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Is Atheism a Belief?

First things first: what constitutes a belief?

Our awareness of the world is what we call knowledge, but 'belief' goes beyond our recognition of mere facts. Merely knowing something does not tell you how to implement that knowledge into your life. So a belief is defined as having *confidence* in an idea/thing/person as true, to the extent that it can influence what you do and don't value. Now the more unique and powerful our belief is the more it should affect how we live.

So when we know something, we merely acknowledge it at a distance, but when we respond with confidence or trust something we know, we call that a belief. To believe is to value what we know. What we value determines what we take interest in; we value financial success so we invest in our education and work hard; we value family so we devote our time to them. So, a belief structures your perceptions and what you do and don't value, and what you value in turn determines how you act.

So what is atheism? Is it a belief?

To know whether atheism is a belief, you have to address the level of confidence it claims, the impact of what it implies and whether its implications affect what you value in life.

Defining atheism

Theism is a proposition that "God exists." People who believe this proposition to be true are rightly defined as theists - believers in theism. Now "theism" refers to the propositional content of *belief*, rather than the *attitude or psychological* state of *believing*. This is why it makes sense to say that theism is true or false and to argue for or against theism.

Since "atheism" is defined in terms of theism and theism is the proposition that God exists and *not* the psychological condition of believing that there is a God, then it logically follows that atheism (as a negation of theism) cannot be the *absence* of the psychological condition of believing that God exists. Therefore, the "a-" in "atheism" most accurately translates as a negation of the truth claim, instead of absence; as "not" instead of "without".

So philosophically speaking, atheism ought to be recognised as *the proposition that God does not exist* (or, more broadly, the proposition that there are no gods). Now there must still be the same distinction of definitions between the words atheism and atheist, such that atheism is a proposition, whereas atheist refers to those who believe the proposition to be true. Now, this proposition is a claim made about reality, a claim that there is no transcendent, no ultimate reality that acts as the supreme source for our reality, our natural world. Surely this view influences what you value in life

and therefore affects the guidelines you live by - therefore constituting what we would describe as a belief.

This definition has the added virtue of making atheism a direct answer to one of the most important metaphysical questions that has ever been: "Is there a God?" There are ultimately only three attitudes one can take about this particular proposition and only two direct answers. Firstly you could answer "yes" and affirm the proposition (theism), secondly you could answer "no" and deny the proposition (atheism). But answers like "I don't know", "no one knows", "I don't care", "an affirmative answer has never been established" characterizes the third option, which is to withhold judgment about the proposition (agnosticism), which is not a direct answer. Agnosticism is traditionally characterized as neither believing that God exists nor believing that God does not exist. In the end, those who affirm a proposition have to give reasons why they think it is true. Those who deny it have to provide reasons why they believe it is false. Only those who withhold judgment can be allowed to sit on the fence on the issue.

Very few people go to conferences to defend agnosticism because by definition agnosticism is the absence of any particular point of view. The fact that there are so many atheist debaters is evidence that atheists believe something.

Departing even more radically from the norm in philosophy, some make the claim that "atheism" shouldn't be defined as a proposition at all, even if theism is a proposition. Instead, "atheism" should be defined as a psychological state: the state of not believing in the existence of God (or gods). This view was famously proposed by the philosopher Antony Flew. The argument is that this definition can best serve as an umbrella term for a wide variety of positions that have been identified with atheism. So that we can say things like "strong" and "weak" to develop a taxonomy that differentiates various specific atheisms. Antony Flew recognized the affirmative belief in the non-existence of God as "strong" or "positive" atheism, whereas to lack a belief that God or gods exist is to be a "negative" or "weak" atheist. So that atheism is not an affirmative belief that there is no God, but simply a rejection of the assertion that there is a God. This leads most atheists to recognize their worldview not as a belief, but more so a lack of belief or disbelief. This "negative" view of atheism is therefore not the claim that God doesn't exist, but more of a neutral claim that an atheist is one who simply lacks belief in God. Those who decide on defining atheism in this way see themselves as excused from defending their worldview since they are not making any positive or negative claim on the question of God's existence.

Unfortunately, this argument overlooks the fact that if atheism is defined as a psychological state, then no proposition can count as a form of atheism because a proposition is not a psychological state. This undermines Flew's definition; for it implies that what he calls "strong atheism"—the proposition (or belief in the sense of "something believed") that there is no God—is not really a variety of atheism at all. *In short, his proposed "umbrella" term leaves strong atheism out in the rain. It doesn't make sense.*

Although Flew's definition of "atheism" has a significant number of people who report using the term in this way, it nonetheless fails as an umbrella term. The popularity of defining "atheism" in this inconsistent way is likely due to the fact that there is strength in numbers, and since Flew's inclusive definition of "atheism" brings anyone who is not a theist into the fold, it therefore gives the community of atheists greater political and social strength. However, it still stands that atheism is most accurately understood in philosophy as the metaphysical claim that God does not exist. It is a viewpoint that there is no God. It is a claim.

So atheism is a worldview and it deals with essentially the same issues Christians deal with, which isn't surprising since a-theism is derived from theism, it's the opposing answer to the same question

- Does God exist? Atheism asserts that God does not exist, and so it may follow that we must subjectively decide our own purpose and in turn dictate our own morals, etc. Atheists have to answer the same questions that Christians do concerning the world, purpose, morals, etc. but based on the foundation of believing that there is no God and/or the denial of God's influence in the world. *So what lies behind atheism really is a doctrinal system, a way of looking at the world, and so an ideology.*

Also, there is no logical connection between a lack of belief about God in someone's mind and the conclusion that God does not exist. If one is not convinced of God, at most, this definition leads us to agnosticism, which means to withhold judgment or to be uncertain concerning the existence or non-existence of God. So if you're not certain on the "God" question, doubtful of the positive claim that "there is a God", or that "there isn't a God"; then maybe it's time to drop your atheism, accept ignorance and sit with the agnostics.

Now I understand some of my atheist friends may read this somewhat frustrated. Interpreting *atheism as not a claim of any kind, but just non-belief in the claim 'there is a god'* is becoming increasingly popular. Yet I hope the rest of this short essay will help you see that from a philosophical standpoint, that definition is not the best fit of atheism itself. The attitude that atheism is just non-belief in the claim "There is a god" is deeply inconsistent with the effect atheism has. For example:

A first problem is that the vast majority of new-atheists I have listened to make the statement "there is no God", but if atheism is not a claim or a belief then it cannot be true or false. Only claims can be true or false. For example, it makes perfect sense to ask whether a statement such as "it is raining" is true. Beliefs/claims have what is called a "truth value." They are either true or false. It is either raining or it's not. Therefore, if atheism is not a claim of any kind, then the atheist's claim "there is no God" is simply meaningless. On the other hand, if the atheist wishes to claim that atheism is true, that is, to confess you really believe that there isn't a God (which I often hear), then that must mean that atheism is a claim, and claims need to be defended, reasoned and have evidence provided. Otherwise, if atheism is not a claim but an acknowledgment of one's lack of knowledge, it cannot be true or false, then saying "I'm an atheist" is up there with saying "I don't know", which is exactly what we'd call agnosticism. If the community of atheists wishes to join the conversation and debate sensibly, they must recognise their belief for what it is and engage accordingly or else leave their atheism to become agnostics.

"Hang on buddy" you might say, "what about my lack of belief in the tooth fairy, spaghetti monster or flying teapot behind Jupiter? Following your logic, are you then saying I have to give reasons why these are false also?" If we're serious, we all instinctively know there is a fundamental difference between active beliefs and passive beliefs. There are a near-infinite number of things I *passively* don't believe in which I don't need to give reasons for. I have never felt the need to write an essay about why 'The Spaghetti Monster' isn't real. On the other hand, there are plenty of things I *actively* disbelieve in, such as the claim that God does not exist, or that the earth is flat, and I can give you reasons for my disbelief too. For our *active* non-beliefs, that is, disbeliefs that consume our time and energy, we do need to give reasons. But for other, lesser, non-beliefs, we don't, and thus we can safely dismiss protestations about the supposed 'tooth fairy' quite easily. One of the key reasons for this is because mere non-beliefs don't lead to action. Think about it, it is only actually existing things that cause anything. For example, if I drop a rock on my foot, it will cause pain. But a non-existent rock causes nothing. When it comes to beliefs, much the same applies. For something to cause an action, it has to be an actual belief, an actual claim. Non-belief in the flying teapot or spaghetti monster never caused anything. This is because the mere absence of belief has no causative power. Only actual claims can cause an action.

So what about atheism? It's obvious that atheism does indeed cause actions. For example, it was his atheism that caused the evangelist Richard Dawkins to write his book 'The God Delusion' and, I assume, atheism that led many enthusiastic sceptics to buy it and voice out similar views. Many internet-dwelling atheists spend what appears to be a heck of a lot of time reading sceptical websites, watching comedies that mock religion, writing angry blogs and posting snarky anti-religious remarks on social media. These are all actions. Actions, I presume, caused by their atheism. I also know of atheists who attend conferences, buy t-shirts with atheist slogans, or stick amusing atheist bumper stickers to their cars. So for a non-belief, a non-thing, atheism looks rather active.

Beliefs breed children

Another sign of a belief is that it attracts other beliefs to it. So what about atheism? Does the statement "*I do not believe in God*" stand-alone: stark, naked, and proud, utterly self-reliant?

Atheistic beliefs rarely exist in isolation. Atheism also attracts other beliefs to it. For example, most atheists believe in naturalism/materialism, the worldview that says that only material things exist. Many also believe in scientism, the view that natural science can answer any and all questions about even the human condition. The list goes on. So why do so many atheists have these beliefs in common? Is it just random happenstance? This cluster of beliefs is driven by atheism. If you believe that God does not exist, you will also be tempted to pounce opportunistically on materialism as a way of keeping the divine food out of the door. Given these additional beliefs that cluster around atheism, we're forced to ask how a non-belief, a non-claim, a non-thing could have such gravitational force.

Beliefs form identity

There is another powerful piece of evidence that atheism really is a belief system, and that's its increasing tendency to function as an *identity marker*. For example, Christians gain their identity from their belief that God has revealed himself, uniquely and supremely, through Jesus. Political parties are united in their belief that their policies will be the 'answer' to sorting things out. The big accounting firms are united in their belief that they can charge ten times more than what is reasonable (I'm an accountant and always get frustrated with how much they charge for doing something which isn't really that specialized). This uniting under a belief is shown by the language that people use: "I am a Christian." "I'm left-wing.", "I'm right-wing.", "I rip people off."

We don't see a similar thing happening with genuine non-beliefs. I have never introduced myself to anybody at a gathering by saying "Hello everyone, I'm Luke and am an antitoothfairyan." There are no university groups for disbelievers in Santa Claus. On the other hand, many atheists do use their disbelief in God very much as an identity marker. They introduce themselves as atheists and many show a tendency to gather together in communities centred on their atheism, either online or in person. They attend seminars, they buy the latest book written by atheists gurus; they mock those who disagree with them. At least in those cases, there exists a strong "glue" that binds people together despite their differences. In the case of churches, trust in Jesus is the common element that should unite Christians despite wealth, gender, age or politics. So the point is, if atheism is a non-belief, a non-claim, a non-thing, how can it perform on any level as an identity marker? Probably because, may I suggest, atheism is a belief system, and just like other beliefs, ranging from the political to the religious, can indeed form part of a person's or community's identity.

However you consider it, atheism looks like a belief, functions like a belief, and behaves like a belief. It is a belief. Now you may ask why this distinction is of any importance and simply put, we reason by means of concept and definition, if we don't understand the definition, we will struggle to reason. It is our nature to construct and interpret thoughts and by these thoughts, we form beliefs. To define

these thoughts is not boxing someone in but is providing a structure within which we may reason and have dialogue. That's the beauty of language.

Take Responsibility

To twist the concept of atheism from its definition by suggesting that it's a lack of a belief rather than a positive belief allows the atheist to avoid the rational responsibility of having to defend the claim that God does not exist. This means the atheist can happily deconstruct the worldview of others or demand justification of their belief without having to put in the effort to justify their own belief. It allows the atheist to avoid any intellectual responsibility and so encourages intellectual cowardice. Maybe I should start saying that my theism is merely the lack of belief in the claim that there isn't a God and join in with the play on words. After all, we live in a culture where it seems that words can mean whatever is most convenient for the argument at hand.

Over and over again, I witness atheists ask questions that are manufactured to trip up the theist while having no answers to the questions themselves. Many atheists ask questions for which he or she admittedly has no answers or believes the answers to be "on hold," but we are expected to give credence to the whole worldview for merely raising the question. Putting another person down does not automatically justify what you have said in response to their position.

You cannot deny the existence of God without holding a whole raft of beliefs about the nature of the world.

You see, really, everybody believes something. As the French philosopher Julia Kristeva put it, "we all have this incredible need to believe." You can't simply say "prove your religion to me," and then cross your arms and think you're clever. Everybody has beliefs that are central for them, beliefs that cause actions, beliefs that define them, shape them, and that have implications. And for those kinds of beliefs, we can ask to give reasons. If you are an atheist who wishes to duck that responsibility, then let me remind you of the words of the late Christopher Hitchens who said: "*That which can be asserted without evidence can be dismissed without evidence.*" Yes, quite right too...

If you define yourself as an atheist then you also have a responsibility to give reasons for your worldview. Now you must attempt to prove that the universe and all that is within it and its deep mathematical orderliness all simply exist on their own as brute facts with no source outside themselves. Now you must attempt to prove that all the complexity of life can form without any intention from the starting point of near to nothing, that our minds can ultimately be derived from that which is mindless. That you, your emotions, feelings, sorrows, joys, memories, ambitions and free will are nothing but a product of pointless particles and chemical reactions, and therefore meaningless. That all the supposed virtues and values of life are in reality just but a product of matter and its movement and therefore have no objective truth in reality. Now you must prove that everything that exists in your worldview can absolutely account for the inherent value in love and life.

This is where atheism fails: it has no explanatory power for things we all believe in like love and morals. In fact, I can't see how the view that everything came from nothing without the aid of mind is sufficient to build an entire worldview on and provide a foundation for meaning and morality. That is why atheism is so bankrupt as a view of life - it cannot deal with the human condition as it really is.

Let me leave you with this final thought: every worldview must answer four essential questions: origin, meaning, morality, and destiny. In turn, the answers put together must be coherent. It is only the Christian worldview that answers these four questions with logical consistency, empirical

adequacy and experiential relevance.