

Alex's Heresies - embracing a physical reality

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Article: Atheism and Agnosticism – meanings

July 19th, 2008 Alex McCullie

Typically atheism and agnosticism are seen as alternate positions of disbelief in a god. The atheist is perceived as taking the harder line of absolute rejection whereas the agnostic has a more diffident position of uncertainty. Even today agnosticism is probably seen as a more socially acceptable and reflective view.

Amongst atheist communities the meanings of atheism and agnosticism cause considerable debate and angst about which, if any, truly reflect people's positions. Many dislike the term atheist as a "belief in opposition" and seek alternatives like non-theist, naturalist, physicalist or materialist, free thinker, humanist and non-believer, even though some can have quite different meanings.

Atheism and agnosticism have very different etymologies. Atheism is literally without ("a") god ("theos") from Greek and has a long history of use. Socrates was accused of atheism for not worshipping the gods of Athens. Early Christians were similarly accused by their opponents in Roman Empire. Atheism was usually used as a derogatory term for not believing in the accusers' gods and not total rejection. Even though agnosticism uses a method of construction - without ("a") knowledge of the divine ("gnosticism"), it was only coined publicly in 1869. Prof Thomas H Huxley, an English biologist, was concerned like many others with the definitive nature of atheism and felt that agnosticism was a more reasoned stance.

Most dictionaries provide two similar but distinct meanings for atheism – a disbelief in god and a denial of the existence of god. For example,

- Disbelief in or denial of the existence of God or gods.
(<http://www.answers.com/atheism>)

Many writers refer to these positions as weak or passive ("disbelief") and strong or active ("rejection"). Despite seemingly similar these positions are quite different. Imagine arguing either of these stances with a believer. Holding a weak atheist position requires you to refute any arguments seeking to prove the existence of god. This is similar to not believing in any number of ideas like unicorns, ghosts and Iraqi WMD. The believer has the responsibility to convince. The fact that billions of people believe in a god or gods does not constitute a proof.

Alternatively, supporting strong atheism requires that you refute proofs of god's existence and, more importantly, prove that god doesn't exist. Unfortunately as no definitive proof exists one way or the other, this strong position seems ultimately impossible to support. There is a slight wrinkle here, though. A strong atheist could reasonably ask "what do you mean by god?" There are many arguments around the apparent contradictory nature of some conceptions of god, such as the presence of an all-powerful, all-knowing and all-loving god with the freewill and existence of evil.

Many of today's strong atheists prefer to talk about probability rather than certainty of the non-existence of god. Richard Dawkins makes this point in "God Delusion" by describing god's existence as highly improbable.

Instead of separating atheism and agnosticism I prefer to talk about the belief in existence of god (*metaphysics*) and claimed knowledge available (*epistemology*). So a strong atheist would have no belief in god and would also believe that we have certain knowledge of that.

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The weak atheist would have the same belief but make no claims about knowledge. The typical non-believing agnostic would also not believe in god but have doubts about whether or not it is ultimately unknowable.

References

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