

Introduction to Atheism

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atheism = a + theism

- “atheism” means “without theism”
Greek: “ἀ” (“without”) + “θεός” (“god”)
- Not a belief, rather a disbelief,
i.e. an absence of belief.
- Atheism is not fideistic, i.e. not faith-based.
- Refusal to swallow belief in god(s) in particular.
- Refusal to swallow supernatural beliefs in
general.

Religious Apologists Sometimes Say: "Atheism is a Religion"

But if atheism is a religion then:

- Health is a disease.
- Baldness is a hair colour.
- Not playing hockey is a winter sport.
- Not collecting stamps is a hobby.
- Not drawing up horoscopes is a form of astrology.
- etc....

Religious apologists who accuse atheists of having a "religion" are implicitly admitting that religion is something dubious, even pernicious.

Extraordinary Claims

- “What has been affirmed without proof can also be denied without proof” – Euclid
- “Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence.” – Carl Sagan
- “What can be asserted without evidence can also be dismissed without evidence.” – Christopher Hitchens
- David Hume rejected miracles and the design argument for the existence of god. He anticipated Darwin’s notion of natural selection.

The Burden of Proof

- The existence of “God” is an extraordinary claim.
- The burden of proof falls upon theists.
- Atheists have no duty to disprove the existence of “God” unless theists produce credible evidence.
- “God” explains nothing.
It is a placeholder for ignorance.
- “God” does not explain the existence of the universe.
It merely shifts the need for explanation from the “universe” to “God.”

Atheism is Negative

...but its implications are very positive

- In its purest form, atheism is strictly negative. This is its **strength**:
 - No ideology to accept.
 - No belief to swallow.
 - No practice to perform, except doubt.
- Point of departure of atheism is application of doubt to theism. The non-existence of gods is the conclusion to which this leads.
- The non-existence of gods is not assumed. It is inferred from:
 - lack of evidence of gods; and
 - self-contradictory nature of god-belief.

Atheism & Rejection of the Supernatural

- Strictest form of atheism: doubt about god-belief, leading to the conclusion of non-existence.
- God-belief is the most important example of supernatural belief.
- All supernatural beliefs are to be rejected for reasons similar to those for rejecting god-belief.
- We therefore extend atheism to doubt about all supernatural beliefs, including god-belief.
- From our **Manifesto**:
“Atheism is the result of the rigorous application of critical thought to supernatural beliefs.”

The Supernatural is Superfluous

- If supernatural phenomena exist, then they are either detectable or non-detectable.
 - If a supernatural phenomenon is **not detectable**, then it can never be observed → equivalent to non-existence.
 - If a supernatural phenomenon is **detectable**, then it is by definition part of the natural world and subject to scientific inquiry. Thus it is **not** supernatural, but natural.
- Thus, only the natural world exists.

Example: the human soul which allegedly survives after the death of the body.

Agnosticism: a Method, Not a Conclusion

- Agnosticism a synonym of doubt, uncertainty or scepticism.
- The application of doubt to theism leads to the conclusion of non-existence of god(s).
- To stop part-way and claim that we cannot know, is an act of intellectual cowardice.
- In particular, symmetric agnosticism is a dogmatic position, claiming that the existence and non-existence of god have equal probability: Fallacy of the Mean.

Atheism and Morality

- Human morality is a result of our biological and cultural evolution as a social species.
- Supernatural beliefs corrupt morals.
- Do not say, “We can be good without god,” but rather “Even religious believers can be good in spite of their god-belief.”
- We atheists are certainly not perfect, but we have one less nonsense belief to mislead us.
- From our [Manifesto](#): “to assign moral authority to a fictional deity alienates us from our own humanity, compromises our freedom, and renders us irresponsible. We know that any religious authority which has the pretention to speak for an illusory god exploits the credulity of its followers.”

**“I have nothing
against the religious,
as long as they act like
atheists in public.”**

The Arrogance of Theism

Theists Claim to “Own” Morality

- Theism maintains its iron grip as a normative system of moral and ethical prescriptions.
- The basis of that system is each theism’s claim to know the will of “God.”
- Theists often claim that morality is impossible without god, or at least god-belief, because in their worldview all moral principles originate in the divinity.
- This is called ***Divine Command Theory***.

Problems with Theistic Meta-ethics: The “Will” of “God”

To use *Divine Command Theory*, we must know the “will” of “God.” But how? We must:

- [1] establish the existence of “God” – i.e. a theistic god;
- [2] establish that god has a will; and
- [3] establish communication to provide information about that will.

All three steps present insurmountable problems.

[1] Existence of “God”

- Classic arguments (ontological, cosmological, teleological, etc.) have been refuted countless times.
- The most plausible – the design argument – was challenged even before Darwin (e.g. Hume) and is now utterly discredited.
- Every scientific advance is another nail in the coffin of the god-hypothesis, which is only a gap-filler.
- No serious, irrefutable, material proof has ever been advanced (trace, image, recording, shroud, etc.).

→ **hypothesis [1] is baseless.**

[2] Existence of god's "Will"

Even if we assume [1] is true:

- If god is perfect, omniscient, omnipotent and eternal, how can he/she/it have any wants?
- If god is omniscient and knows the future, how can he/she/it desire to change anything?
- To want implies dissatisfaction. How can a perfect god be dissatisfied with anything he/she/it created?

→ **hypothesis [2] is self-contradictory.**

[3] Information about god's "will"

Even if we assume [1] and [2] true, what is the line of communication to "God"?

- Revelation? As reliable as dreams.
- Holy scriptures? Written by human beings, mainly thousands of years ago, replete with contradictions (between scriptures and within each). Mainly pious legends, useful mainly for anthropology only.

→ **hypothesis [3] is utterly unreliable.**

The “Will” of “God”: Conclusion

- Nobody has a clue what god wants.
- I, an atheist, know as much about the will of god as any pope, imam, rabbi, priest or pastor, and I know absolutely nothing about the will of god. Which is exactly what everyone else knows, regardless of what they claim.
- Any claim to speak in the name of god is mere illusion – or a scam.

“Everything is permitted”

- Famous example of a character in a Dostoyevsky novel who said, “Without God, everything is permitted.”
- In fact, the opposite is true:
With god-belief, anything can be justified.
- Theistic morality is arbitrary because:
 - No way to confirm or invalidate any claim about what god wants.
 - No way to resolve incompatibilities between competing claims.
 - Entirely at the mercy of religious authorities who claim to have knowledge of divine will.

Atheophobia & Theonormatism

- **Atheophobia:**

- 1) belief that atheists are morally inferior to religious believers;
- 2) belief that atheism leads necessarily to moral degradation;
- 3) notion that atheist activism leads necessarily to persecution of religious believers and even totalitarianism;
- 4) fear or shame of being identified as atheist (internalized atheophobia)

- **Theonormatism** (neologism coined by Québécois philosopher François Doyon)

- 1) Attitude that belief in “God” or in transcendence is the norm.
- 2) Marginalization and denigration of atheism by considering it a form of religion, thus denying the sincerity of atheists.

Two views of the same sordid old prejudice:

- **Denigration and marginalization of atheists & atheism.**
- **Promoted by religious leaders out of self-interest, to inflate their own importance.**
- **Sometimes internalized by atheists themselves.**

Religious Privileges

Hiding behind religious “obligations”

- Religions seek privileges in society, in order to impose their beliefs and practices on others (whether non-believers, believers in a different religion or co-religionist who do not practice “enough”).
- Myth of religious “obligations” – a major tool used by religious to mask the privileges they seek. In reality:
 - 1) the person freely chooses his or her religious behaviour; or
 - 2) the person is coerced into that behaviour.
- Examples:
 - I “must” wear my kippa/hijab/turban/etc., even at work.
 - I “must” fast during Ramadan.
 - I “must” pray at specific times.

Even if you insist on believing in god...

**He, she or it
does not
give a shit**

The Necessity of Secularism

- Religious spokespersons claim to speak for “God,” thus claiming infinite authority.
- Religions offer infinite rewards and threaten infinite punishments in order to impose their dogmas.
- Religions claim to have invented morality & to own it.
- Religions indoctrinate young children, too immature to defend themselves intellectually and emotionally.
- Secularism is to religion as safe-sex practices are to STDs (sexually transmitted diseases), a public health measure.

Atheism & Secularism

Different But Related

- **Difference:**
 - Atheism: a personal stance
 - Secularism: a program to manage religion-State relations
- **Common foundation:**
 - non-recognition of divine authority[*].
 - independence of morals and ethics from religious tenets.
- Atheists refuse to recognize divine authority in matters of personal morality.
- The secular State refuses to recognize divine authority in legislation and the functioning of its institutions.

[*] We do not say “reject divine authority” because there is nothing to reject. We recognize that such so-called authority comes from humans who arrogantly claim to speak for “God.”

Neutrality with respect to citizens

How can the secular State maintain its independence from religious morality without compromising its neutrality with respect to its citizens?

- “Democracy demands that the religiously motivated translate their concerns into universal, rather than religion-specific, values. It requires that their proposals be subject to argument, and amenable to reason. I may be opposed to abortion for religious reasons, but if I seek to pass a law banning the practice, I cannot simply point to the teachings of my church or evoke God's will. I have to explain why abortion violates some principle that is accessible to people of all faiths, including those with no faith at all.”
– Senator Barack Obama, 2006-06-28

Separation

- Secularism requires **separation between religion and State.**
- The non-recognition of “divine” authority implies **separation between religion and morals.**
- The secular State’s equal treatment for all implies **separation between believers and beliefs:** i.e. human beings have rights, but their beliefs do not.

Secularism: Final Goal or Just a Stage?

- Is secularism an end in itself, or only a first stage in the fight against religious obscurantism?
- If it is only a stage, what comes after?
- My opinion: Secularism should be an end in itself, but that means it must be complete secularism. I could be wrong...
- Other AFT members disagree. We must debate!
- To be discussed at next month's Meetup event (in French)
REGISTRATION: www.meetup.com/lpa-aft/events/282366121/

Note: For me, “secularism” includes the religion/State separation principle, unless otherwise indicated.

Links

- **Atheist Manifesto**: Declaration of principles of AFT
- **Why Atheism?** Talk at Atheist Days 2017 (Dni Ateizmu 2017) Warsaw, Poland, org. Kazimierz Łyszczyński Foundation
- **World Atheist Day 2019**: Presentation David Rand
- **The Will of God: Pure Fiction**: Talk at “Interfaith Symposium” Lindsay, ON, 2015-11-21, org. Ahmadiyya Muslim Community
- **Atheophobia, An Ancient Prejudice, and Yet So Prevalent Today**
- *Les Philosophes québécois et leur défense des religions*, François Doyon, Éditions Connaissances et Savoirs, 2017
- **The Myth of Religious Obligations**
- **The Necessity of Secularism**
- **The Relationship Between Atheism and Secularism**, Talk at Colloquium “Religion, Secularism and the Rule of Law,” Beirut, Lebanon, 2012