

An atheist apologetic

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From a casual inspection of several Web sites, one could get the impression that it is almost a dogma among atheists that atheism is not a belief but only the absence of a belief. A common reaction to this, among religious apologists, is that this is some kind of Orwellian pretext on which we try to evade any obligation to defend what we believe, leaving all burden of proof with our adversaries. Religion's opposition, like religion itself, has plenty of spokesmen who are incompetent, disingenuous, or plain dishonest and sometimes all of the above. Thinking myself to be none of the above, I offer herewith my own understanding of what atheism is and why I embrace it. This essay is not meant to be a proof of God's nonexistence. It is intended only as a defense of my belief that God does not exist.

The short answer to the question "Why am I an atheist?" appears near the end of [my deconversion story](#): I lost my faith when I could no longer defend it. Having discovered that none of my reasons for thinking God was real would withstand critical scrutiny, I could not in good intellectual conscience affirm his existence. Neither, however, could I think of any reason for denying God's existence, and I believed at that time (I was 25) that atheism was simply the affirmation of God's nonexistence. That was what I'd been told by people who seemed to know about such things. I had also been told that the word for people like me, who neither affirmed nor denied God's existence, was *agnostic*. And so, for most of the next 30 years, I called myself an agnostic. Then I ventured into cyberspace, and among the first places I wandered into was Austin Cline's [Agnosticism/Atheism site on About.com](#), where I discovered that the taxonomy of religious thinking was quite as I had been led to believe.

I will not here recapitulate the debate about how atheism should be defined. Those who care to be enlightened can read what Cline has to say about it, including his analyses of what the dictionaries say. It may be remarked, though, that notwithstanding anyone's pronouncement, no matter how otherwise authoritative, actual usage is the final arbiter. A debate exists in this case for one reason only: Actual usage is not consistent. A majority of English speakers mean one thing by *atheism* and a minority mean something else, and there is no rule of lexicography that says the majority rules in these cases. For present purposes, I will suggest only that those who apply some label to themselves ought to have the privilege of deciding what they mean in so applying it.

(It may also be noted that anyone who denies that anything of a certain kind exists necessarily does not believe that something of the kind exists, and so what Cline calls *strong atheism* has to include what he calls *weak atheism*.)

There is the further complication that, in common speech, *I don't believe X* actually does mean, nearly always, *I think X is untrue*. In any case, though, anyone who has an opinion has a belief, and I think it unlikely that many people, no matter what they call themselves, are without any

opinion about whether there is a God. It is arguably the case, then, that when someone says, "Atheism affirms nothing, and therefore there is nothing about it that needs a defense," there is a good chance they're being disingenuous. Nevertheless, they make a point that needs to be made. No one needs to be held to account for any belief that they do not actually affirm. The misapplication of a label, even when it happens, does not commit anyone to defending whatever the label is correctly applied to. These days, I call myself an atheist. Now suppose I were to say, "That doesn't mean I'm saying there is no God." You reply, "But if you're not saying that, then you're not really an atheist." Very well, then maybe we can argue about what I should be calling myself, but I don't need to prove "There is no God" until I have said "There is no God," and saying "I am an atheist" is not equivalent to saying that, unless I so intend.

(The notion that for every word, there exists some true meaning independent of what people think the word means is a kind of essentialism that I don't accept. Whether I should accept it is yet another topic for yet another essay.)

With that much out of the way, let's see if we can get past arguments about nomenclature. Do I believe there is no God? Yes, I do. Can I prove there is no God? No, not in the deductive sense of *prove*, but that is so for just about everything that any of us believes. In all of science, nothing has ever been proven in that sense. In saying that I believe God does not exist, I am saying that I think his nonexistence is a probable truth, that I am justified in acting and thinking as if it were the case that he does not exist. I am saying that I have good reason to take his nonexistence for granted until such time as I am confronted with a good reason to change my mind.

That last qualification is important. No belief has to be incorrigible to be justified. The mere possibility of error does not alone constitute grounds for doubt. Whether it does, depends on how we assess the likelihood of error, but if the possibility is no more than what we infer from the mere fact of human fallibility, then we're entitled to ignore it for ordinary purposes. It is possible that heliocentrism is contrary to fact, but that doesn't mean the scientific community is being epistemically irresponsible in treating it as actual fact.

I'll get to my defense in a moment, but I'd like to start by denying that I really need one. If I lack any good reason to believe some particular thing exists, then I already have reason enough to doubt that it exists. This seems to strike some people as a radical sort of skepticism, but it is a sort that most people adopt most of the time. They do make exceptions, but they're very selective about those exceptions. Of course there are cases in which absence of evidence warrants nothing more than a withholding of judgment, but in general the unfalsifiability of a proposition is not sufficient to overcome *prima facie* doubt. This is not to endorse the sort of radical evidentialism espoused by Clifford and his sympathizers. I accept a limited version of epistemic relativism. The reasonableness of one person's doubt about some proposition does not entail the unreasonableness of another person's belief in that proposition. But it works both ways. The reasonableness of your belief in God does not, by itself, imply the unreasonableness of my disbelief.

So what do I think makes my doubt reasonable, other than having no reason to believe? In my judgment, the best argument for atheism is the existence of atheists. I am convinced that if God

were real, then nobody would think otherwise. Some theists, of course, will immediately accuse me of assuming facts not in evidence. (Before I address that objection, I wish first to disavow any apparent claim to originality. If memory serves, I formulated this defense on my own before discovering [Theodore Drange's "Argument from Nonbelief"](#) , but whether my memory is accurate or not, it is certainly true that neither Drange nor I was first to think of it.) The usual apologist objection is to our assuming that God could have no reason for failing to make his existence too obvious to deny. To begin with, I see no reason for supposing that the average theist can fathom the divine mind any better than I can. But I think the objection irrelevant in the final analysis. Absent some antecedent non-question-begging reason to think that a real God would withhold incontrovertible evidence of his existence, I am justified in believing that he would not do so if he were benevolent.

The rejoinder comes: On what grounds do I suppose I can critique God's notions of benevolence? But it is not his notions I am critiquing. It is the notions of those who affirm his existence that I am critiquing. I know nothing of their God except what they tell me, and what they tell me seems inconsistent with what I observe about the real world. I am not obliged to take their word for it that the inconsistency is just a product of my epistemic limitations. It could be so, but I have no choice but to work within those limitations. I am under no obligation to take anyone's word for it that they have some special insight into God's expectations of how I should think.

The Argument from Unbelief is not the most famous atheistic argument. The Argument from Evil is certainly better known, and plenty of atheists seem to think they need no other. I agree that it suffices to justify atheism, but I am irked by atheists who treat it as if it had no counterargument. There have been several, they need to be addressed, and they rarely are. Obviously, the counterarguments don't persuade me, but I think that on this issue, the apologists have a better case than most skeptics give them credit for. For my intellectual taste, the Argument from Unbelief is simpler, more cogent, and harder for apologists to rebut.

Not, of course, that there have been no rebuttals. Just as every theistic argument has an atheistic counterargument, so too does every atheistic argument have a theistic counterargument. And from this very fact, many suggest that it is a waste of time to study the arguments at all. "Obviously, nobody has been able to prove anything," they say. This is a common defense of agnosticism, which I define in this context as the notion that no opinion either for or against God's existence can be justified. And of course there is no obligation on anyone to have an opinion. If someone thinks both sides have equally compelling arguments, or that neither side has any compelling argument, then they are within their epistemic rights to withhold judgment. But the claim that neither side has proven its case needs to be scrutinized, not just parroted. I suggested earlier that there are different kinds of proof. Philosophical convention has it that proof can be either deductive or inductive. To oversimplify a bit, deductive proof is the kind used by mathematicians, inductive proof the kind used by scientists, the results in the former case being certainly true and in the latter case only probably true.

As noted, this is an oversimplification, but we can work with it for now. What matters to my argument is the observation that almost everything that any of us believes is the conclusion of an

inductive argument, or it would be if we were to take the time to defend it with any argument at all. Nobody who believes that the Norman Conquest of England happened in 1066 can prove it in the same sense that anyone who has learned calculus can prove that the derivative of the cosine of x is the negative of the sine of x . The problem of justifying inductive reasoning has challenged philosophers at least since Hume's day. Notwithstanding a consensus that nobody has solved it, it seems to work, and I have some ideas as to why that is so, which I discuss in [an essay elsewhere on this site](#) .

I have mentioned two arguments that I regard as sufficient to justify a supposition that God is not real. Of course there are others. Skeptics have been almost as inventive as apologists in their efforts to justify their thinking, and not all of their inventions have worked as intended. There is plenty of nonsense to be found in atheist literature. Even so, there remain plenty of arguments that do work, and the concept of cumulative evidence may be applied here. When several lines of argument converge independently on the same conclusion, then it becomes very reasonable indeed to accept that conclusion, absent a very compelling counterargument. I won't try to list all the arguments for atheism here, but a couple besides those already mentioned merit some attention.

One is often called the Argument from Confusion. It arises from the observation that those who think God is real cannot agree on anything about him other than his mere existence. There are disputes, historically persistent and apparently intractable, about his nature and characteristics as well as the particulars of his instructions to humankind as to how they should live. These disagreements furthermore are not credibly attributable solely to the generally recognized imperfections of human cognition. They instead are most easily accounted for by the supposition that there is nothing known about God because there is nothing to be known.

Then there is the diminishing domain of theistic arguments. There has been a historical trend, coincident with the development of modern science, in which theistic arguments that once seemed cogent have been shown to be irrelevant because they have offered God as a supernatural explanation for phenomena that seemed otherwise inexplicable until modern science found natural explanations. This trend seems to justify a suspicion that God is simply a codeword for *We don't know*. The progress of science to date certainly does not entail the answerability, in naturalistic terms, of all questions, but as long as *God did it* is interchangeable with *We don't know how it could have happened otherwise*, it remains reasonable to think it more probable that there are some very important things we have not yet learned about the natural world than that we have managed to rule out all answers except a supernatural one.

As for theologies that do not offer God as an explanation for anything, I think such a god can be dismissed as ontologically irrelevant, because then a universe with such a god is indistinguishable from a universe without one. A proper analysis of this line of thinking would take us into the debate over verificationism, to which I can do no justice here. For the nonce, I claim the following. No matter what can be said in defense of believing an existential claim that cannot be falsified even in principle, I cannot see any principled objection to disbelieving any claim of that sort. If the meaning of *God* is so construed that the truth of *God exists* is indistinguishable from the truth of *God does not exist*, then it is not apparent to me what it could

even mean to say I was wrong in affirming the latter.

I can hardly prove that there is no entity of any sort that I would call God if I knew of its existence. If that is what it would take to justify atheism, then I am no atheist, but I deny having to prove anything like that, no matter what I call myself. I have no responsibility for characterizing God. That falls to those who say there is one, and as noted above, they have never gotten their act together. My belief that none of them is right is justified inductively by noting that in every case so far, what they have told me has been (a) incoherent, (b) demonstrably false, (c) unconvincing, or (d) meaningless. I could be wrong, but absent some reason to think so, I don't think so.

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