feel sure of the non-existence of God (see Chapter 4, Section 4.3.1.1).

5.2.2 Inconsistency in Religion

Previous research found that when atheists are asked about what made them lose faith in god(s), most emphasise intellectual reasons (Caldwell-Harris et al., 2010; Vetter & Green, 1932). For example, Caldwell-Harris et al. (2010, pp. 7-8) found that the most common reply to this question is that religion didn’t make logical sense (47%) or that it didn’t fit with science (12%). Many participants in my sample also emphasised inconsistencies in religion as contributing factors to the dismantling of their previously held beliefs and the subsequent formation of their atheistic worldviews. These inconsistencies in religion included perceived contradictions found within religious texts and doctrines.

Vetter & Green (1932) found that a wide reading of science, history and religion was the most common explanation for the adoption of atheism among their participants.⁶ A more recent survey also found that atheists have higher levels of religious knowledge than do believers, even when education is held constant (Cooperman et al., 2010). Some participants in my study mentioned that they lost respect for religion when the lessons of history were inconsistent with the credibility they thought religious institutions should hold: “It wasn’t until I got to Seventh Form that I realised that King Henry created a Church just because he wanted a divorce,” (Anne). In addition, some participants’ robust knowledge of the many different belief systems which make universal truth claims led them to be sceptical of the

⁶ I acknowledge that this reference is very old but it is widely cited in the current literature and as part of that ongoing discourse, it needs to be covered in this thesis.

possibility that god(s) had revealed truth to any one of these religions: “How can one possibly be right at the expense of others?” (Jenny).

The thematic results from my qualitative analysis suggest that inconsistencies within religious doctrine are contributing factors to the adoption of atheism. This theme was identified as a strong one as there were no ‘dissenting’ or ‘opposing’ views, although some participants did not offer an opinion on the subject in the course of the interview.

5.2.3 Environments Amenable to Atheism

The “Naturalistic Account of Religion” claims that the origins of supernatural belief can be explained by the continual misfiring of a cognitive, hyperactive agency detection device (HADD), formerly advantageous to human survival (see Chapter 2, Section 2.4.1.1). Following this reasoning, Barrett (2004) maintains that certain special environmental conditions that “thwart or reduce the theistic-consistent outputs from the agency detection module” (Saler & Ziegler, 2006, p. 20) could make atheism more likely among some populations (see Chapter 2, Section 2.5). Empirical studies which find higher education to be positively associated with atheism (Caldwell-Harris et al., 2010; Cooperman et al., 2010; Martin, 2007; Saler & Ziegler, 2006; Vetter & Green, 1932; Willits & Funk, 1989; Wuthnow & Mellinger, 1978) are consistent with Barrett’s (2004) claims, as many HADD-thwarting conditions such as low physical risk, rewarding employment, opportunities for reflective thought and plenty of non-theistic alternatives are characteristic of academic environments.

Consistent with previous work, and with the exception of two respondents, all participants in my study were either in High School or University when their journey towards the adoption of atheism began (Wuthnow & Mellinger, 1978, Willits & Funk, 1989), and many cited the influential role education played in their decisions. (The exceptions were Matthew and Alexander, as explained above). Also consistent with previous work (Alidoosti, 2009), participants self-identified as being rational, practical, sceptical, mechanical and scientific in their outlook (qualities which thrive in academic environments). In addition, eight of the twelve participants in my study were students (five postgraduates and three undergraduates) and two were lecturers.

5.2.4 Defective Fathers

Freud, among others, believed that the emotions people associate with their ‘father figure(s)’ may indeed be projected onto their ‘God concept,’ as the monotheistic God is often portrayed and imagined as the ultimate ‘father figure’ (Luijpen, 1964; Olthuis, 1985; Vitz, 1999). Vitz’s (1999) “Defective Father” hypothesis maintains that the adoption of atheism is

often an irrational, psychological and emotionally charged reaction towards losing one's father by way of death, neglect or a troubled relationship (see Chapter 2, Section 2.8). While my findings cannot be generalised because of the specificity of my sample, half of my participants indicated that they had strained or non-existent relationships with biological fathers and/or other 'father figures.' (The other half of my respondents either had healthy relationships with their 'father figures' or failed to mention them in the course of the interview). However, due to other thematic results (see Section 5.2.2 and 5.2.3) and previous empirical work (Caldwell-Harris et al., 2010; Vetter & Green, 1932), which suggests that atheism is adopted for logical reasons, my position is not aligned with Vitz's (1999) interpretation that disbelief is predominantly an irrational reaction: A 'defective' relationship with a 'father figure' does not inevitably lead to irrationality. Nonetheless, I suggest that the potential relationship between the 'father figure' and the adoption of atheism is an interesting one and could usefully be explored further.

5.3 The Basis of Morality

Some authors have provided evidence of a popular view in many societies today that atheists lack the basis for morality (Baggini, 2003; Edgell et al., 2006; Harding, 2007; Lacroix, 1965; Martin, 1990). Empirical evidence suggests that atheists are America's least trusted group (Edgell et al., 2006) and Bryant (2008) claims that New Zealand is in a period of moral decline due to rising levels of atheism and agnosticism.

In fact, the thematic results from my qualitative analysis suggest that my participants see their moral behaviour as very similar to that of theists, although they perceive the justification behind their morality to be very different. This theme was identified as a strong one and differences in the views offered by respondents were minor and/or trivial. Consistent with previous work (Michel, 2009) participants claimed that the basis of morality did not require belief in god(s) (as it does in the "Divine Command" theory; see Chapter 2, Section 2.4) because evolutionary theory can provide alternative explanations and justifications for moral behaviour: "We evolved to be moral so we don't need God to explain morality" (Peter). Moral behaviour increases the likelihood of survival for an individual, an individual's genetic code, families, other groups within society, and the society itself, by way of 'mutual advantage' and 'reciprocal altruism.' "Selfishness, in a genetic sense, actually makes us pretty good" (Elle).

5.4 Atheism as a Worldview

As mentioned in Chapter 2 (Section 2.4), following the direction of Freud, Nicholi (as cited in Southerland et al., 2001) states that worldviews can be divided into two main categories: naturalistic/materialist or ‘supernatural.’

Despite the potential compatibility of atheism with some forms of supernaturalism and religion, previous work notes that atheism usually coincides with an interpretation of the world that is in line with naturalistic materialism (Baggini, 2003; Hebel, 1999; Lavender, 2009; Ysseldyk et al., 2010). This relationship between atheism and naturalistic materialism is so prominent that some academics have gone so far as to build naturalism into their definition of atheism (Harding, 2007, p. 150).

Although being a positive atheist does not require one to be a naturalistic materialist (see Chapter 2, Section 2.4.1.2), my thematic results further support the existing evidence of a strong relationship between the two philosophical positions. I have made this conclusion based on a number of findings in my study. Some participants referred to their naturalistic materialist stance when answering questions: “It’s just all matter floating around and when you are dead, you no longer exist” (Nick). Additionally, participants reported that when they required comfort in times of suffering, they did not mention any spiritual activities or supernatural entities. Likewise, when comforting others, they predominantly offered practical support and ridiculed the use of prayer.

Consistent with naturalistic materialism, no participants indicated a belief in an afterlife. An afterlife is an event which lies, in principle, beyond the scope of scientific explanation and is outside of natural laws; therefore, it is a supernatural belief. Participants expressed with confidence the view that consciousness is dependent entirely on the brain and that the human spirit or the soul does not exist beyond its use as a symbolic term. When asked about unexplained phenomena, participants indicated that nothing is unexplainable by science but is only currently inexplicable due to a lack of resources, technology or prior research. This view implies that no events or entities lie beyond the scope of scientific inquiry, which again coincides with the naturalistic materialist worldview. (There were no ‘dissenting’ views offered by participants with regards to this type of worldview).

5.5 The Atheistic Worldview and Life Challenges

Previous research has concluded that supernatural worldviews perform roles for people, including comforting them in their suffering, allaying their fear of death and explaining things

that cannot otherwise be explained (Dennett, 2006, pp. 102-103). This raises the question as to how atheists (who are often also naturalist materialists) cope with life's uncertainties and ills.

5.5.1 Comfort

Supernatural worldviews help comfort people in their suffering (Dennett, 2006; Peteet, 2001). Peteet (2001, p. 189) found that theists identify with their deities in order to feel less alone and/or more dignified in times of suffering. Atheists, however, cannot benefit from such identification as they lack belief in god(s). The results of my research suggested that all participants provided themselves with 'terrestrial' means (see Chapter 2, Section 2.4.2.1) of comfort in the absence of supernatural belief. They turned to human relationships, periods of introversion, positive self-talk and scientific knowledge for comfort. Additionally, they preferred to comfort friends and family members in trouble by offering practical support. Such findings are consistent with Peteet's (2001, p. 189) research which show that atheists rely on their stoicism, bravery, integrity, intellectual honesty and friendships in times of pain, loss or death.

5.5.2 Death

Previous research has concluded that supernatural worldviews help believers by allaying their fear of death (Dennett, 2006). The thematic results of my qualitative analysis suggest that the atheistic worldview held by research participants impacted on their reflections on death and dying. Because none of the participants believed in an afterlife, they did not expect existence or conscious experience following the point of death. (No 'dissenting' views were offered). This expectation of non-existence was often paralleled with the rather comforting notion of an infinite and dreamless sleep; therefore, participants did not fear death in itself, and hence, fear allayment was not required. This finding complements and builds on previous work which suggests that atheists generally feel ambivalent towards death (Hapsanto, 2010). Some participants mentioned that when they had previously believed in god(s), they experienced *more* anxiety when contemplating death. This is because the fear of judgement associated with afterlife myths such as Heaven and Hell, for example, had increased their fear of the 'other-side.'

5.5.3 Unexplained Phenomena

Previous research has concluded that theism explains things that cannot otherwise be explained (Dennett, 2006). None of the atheists in my study, however, expressed any desire for theistic explanations of currently unexplained phenomena. All participants who offered an

opinion on this subject preferred a world in which some things went unexplained and viewed the converse as boring. Theistic explanations for unexplained phenomena were often seen as destructive to scientific progress and the human imagination. Consistent with both naturalistic materialism and a belief in scientific progress, and as indicated in Section 5.4 above, most participants interpret current inexplicability as a product of a lack of scientific resources, technology or prior research.

5.6 Purpose in Life

There is considerable empirical evidence correlating strong religious identification, church attendance or belief in the afterlife with higher levels of subjective well-being, resilience against depression and higher life satisfaction (Greenfield & Marks, 2007; Koteskey et al., 1991; Lim & Putnam, 2009, March; Steinitz, 1980; Ysseldyk et al., 2009, February). Some authors attribute these mental health benefits to the acceptance of a theistic worldview according to which life is purposive (Pargament, 2002). Conversely, atheism has been criticised by some with claims that only a belief in god(s) prevents life from being absurd and without purpose or value (Baggini, 2003; Harding, 2007; Martin, 1990). Herzbrun (1999) contests this, however, by providing research results that suggests that non-believers find meaning in life by helping other people and making contributions to society.

None of the participants in my sample identified with a ‘higher purpose’ in life, and all of those that offered an opinion cited chance mutations and natural selection in evolutionary processes as the explanation for the origins of their consciousness. Refuting teleological arguments, Elle asked: “What’s the purpose of a hippopotamus? We are just another mammal that happened to evolve consciousness.” Therefore, my findings appear to be consistent with the conclusions made by Peteet (2001, p. 189): “Individuals with a naturalistic or atheistic worldview consciously reject a purposeful explanation for the Universe.”

Yet, the perceived lack of purpose in life did not remove the value that most participants put on life experiences nor the joy that they obtained from those experiences. (There were no ‘dissenting’ views; however, some participants expressed themselves differently and some failed to offer an opinion). Indeed, the finitude of existence expected by participants appeared to increase the value they put on life and inspired them to appreciate each present moment. Consistent with previous work (Michel, 2009), interpersonal human relationships created a sense of ‘terrestrial’ meaning for many of the atheists in my sample.

5.7 Summary

This chapter has explored the salience of previous studies to the responses of my academia-based sample of atheists. Some of my findings were consistent with earlier work whereas others were not. I made the observation in Chapter 2 that the current social science literature relating to atheism still relies on some very old references, which I believe, reflects an insufficiency in the amount of available research. In Chapter 6, the concluding chapter, I provide a summary of my work, acknowledge the limitations of my study and make some suggestions for future research in this underdeveloped field. I then finish the chapter by discussing the implications of my research.

Chapter 6

Conclusion and Recommendations

6.1 Introduction

The previous two chapters presented the thematic results of this study and discussed them in relation to my research objectives and existing literature. This chapter concludes the substantive discussion by presenting a summary of the study, acknowledging the limitations of the research, and recommending strategies for further research on atheism. The recommendations are derived from the thesis discussion and are presented as a series of bullet points. The implications of my research are then presented.

6.2 Summary

This thesis aimed to explore atheists' reflections on major life issues. Very little qualitative research has been undertaken on the subject of atheism (Small, 2009, p.345; Michel, 2009, p.3) and therefore rich descriptive results are scarce. My thesis is an exploratory study which hopefully begins to address this gap in the literature.

Many questions in the study of atheism still remained unanswered when I began my study. My interview questions took an interest in several of them: Can particular past experiences or certain environmental factors predispose one towards an atheistic worldview? Do atheists fear death, and if so, how do they deal with this fear? How do atheists imagine death and discuss death with others? Where do atheists turn in a time of suffering and how do they comfort others? How do atheists approach the problem of currently unexplained phenomena? How do atheists justify morality without god(s)? What provides an atheist with value, purpose or meaning in life?

My research objectives and questions were not geared to making generalisations about the characteristics of "Christchurch atheists," but rather, they were designed to explore the social and psychological processes by which some atheists respond to life events. (In other words, I was not looking for 'typical' or 'average' cases). Hence, the data that I have collected for this study are a representation of the experiences of the atheists who participated in my research and the way they have described those experiences. They are not a representative of all atheists or even the ones residing in wider Christchurch area outside of academic settings.

I conducted 12 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with Christchurch-based atheists in academic settings between September 2010 and November 2010 to address these questions. The qualitative analysis of these data provided a number of interesting and relevant thematic results. Some of these results were consistent with previous literature on atheism and some of them were not (see, for example, Chapter 5, Sections 5.2.4 and 5.3).

All of the atheists in my sample identified themselves as naturalistic materialists, believed in the potential for science to explain all phenomena, repudiated belief in an afterlife, did not practice spiritual or religious activities and did not see purpose built into a universe made entirely of matter-energy. Consistent with previous work (Michel, 2009; Herzbrun, 1999), the perceived lack of purpose in life, however, did not remove the value that most atheists put on life experiences nor the joy that they obtained from those experiences.

The results of my research suggested that atheists provide themselves with alternative means of comfort in the absence of supernatural beliefs. As seen from the point of view of their atheistic worldviews, death is not interpreted as a cause of fear. Hence, fear allayment is not necessary. This finding complements and builds on previous work which suggests that atheists are generally ambivalent towards death (Hapsanto, 2010). None of the atheists in my study expressed a need for theistic explanations of currently unexplained phenomena. Many participants indicated that they preferred a world in which things went unexplained and viewed the converse as boring. This might be partly explained by the finding that respondents identified themselves as being rational, practical, mechanical, sceptical and scientific in their outlook, which is also consistent with the findings that higher education, academic environments, scientific knowledge and rationalism are positively associated with atheism (Caldwell-Harris et al., 2010; Cooperman et al., 2010; Vetter & Green, 1932; Willits & Funk, 1989; Wuthnow & Mellinger, 1978; Alidoosti, 2009). With the exception of two participants, all of the atheists indicated that apostasy and the shift from theistic belief to positive atheism began in their adolescence, often lasted in excess of ten years and included a significant period of agnosticism.

Half of the participants in the study mentioned that they had strained relationships with either their biological father or a father substitute. These findings seem consistent with some parts of the “Defective Father” hypothesis and with previous empirical work which imply a link between atheism and “defective” relationships with ‘father figures’ (Vetter & Green, 1932; Ullman, 1982; Vitz, 1999). However, corresponding to other thematic results from my research (see Chapter 5, Section 5.2.2 and 5.2.3) and other conflicting findings from previous empirical work (Caldwell-Harris et al., 2010; Vetter & Green, 1932), which suggest

that atheism is adopted for logical reasons, my position is not aligned with Vitz's (1999) interpretation that disbelief is an irrational reaction: I suggest that the potential relationship between the 'father figure' and the adoption of atheism is an interesting one and needs to be explored further.

Popular literature, empirical research and historical data provide evidence of a popular view in many societies today that atheists act immorally, behave dishonestly and lack the basis for morality (Baggini, 2003; Edgell et al., 2006; Harding, 2007; Lacroix, 1965; Martin, 1990). Many of the participants in my study, however, refuted the "Divine Command" theory and provided alternative justifications for their own moral standards.

6.3 Research Limitations

Potential participants were recruited using the snowball (or chain) sampling method. An initial group of respondents were asked to suggest others who may be willing to participate in the research. The snowball recruitment method, together with the location of most of the recruitment advertisements, meant that most participants had an affiliation with Lincoln University by way of work or study and thus were not necessarily 'typical' atheists. Hence, the generalisability of my research findings is limited due to this recruitment technique, in addition to my small sample size. Hence, my thematic results are not representative of all atheists or even the ones residing in wider Christchurch area outside of academic settings. Given the opportunity to conduct further research in this field, I would select a larger sample size, I would utilise a randomised recruitment method and I would also study theists (as control groups) to further substantiate findings from my research in underdeveloped areas such as the gradual transition to atheism, atheists' lack of fear of death and their preference for unexplained phenomena.

Another limitation is related to the self-selected nature of participant involvement. This may have skewed the sample towards over-representing those atheists who were more comfortable talking about their atheist stance than others, and/or more passionate in their stance than other disbelievers, perhaps seeing the research as a way to promulgate their non-beliefs. Interestingly enough, Small (2009, p.336) found that atheists, more so than religious participants, expressed particular gratitude for the opportunity that they were given to share their perspectives. Prudently, I would use randomised selection procedures to help reduce the likelihood of skewed samples in future studies.

I was also limited by using semi-structured interviews as the sole method to gain an insight into atheists' personal reflections. It meant that I was only able to obtain one-point-in-

time responses and therefore could not compare verbal responses with physical behaviour. For example, an interviewee's self-proclamation of his or her own high moral standing in the presence of an interviewer does not guarantee that their behaviour will be honest and ethical. Given the opportunity, I would build on what I have already accomplished in this thesis by conducting an observational study which would provide more conclusive findings when investigating moral standards

6.4 Recommendations for Further Research

Much of the literature presented in this thesis is theoretical and based on untested hypotheses. There is often insufficient empirical research to support these hypotheses and much of the findings that do exist are not consistent with theory. I noted earlier that the current social science literature relating to atheism still relies on some very dated references (such as Vetter & Green's widely cited 1932 study) which further emphasises the apparent scarcity of research exploring the personal reflections and social lives of atheists. Of particular concern is the very small quantity of previous qualitative work on atheists (Michel, 1999; Small, 2009). The existing literature relies heavily on quantitative survey research which produces mostly 'surface' results. Although my research provides rich descriptions of atheists reflecting on their position and the impacts it has on their lives (something which was largely missing from the current literature until now), it was limited by its specific methodology. Therefore, with this and the shortage of previous work in mind, much more research is required in this developing field. Researchers might consider the following recommendations which arise from my current study:

- There appears that there may be a link between the loss of a 'father figure' by way of death or a troubled relationship and the adoption of an atheistic worldview. These findings seem consistent in some parts with the implications of Sigmund Freud (as cited in Luijpen, 1964, p. 210) and the "Defective Father" hypothesis (Vitz, 1999). However, little quantitative work appears to support the theory (Vetter & Green, 1932; Ullman, 1982; Vitz, 1999). A comparative quantitative study which explores father-child relationships among random samples of atheists and theists could be used to test this hypothesis further.
- In light of the recent traumatic earthquakes that have affected Christchurch city, longitudinal studies following atheists over several years of their lives provides a potential laboratory as to how such major life events affect their worldview. The "Compensator" theory of religion states that "primary compensators" required in times

of danger decrease the likelihood of adopting atheism. Additionally, “secondary compensators,” needed when someone has children or is becoming elderly, are also said to decrease the likelihood of adopting atheism. Research which made it possible to follow individuals over a number of years, examining whether the events of natural disasters, child rearing or the aging process affect their worldview, would help further test the viability of this theory.

- A well-planned, well-resourced, observational study would provide more conclusive findings when investigating moral standards; notably when searching for consistency or divergence between ‘words’ and ‘actions’ in the case of comparative random samples of theists and atheists.
- Genetic research could take up Saler & Ziegler’s (2006, p. 25) claim that “variations in the activation threshold or sensitivity of the agency detection module *could* stem from a genetic mechanism.” Such research would also help to confirm whether or not belief in the supernatural does arise from the continual misfiring of an overly-sensitive, agency-detection, cognitive device previously beneficial to human survival (Dennett, 2006; Mills, 1995; Saler & Ziegler, 2006).

6.5 Implications of my Research

Despite the limitations mentioned above, my research has begun to address a gap in the literature by providing a number of rich descriptions of the personal reflections of atheists. The thematic results of my study, whilst limited in their generalisability, seem to be consistent in some ways with existing theory; supporting some of the more established literature but also encouraging further testing of insufficiently supported hypotheses such as the “Defective Father” hypothesis. Some findings of my study, such as the participants’ gradual transitions to atheism often beginning in adolescence, their lack of fear of death and their preference for unexplained phenomena, require further substantiation and thereby encourage further research into these previously underdeveloped areas.

Generally, parts of my research and previous work (Caldwell-Harris et al., 2010; Vetter & Green, 1932) suggest that the atheistic worldview has been adopted by adherents for logical reasons. Of particular concern among my respondents were perceived inconsistencies in religion, lessons from history and the acquisition of scientific knowledge. However, I do also acknowledge the possibility that emotionally charged psychological influences may accompany ‘logical’ explanations of the formation of worldviews. My discussions with participants about their experiences with both religion and atheism were mostly emotive.

They frequently incorporated the powerful themes of guilt, fear, alienation, grief, anger, joy, pleasure, inspiration and excitement in their responses. Whilst limited in generalisability, my results also seem to support Vitz's (1999) suggestion that there may be a potential relationship between 'defective father figures' and the adoption of atheism.

I suggest that the atheistic worldview is not adopted for purely rational reasons, even though these reasons are often cited as being the most prominent (see Caldwell-Harris, et al., 2010; Vetter & Green, 1932). Instead, a number of other factors may also be involved, as emphasised in the literature for worldview formation in general (see Chapter 2, Section 2.4.3). These factors may include childhood emotional experiences and related psychological processes, (Hebel, 1999; Olthuis, 1985; Ullman, 1982) particularly in the case of atheism - those residual emotions from relationships with 'father figures' (Rizzuto, as cited in Peteet, 2001; Vetter & Green, 1932; Vitz, 1999).

Most pertinent, however, is that for whatever combination of reasons participants adopted their atheistic worldviews, their new interpretations of the world changed how they felt and how they reacted to life challenges (such as death, suffering and unexplained phenomena). Hence, once adopted, not only does a worldview provide "both a sketch of and a blueprint for reality; describing what we see and stipulating what we should see" (Olthuis, 1985, p. 29), but our feelings and reactions towards events also change accordingly.

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Appendix A: Advertisement Calling for Potential Research Participants



Department of Social Science, Parks, Recreation, Tourism and Sport
Faculty of Environment, Society and Design

Atheists Wanted as Participants for Lincoln University Research

My name is Joshua Huisman and I am a Master's of Social Science student at Lincoln University. I am currently recruiting participants for my thesis research project. The title of the thesis is 'No Invisible Means of Support: Life Challenges and the Atheistic Worldview.'

This research examines a largely unexplored area in which little work has been done, especially in New Zealand. Due to the lack of previous research, I wish to conduct an exploratory study, analysing Christchurch-based atheists' personal reflections on major life issues. Participation would involve one interview (approximately one hour or so) in July, August or September this year. With your consent, the interview will be recorded and transcribed for my thesis. Anonymity will, of course, be preserved throughout the whole process.

If you or anyone you know is willing to assist (participation is of course voluntary), I would like to know about your or their reflections on life issues and the atheistic worldview. Please contact me or my supervisors using the following contact details:

Researcher:

Joshua Huisman

Environment, Society and Design Student

Josh.huisman@lincolnuni.ac.nz

Supervisors:

Dr. Suzanne Vallance

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Bob Gidlow

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This research has been reviewed and approved by the Human Ethics Committee of
Lincoln University.

Appendix B: Email for Potential Interview Participants

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN;

Thank you for your interest in my project! The title of the thesis is 'No Invisible Means of Support: Life Challenges and the Atheistic Worldview.' The information collected is for a Master's of Social Science thesis at Lincoln University. Your involvement would be appreciated but of course, participation is completely voluntary.

This research examines a largely unexplored area in which little work has been conducted, especially in New Zealand. Little is known about atheism from a social-scientific perspective so I aim to conduct an exploratory study of atheism in Christchurch. The research will include interviews with avowed atheists from within the wider Christchurch area.

Your participation would involve one interview (approximately one hour or so) in July, August or September this year. If you consent, then the interview will be recorded (with your approval) and transcribed for my thesis. You may consent to the interviews without consent to recording and in this case, notes may be taken instead.

Anonymity will, of course, be preserved throughout the whole process. You will not be identified as a participant. Pseudonyms will be used so that your information cannot be linked back to you.

Even if you agree to participate in my research, you may withdraw from the study, including withdrawal of any information you have provided, by 1st December 2010. If you have any concerns about the content of what you have told me during an interview situation, you can contact me and request a copy of the transcript to review. Any alterations you wish to make to the transcript, however, must be made by 1st December 2010, which is the date when I begin the write-up of my results.

For the purposes of my research the following definition of atheism has been used:

"An atheist is opposed to the general tenets of theism. It is a position that does not involve belief in a God or gods. In addition, most atheists are especially opposed to the idea of a personal, singular, intervening creator."

Could you please let me know if you fit this definition of atheism? If you do, I would like to know your opinions and reflections on life issues and learn more about the atheistic worldview.

Once again, your interest in my project is much appreciated. I will give you some time to consider whether or not you would still like to participate in the interview. I will contact you again in 3 to 4 days to see if you are willing to participate. If you do decide to participate, we can then arrange a mutually suitable time and location to meet (for example, a public café, your home or my house – whichever suits you best).

If you know of anyone else who would be willing to participate and who is also, to your knowledge, an atheist over 18 years old, please inform them of my study and invite them to contact me.

This research is under the supervision of Bob Gidlow and Suzanne Vallance and has been reviewed and approved by the Lincoln University Human Ethics Committee.

Kindest Regards,

Joshua Huisman
Faculty of Environment, Society, and Design
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Tel.: (03) 325-3820
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Appendix C: Interviewee Information Sheet

Name of Project: 'No Invisible Means of Support: Life Challenges and the Atheistic Worldview.'

You are invited to participate in a project called 'No Invisible Means of Support: Life Challenges and the Atheistic Worldview.' The aim of the project is to conduct an exploratory study of atheism in Christchurch. The information collected is for the purposes of a Master's of Social Science thesis. Your participation in the research is completely voluntary but would be very much appreciated.

- Participation in the project involves responding to questions in a recorded interview situation which should take approximately an hour to complete. You may consent to the interviews without consent to recording, and in this case, notes may be taken instead.
- The interview data are anonymous and you will not be identified as a respondent. Interview data will be number coded for data entry (instead of using names) and the recording will be stored safely in lockers located at Lincoln University with no available access to the public. Consent forms will be stored separately in a secure location at Lincoln University. The results of the research will appear only in aggregate form. If quotes are given, pseudonyms will be used so that they cannot be linked back to you.
- You may withdraw your participation, including withdrawal of any information you have provided, by 1st December 2010. If you wish to withdraw your information, please contact me or my supervisors (contact details are given below), on or before this date.
- If you have any concerns about the content of what you have told me during an interview situation you can also contact me and request a copy of the transcript to review. Any alterations you wish to make to the transcript must also be made by 1st December 2010, which is the date when I begin to write-up my results.

For any further questions regarding the research, please feel free to contact my supervisors or myself. We will be available before, during and after the interview:

This research is under the supervision of Bob Gidlow and Suzanne Vallance and has been reviewed and approved by the Lincoln University Human Ethics Committee.

Joshua Huisman

(Researcher)

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Appendix D: Interviewee Consent Form

Name of Project: “No Invisible Means of Support: Life Challenges and the Atheistic Worldview” (Your participation in this research is completely voluntary).

I have read and understood the description of this project. On this basis, I agree to participate as a subject in the project. I agree to have the interview digitally recorded/ I do not agree to have the interview digitally recorded but agree to note-taking of the interview (Please strike out whichever does not apply). I consent to publication of the results of the project with the understanding that anonymity will be preserved. I understand also that I may withdraw from the project, including withdrawal of any information I have provided by 1st December 2010. I understand that if I have any concerns about the content of the interview, I can contact Joshua Huisman and request a copy of the transcript to review. I also understand that any alterations I wish to make to the transcript must also be made by 1st December 2010.

Name: _____

Signed: _____ Date: _____

This research has been reviewed and approved by the Lincoln University Human Ethics Committee.

For the researcher's use only: Participant number

Appendix E: Interview Guide

General Questions

1. What is your age?
2. Could you please tell me a little bit about yourself? For example; describe some of your childhood experiences, or your education and your current situation?
3. Could you please describe the relationships you had with your parents as a child?
4. Could you please tell me about some of the encounters you have had with religion or spirituality in your life?
5. Could you please start by telling me a little bit about how and why you first started identifying with the position of atheism?
6. Can you name any major life events that affected your choice in becoming an atheist?

Comfort and Suffering

7. It has been suggested that belief in god(s) provides roles for people such as comforting them in their suffering. Could you please tell me about where you have turned, if anywhere, in a time of suffering or difficulty in general?
8. Could your please tell me about a time in which a close friend, relative or dependent was in serious suffering and how you may have attempted to comfort them in that situation?
9. Do you think difficult times like these would be easier if you believed in god(s)?
10. How do you think people who believe in god(s) differ from you (if at all) in the way they approach suffering?
11. Do you think people who believe in god(s) benefit from that belief in times of suffering?

Death and Dying

12. What do you believe happens to an individual after they die?
13. It has been suggested that belief in god(s) helps allay peoples' fear of death. Do you fear death as an atheist? If so, how do you deal with this fear of death?

14. Can you recall any moments where you have had to encounter the sensitive subject of death with someone else and how dealt with this situation? How do you think your approach differs to a theistic approach?

Unexplained Phenomena

15. It has been suggested that belief in god(s) helps to explain things that cannot otherwise be explained. Could you please tell me about how you approach the problems of the unexplained as an atheist?

16. If a child asked you to explain something that was otherwise unexplained by Science or other reliable sources of knowledge, how would you respond in this situation? How might a theist differ?

Morality

17. Could you please explain to me the main features of your moral beliefs?

18. How, if at all, are your morals influenced by the fact that you are an atheist?

19. What would you say the major influences of your moral outlook are? (If prompting needed: "E.g. are there any authors, sources, general principles, golden rules etc. that can be emphasised?")

20. Some may argue that it is impossible to have an absolute standard of morality without a belief in god(s). How would you respond to such a claim?

Meaning in Life

21. Some may argue that if there is no god(s), then human life in general has no purpose. How would you respond to such a claim? Could you please give a few examples of what provides meaning in your life?