

# Why I am an Atheist

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What is the state of belief of an atheist? An atheist is often defined as someone who does not believe in God. It is quite true that an atheist does not believe in God, but that is insufficient to define the state of belief of an atheist. A tree or a rock or a lizard does not believe in God either, but it would be bizarre to describe such beings as atheists. This is because they are not believers at all, in anything. And even a dog or a chimpanzee, which plausibly does have beliefs, is hardly to be characterized as an atheist. Furthermore, an agnostic does not believe in God either, since he suspends belief on the question.

What is missing, obviously, is the fact that an atheist disbelieves in the existence of God: he believes that there is no God. He doesn't merely lack belief in a divinity; he positively believes in the absence of a divinity. Moreover, he takes his negative belief to be rational, to be backed by reasons. He doesn't just find himself with a belief that there is no God; he comes to that belief by what he takes to be rational means. That is, he takes his belief to be justified. He may not regard his atheistic belief as certain, but he certainly takes it to be reasonable, or as reasonable as any belief he holds. Just by holding the belief he regards himself as rationally entitled to it (or else he wouldn't, as a responsible believer, believe it, that being the nature of belief).

Also, given the nature of belief, he takes himself to know that there is no God: for to believe that *p* is to take oneself to know that *p*. The atheist, like any believer in a proposition, regards his belief as an instance of knowledge (of course, it may not be, but he necessarily takes it to be so). So an atheist is someone who thinks that he knows there is no God. Thus he is prepared responsibly to assert that there is no God. The atheist

regards himself as knowing that there is no God in just the sense that he regards himself as knowing, say, that the earth is round. He claims to know the objective truth about the universe in respect of a divinity, that the universe contains no such entity. Of course, this entails that he claims to know that other people's beliefs on this question are false, i.e. the theists who believe that there is a God. He also claims to know that the agnostics are mistaken too: they suspend belief when it is rational to commit oneself on the question.

If an agnostic asserts that only a state of non-belief about the existence of God is rational, the atheist takes the view that this is false: it is rational to hold positively that there is no God, not merely to be neutral on the question. The atheist thus claims to know that theists and agnostics are epistemically defective: they have false and unwarranted beliefs about the question of God's existence. He then has reason to wish to alter their beliefs so as to bring them into line with the truth. True beliefs are better than false ones, and he has the true beliefs while theirs are false.

It would be quite wrong, then, to describe an atheist as a "non-believer." He does not merely lack beliefs; he has many beliefs, among them that there is no God. It is not that the atheist is somehow shy of belief or afflicted with pathologically high standards for belief formation; he is not a skeptic, one who shuns belief. He is as much a believer as the theist; he just believes different things. It is not that there is a big hole in his belief system while the theist is bursting with robust beliefs; his beliefs are as numerous and sturdy as anyone's, just different, that's all. Indeed, the theist is as much a "non-believer" as the atheist is, since the theist does not believe that there is no God, thus failing to

possess a belief possessed by the atheist. And, of course, the atheist has many substantive beliefs that go along with his atheism, concerning the origin of the universe, life, the nature of morality, mortality, etc. Only from the point of the theist is he describable as a "non-believer"; from his own point of view, he believes in a great many things. From the atheist's perspective, the theist is as much a non-believer as the atheist is commonly taken to be, since the theist fails to hold many of his atheistic beliefs. The atheist is a red-blooded believer, indeed a confident (purported) knower.

To many observers, the atheist as thus described is an arrogant and unreasonable figure. He takes himself to be entitled to various beliefs and attitudes to which he is simply not entitled. He does not know what he so confidently takes himself to know. He has overstepped the epistemic mark. He is a dogmatist, an atheistic fundamentalist, as unreasonable as the most unflinching religionist. He claims knowledge where none can be had. Agnosticism is the only reasonable position, if theism is to be rejected; atheism is intellectually irresponsible. How can anyone know that there is no God, any more than we can know that there is a God? These matters are simply beyond human knowledge, it will be said, areas of deep and irremediable ignorance.

I count myself an atheist in the strong sense outlined, so am I guilty of going out on an epistemic limb, of claiming to know what cannot be known? Am I being unreasonable? I don't think I am, because there are many propositions affirming the nonexistence of things that most sensible people unhesitatingly accept. Take Santa Claus: what is your state of belief about him? Presumably, you do not believe that he exists; but are you an agnostic about his existence? Do you think it is unreasonable, scandalous even, to believe that Santa Claus does not exist? I doubt it. You actively disbelieve in the existence of a tubby, ageless, pink-faced man with a white beard and red clothes who lives in the north pole making toys for children, and who periodically mounts a sleigh to fly through the air powered by superfast reindeer in order to distribute these toys to the children who have been good. If some epistemic stickler were to insist that

only agnosticism is rational here, you would think him a bit nutty ("How can you be so certain there is no Santa Claus? Such certainty is beyond human epistemic powers!"). The reason is that you take yourself to have many good reasons to doubt that Santa exists: the story is made up to please gullible little children; searches of the north pole have not revealed the tubby philanthropist in question; it is preposterous to suppose that he could fly through the air with gravity-defying reindeer; he leaves no trace of his alleged journeys; parents have been known to purchase the gifts attributed to Santa's generosity. These are all solid reasons to believe the negative existential: "Santa Claus does not exist." Do they amount to cast-iron Cartesian certainty? No, but then nor do the vast majority of our beliefs; and this one seems no worse than, say, the belief that the earth orbits the sun or that Barack Obama exists.

We are not certain in a skepticism-proof way of many things, but that doesn't imply that we don't have good reasons for our beliefs, including beliefs that certain things that some people think exist (in this case, little kids) do not. Quite simply, we know there is no such person as Santa Claus. Here is another example: I tell you that there is a dragon in the room next to you, eight feet tall and breathing fire, called "Draggy." You express doubt, because you can't see anything dragon-like in the vicinity. I tell you that it isn't visible, audible, touchable, or smellable. Draggy is a very special kind of dragon, completely undetectable by the human senses or any other device; yet he exists. I then challenge you to disprove my claim. I insist that if you won't take my word for it then at least admit that you are agnostic on the question of Draggy's existence, since you can't prove he doesn't exist.

You might reply that I have defined Draggy in a very convenient way, so that no sensory evidence could possibly be given for or against his existence. The existential claim is totally unverifiable and unfalsifiable. Should you then be an agnostic about Draggy? That seems unduly cautious: it is more reasonable to suppose that I am playing a game with you, perhaps in order to scare you (I might go on to assert that when it thunders outside that is Draggy being petulant). You would be well

within your rights to say to me: "Rubbish, you are making this sh\*\* up; I totally disbelieve in the existence of your dubious Draggy or whatever you want to call it." I might then go on to remind you of Descartes, dreams, brains in vats, the difficulty of obtaining absolute certainty; but you would rightly not be impressed by such flimflam. People cannot just go around positing peculiar entities and expect you either to believe that they exist or admit that you don't know one way or the other.

Let me distinguish reasonable from excessive agnosticism. Reasonable agnosticism applies to cases where the evidence for and against a proposition is pretty evenly balanced. There are many such cases: Should we maintain a military presence in Afghanistan? Is there such a thing as dark matter? Was the moon ever part of the earth? Excessive agnosticism is the view that we should never commit ourselves as to the truth of a proposition. It is the natural response to various forms of extreme philosophical skepticism. What I am pointing out is that opponents of atheism practice selective excessive agnosticism: they insist on a skeptic's standard of evidence when it comes to the proposition that God does not exist. They accept that other negative existentials can be known to be true, as that Santa and Draggy do not exist, but they deny that the atheist's negative existential can be known to be true. My position is that both are in the same boat: that is, it is as reasonable to be an atheist as it is to be a disbeliever in Santa or Draggy. There is nothing inherently irrational in denying the existence of God, any more than it is inherently irrational to deny the existence of those other things. To suppose otherwise is to be what we might call a dogmatic agnostic: one who refuses on principle to disbelieve, no matter how good the evidence for disbelief is.

And now the question becomes what the reasons actually are to deny that God exists. Here I shall be brief, because this is well-trodden ground. In the first place, I do not think there is any evidence in favor of God's existence (by "God" I shall mean a supernatural being with some personal characteristics who created the universe and is interested in the fate of sentient beings such as ourselves). No observable fact about the universe

points towards God as its most plausible explanation, e.g. the intricate design of organisms. There is no good evidence of miracles on the part of specially endowed human beings or emanating from Beyond. The idea of a disembodied being with infinite causal powers existing imperceptibly is contrary to reason. The traditional story of such a being is better explained by certain human needs and superstitions instead of by the actual existence of such a being. It is never reasonable to believe in the existence of something simply because of human testimony, when no other evidence has ever been forthcoming. The traditional so-called proofs of God's existence, the first-cause argument, the ontological argument, the argument from design, do not hold water. In sum: there is simply nothing out there that amounts to a decent reason to assert that there is a God. As to arguments against, there is the standard problem of evil, as well as the more general problem of making sense of a being having all the qualities said to be possessed by God (e.g. how can God be truly omnipotent granted that he is a necessary being, for couldn't he act so as to extinguish himself, thereby showing his contingency?). There is really no more reason to believe in the God I have defined than in the Greek gods or other beings of myth and legend.

The theist may think I am being hasty and unfair. These are profound questions, she will say, not to be quickly decided. I agree that the considerations just adduced need to be thought through carefully (and I take myself to have done this work over the years), but the point that needs to be made here is that the theist is actually as hasty and unfair as she says I am. For every theist is also an atheist. That is, every believer in one god is a disbeliever in another. Believers in the Christian God disbelieve in the vengeful, jealous and capricious God of the Old Testament, as well as in the Hindu gods or the Greek gods or the nature gods of "primitive" tribes or any number of other "false gods." People believe in the reality of their own God, but they are not similarly credulous when it comes to other people's gods; here their disbelief is patent and powerful. They do not preach agnosticism



about those other gods; they reject them outright. I am with them on this point, but I extend it to their God too. My point is that they are as "dogmatic" as I am in their atheism; we are just atheists about different gods. I am an atheist about all gods; typical theists are atheists about the majority of gods believed in over the centuries by human beings of one tribe or another. I find their disbelief thoroughly sensible; I would merely urge them to push it one stage further. I favor total atheism; they favor selective atheism, none of that pusillanimous agnosticism for either of us. So please, theist, do not accuse me of epistemic irresponsibility in my atheism.

There used to be a big issue about monotheism and polytheism. Asserting the existence of only one god flew in the face of the beliefs of the polytheistic majority. No doubt the polytheists felt disrespected, and they wondered how the monotheists could be so sure that all those gods of old were mere fancy, poor non-existent beings, destined for the scrap heap of history. Some of the gods denied had ancient names, fervid followers, temples devoted to them, priests specializing in their doings, and the disbelieving monotheists wanted to abandon all of that in favor of their pinched unitary deity. The new monotheists were the atheists of their day, except that they retained a single divine being alone (hoping for a *reductio* the polytheists asked why, if they were ready to abandon nearly all the gods, they didn't go the whole way). Perhaps the polytheists urged a more cautious agnosticism on the monotheists with regard to the spurned deities; they rejected the offer, preferring outright disbelief. My state of belief mirrors theirs, except that I affirm zero gods instead of one. (In fact, the idea of many gods has its advantages over the one-god theory: it comports with the complexity of the world and it promotes tolerance.) Yahweh, Baal, Hadad, and Yam: which of these ancient gods do you believe in and which do you think fictitious? I believe in none of them, nor in any others that might be mentioned; if you believe in one of them and disbelieve in the others, then you are just like me with respect to those others. Atheism is not confined to atheists, and the epistemology is the same no matter which gods you disbelieve in.

I say I am an atheist, and that is true. But the label is misleading in that it characterizes me from the perspective of a theist: I am a rejecter of theism (why can't I describe theists as rejecters of atheism, thus privileging my own position?). This gives the impression that I go around rejecting theism, that I am preoccupied with that activity, that I wake up each day and celebrate my denial of God's existence. According to this picture, I am an atheist in the same way that I am a philosopher or a tennis player or hold certain moral views, these being traits of mine that define my "identity." But really I am atheist in the same way typical monotheists are a-polytheist: it's not something you think about, aside from the constant buzz of people asserting the opposite. Since there are no noisy polytheists left, monotheists don't need to occupy themselves with combating polytheism; nor is this something they fret about and ponder on a daily basis. They are beyond polytheism.

To be a theist who is labeled an a-polytheist would be an odd mode of description today, true but hardly central, significant. You could be an a-polytheist and scarcely have given the topic a moment's thought; it is simply a logical implication of your assumed monotheism. For me, to be called an atheist feels similarly weird, as if I am defined by one of disbeliefs (I'm also an a-scientologist, an a-Santa-ist, an a-werewolf-ist, etc). If theists were in the minority, and quieter, I doubt that the term "atheist" would be much used; and if that minority were very small, theists might be called "a-naturalists" or some such thing. I am defined as an atheist only in a certain social context. I used to be a serious engaged atheist, when I was thinking systematically and passionately about religion, some forty years ago, when I was in the heated process of rejecting religious claims. But since then my atheism has become merely reactive; where once the lava was hot, now it is cool. I used to believe in ghosts and goblins too, as well as Santa, but once the process of rejecting these entities was over, my state of belief became one mainly of indifference. It would be odd, though literally true, to describe me as someone who disbelieves in ghosts, goblins and Santa, as if this were what my thought

processes were all about. I am beyond these things as I assume you are too. And that is my actual position with respect to God: I am post-theist, or I would be if I were not placed in a social context in which I need to defend my settled beliefs (hence this essay). I no longer debate the issue with myself or wonder whether I might be making a serious mistake (though I concede, as a good fallibilist, that it is logically possible that I am wrong, as it is about almost everything I believe). So my state of belief is not that of one continuously denying the existence of God, with an active belief that there is no such entity (though it is true that I am more often in this state than I would be if the issue were not constantly debated around me). I am, dispositionally at any rate, in a state of implicit disbelief with respect to God, as I am in a state of implicit disbelief about ghosts, goblins and Santa. I simply take it for granted that there is no God, instead of constantly asserting it to myself. The state of mind I am in while composing this essay is not, then, my habitual state of mind, and even to be explicitly denying the existence of God strikes me as taking the issue a little too seriously, as it would be to write an essay making explicit my negative implicit beliefs about Santa Claus. So I am really as much post-atheist as post-theist, when it comes to my natural state of mind, just as I suppose that most people are post-a-polytheist as well as post-polytheist. Polytheism, for most people, is simply a dead issue, not a subject of active concern. Theism for me is a dead issue, which is why it is misleading to call me an atheist, though it is of course strictly true that I am. It is misleading in just the way that it is misleading to speak of a traditional Christian as an a-polytheist or a normal adult as an a-Santa-ist, since it suggests a far more active engagement with the issue than is the case. Many other difficult issues engage my mind and remain unresolved, or at least open to serious question, but not my disbelief in God.

I have also reached the point (I reached it long ago) that the issue of God's existence no longer strikes me as an interesting issue. I mean, when it comes up I tend to glaze over, because all the moves are so familiar, and the debate seems so antiquated. I find it hard to get fired up

about it. It just seems dull. No intellectual sparks fly off it. The question has important political and cultural significance, to be sure, but as an intellectual issue in its own right, it lacks vitality. By contrast, my belief in ethical objectivism, or in natural mysteries, or in conceptual analysis, seems relevant and alive, as does my rejection of the contrary positions. My rejection of theism is more like my rejection of monarchy as a good political system: a bit of a yawn. When I was young, I saw through both ideas and have found no reason over the decades to question my earlier conclusions, so the belief is like an old relative I take for granted rather than a lively new acquaintance (I am by no means in love with atheism, as I am with other intellectual ideas). The thrill of atheism has gone, along with fear of it; now it is just an uninteresting fact about me, hardly worth mentioning.

Do I then advocate abandoning all talk of God and his works? I think there is no such thing as God in reality, so do I also think that discourse about God has no useful role? It may shock some of my atheist comrades but I don't advocate the abolition of God-talk. What I think is that God is (or can be or become) a useful fiction, so his name can play a role even though it has no existent bearer. For many people Satan has already gone that way: they don't believe in his literal existence but they find it useful to retain the concept and its associated language and ideology. Satan is, or has become, a useful fiction, his name a fruitful source of ideas and emotions, especially when it comes to describing the deeply evil. Imagine a community of intelligent beings who have never believed in God or anything supernatural or even considered the question of whether such beings might exist; they are constitutionally secular. They do, however, enjoy works of fiction, so they are familiar with the notion of a fictional character; they are clear that such characters do not exist but are merely conjured up by creative writers. One day a writer publishes a novel with a radically new theme: a supernatural being who created the universe, cares about us, ensures our survival after death, rewards the virtuous and punishes the wicked, called "Gud." The book is offered as a work of pure fiction, and is taken to be so by its eager readers. It becomes a bestseller, a

publishing phenomenon. People speak constantly of Gud and his works, enjoying the fiction woven around this supernatural character. The story supplies something in their imaginative life hitherto missing (rather as some of Shakespeare's characters seem to do so). No one, however, is tempted to think the story is factually true. They start saying Gud-related things to each other, like "Gud wouldn't think much of that" or "It would take Gud to pull that off" or "By Gud, you're beautiful." They find such remarks amusing, maybe enlightening, though they are consciously interpreted as purely fictional (compare "Only Sherlock Holmes could have solved that crime").

In this way the God concept enters their thought and discourse, but never in such a way as to make a factual claim; it is all just harmless make-believe. I have no objection to any of this: our hypothetical community is a community of atheists who find talk of Gud useful and amusing. A fictional supernatural being plays a role in their imagination but is not taken to be a genuine constituent of reality. They are careful, say, to instruct their children that this is just a story not a piece of sober metaphysics or science. Well, I think God could play just such a role for us. We simply cease to take talk of God literally, consigning him to the category of useful fictions. He already plays that role for many of us, because atheists do not all abjure the word "God" ("I wish to God people didn't believe in things like...God"). In fact it is plausible to conjecture that back in man's prehistory, before the distinction between myth and fact has become clear, talk of the gods belonged to a seamless mode of speech in which people were none too fussy about which parts they thought corresponded to objective reality and which parts were projections of the imagination. Then god talk became hardened into literal assertion, and you had to

decide whether you thought that the gods were myth or reality; heretofore people were pleasantly hazy about that distinction. I don't advocate a reversion to such haziness; I just think it was a mistake to put the gods on the reality side instead of the useful fiction side. Let us, then, put them clearly on the fictional side where they belong; we can then talk about them all we want, so long as we know what we are doing. Presumably churches and other forms of worship will then disappear, at least as we know them, though worship of known-to-be-fictional characters is not unprecedented. Religion as we have it will certainly not survive the reorientation I am suggesting, though a good deal of its conceptual core might (only now interpreted fictionally). People will no longer believe in God, but they will make-believe in him. This strikes me as quite an attractive world to live in. Stories can, after all, be good, artistically, morally, without being true, that is, factual. There is no God, but the story of him has its attractions as a work of art (at least some of it does; not all of the God fiction is that useful). Living in that world, my state of belief with regard to God might include a good deal of make-believe in him, combined with adamant disbelief in his reality. My imaginative life already involves a lot of make-believe in relation to fictional characters, none of it confused with belief proper; I see no reason why I couldn't extend this attitude towards God, at least once other people stopped literally believing in him. I might then extract what is good in the concept, while discarding the metaphysical baggage. Religious language would then be more of a fun fiction than a cruel hoax, a kind of game.