

Atheism Is a Belief - Here's Why

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.

I have heard it said that atheism is not an affirmative belief that there is no God, but that atheism is simply a rejection of the assertion that there is a God. This leads the atheist to recognize their worldview not as a belief, but more so a lack of belief or disbelief. In this view, 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.

I know many would make this assertion, but it's mistaken. The word 'atheist' stems from the Greek word 'Theos' which means 'God', and the 'a' is the negation translating to mean 'without'. Hence 'atheism' by its origin simply means 'without God', not 'without belief'. In the etymology of the word, there is no way to derive the concept of 'without belief'. The word means the universe is without God, which is another way of saying that God does not exist. This is a claim made about reality and by definition is, therefore, a belief, a belief that there is no transcendent, no ultimate reality that acts as the supreme source for our reality, our natural world. This worldview obviously influences what you value in life and therefore affects the guidelines you live by.

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*"; drop your atheism, accept ignorance and sit with the agnostics.

So there are ultimately only three attitudes one can take about a particular proposition. In this case of God's existence, firstly one could affirm the proposition (*theism*), secondly deny the proposition (*atheism*), or thirdly withhold judgment about the proposition (*agnosticism*). Those who affirm the 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.

Now I can imagine some atheists reading this frustrated. I'm not surprised given the desperate attempt to redefine what atheism really is, you've probably heard it before, "*Atheism isn't a claim. It's just non-belief in the claim 'there is a god.'*" I have lost track of how many times I have heard variations of this, 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. The attitude that atheism is just non-belief in the claim "*There is a god*" is deeply inconsistent with the effect atheism has. Let me list a few issues...

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 acknowledgement 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 wish 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 'The Spaghetti Monster Delusion'. 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? No, 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? Not really, 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 for 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 atoothfairyian."* 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. We're even supposed to love people who wear funny trousers that show their ankles and call it fashion... But, all that aside, reflect on this question for a moment: 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. 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 belief, 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 belief. 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.

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