

A Question of God
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The question posed to me has to do with the question of agnosticism vs. atheism, and one somehow presumes from that question, "vs. theism" is implied. Let me begin by making some definitions.

Theism, I take to refer to a belief in some sort of god, any god, possibly multiple gods. This includes particular religions such as Christianity, but also such things as deism. One of the principle questions surrounding theism of any sort is just how exactly does one define "god". (2) Some choose to define theism as "religion". I will return to this issue later. I will refer to this definition in defining atheism below.

Atheism, I take to refer to a disbelief in god. I take atheism to be relatively context free. This is not to say that an atheist does not believe in some particular god, such as the Christian god, but rather that this person does not believe in god. I do not make a distinction here as to motivation for this disbelief. (1) An atheist may simply claim that the notions of god proposed are nonsensical, and no such definition of something that a theist would take to be a definition of god could be sensible (in this sense the atheism is a-[theism] morphologically). (2) Alternatively, the atheist may have a more profound active belief that there is definitively no god (morphologically this would be [a-the]-ism). This second instance I take to be more religion-like than the first, and suffers from some of the same logical flaws as theism.

Agnosticism, I take to be the state someone is in on the religion question when they can answer "I don't know" to the question of a belief in god. Here, however, there are also two possible interpretations of this statement for me. (1) That the person truly can't make up their mind; the agnostic leans in neither direction, either because they cannot choose or because they refuse to choose. (2) The second case would be when the person is asked of the FACTS behind their beliefs, they ultimately say that they cannot prove there is/is not a god, regardless of what they claim to believe on the subject.

Now, because these terms have different definitions, some of which overlap, the question of atheism vs. agnosticism (vs. theism) is more complicated than just choosing one.

Let me take each possible (sub)definition in reverse order and see where this takes us.

The second definition of agnosticism I would have to think describes me fairly well. When pressed for logical proof of god's existence or lack of it, I can ultimately I have none in either event. I do not believe that god is necessary, but I don't pretend to know all the answers, nor do I suggest that I can prove a negative. However, I do not accept that there is evidence of god, by any definition that has been presented to me. I find them to be logically inconsistent, either internally, or with the real world.

The first definition of agnosticism that I gave, however, described me pretty well as a teenager as I actively searched for answers to this question. It took me many years to completely reject this notion, because certain aspects of god are appealing, but ultimately, I did pass out of this stage. Much of my family, however, remains in this stage; perhaps not actively seeking, but not really willing or able to come to a conclusion. For my brother this is deliberate--he enjoys riding the fence. For my mother, I just don't think she thinks it's that important to think about.

Considering atheism, I take the second definition to be fairly illogical. It is impossible to prove a negative. While an atheist can rip up particular religions and show their internal contradictions, it is

impossible to prove that if a god must exist, that it must conform to these standards. Or that because we cannot come up with a logically coherent notion of what a god might be (our wishful thinking being imposed upon it as it is), does not mean that some of the notions we propose do not exist. We may not like the truth, but that does not make it less truthful. As I said above, I perceive this sense of "knowing" that no god exists to be just as religion-like as versions of theism. This brand of atheism also tends to take on anti-religion qualities which, if nothing else, can be counterproductive. I believe that this also tends to be the brand of atheism that people choose if they are trying to get a rise out of believers.

The first definition of atheist is more descriptive of myself. I generally don't believe that definitions of god are sensical, and thus it is possible to say I don't believe in a certain particular definition of god, proving that all notions of "god" are impossible is futile. I finally decided to stop looking for god, and since I had no convincing evidence for god, I came to the conclusion, for myself, that I didn't believe by default. I came to this choice by personal reasons, and the need for things to make sense. Since definitions of god don't make sense, I could really only continue in the agnostic track or choose atheism. My inclination to science likely informed the choice of default, though not necessarily the original question. This belief may change if new information is provided, but until that time, I default to no. I take Carl Sagan's commandment very seriously here: "Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence", and god is certainly extraordinary. I do, however, consider my atheism something of a religious belief. Not held as emotionally as the other definition of atheism, but I don't consider myself to be lacking a religion. I consider religious belief to be centered fundamentally around beliefs about god, and I certainly believe something about that question. Atheism is not organized in the same way as Christianity, but nonetheless, when I have the chance, I select "Other" and write "Atheist", rather than "None" on surveys.

For me, the question of god and my belief or disbelief in it, is inextricably bound up in my personal history and how things played out in my life. It is nearly impossible to make sense of what I believe and why without knowing this history. I also think that since we are talking about a belief and not a question of fact that there is nothing wrong with this, and in fact, this is the way it ought to be. People who come to their beliefs unexamined, because that is the way they were raised, have no real foundation upon which these beliefs are based, and their beliefs have no connection to their lives. They become something that they tell people, and probably don't even really believe what they say at all. Therefore, let me begin at the beginning, in a semi-autobiographical way, as I see it.

I was raised Catholic. That in itself is somewhat puzzling because my parents both presently profess agnosticism. My mother was raised Catholic herself, attending Catholic schools, and dad converted in order to marry her, so the focus growing up was on Catholicism. For some reason I do not really understand, like many Americans, my mother felt that it was important that I be exposed to religion and grow up with it as she had (despite having more-or-less rejected it for herself), so we attended church most Sundays and my brother and I were sent to catechism. But the seeds of questioning were already being sown in our upbringing at home.¹

¹I don't really understand this tendency in the US to default to taking one's kids to church, even when one no longer believes or attends oneself. In fact, I really don't approve at all. How does it get spread through the culture that something you've rejected and not found beneficial in one's own life should continue to be foisted upon the next generation? I think this is ultimately where the difference between American and Europe lies, that they move away from religion and don't force their kids to be raised in it, and American's have this weird notion that they should even when they themselves have rejected it. It's foolish, not to mention, contributes to how backward America is spiritually. My adoption of atheism would have proved

I had two main problems with catechism: 1) I was bored out of my mind, just as I was with school in general, learning the same things over and over again every year, 2) I need for things to make sense, and Catholic teaching, almost by definition, is designed to demand the subjugation of reason to blind faith--for instance, in the doctrine of the trinity. This second feature of Catholic teaching led me to question, and the first only fueled my dissatisfaction. I recall distinctly this sense of conflict from about the age of 10. (Note: in other autobiographical references, you may note other seeds of dissatisfaction at this same age.)

It was around this point that I began to search for a way to make this work for me. My default, since I had been doing this religion thing all my life, was to find a way to believe, to find some way to reconcile my desire to believe with what my head was constantly questioning. But as time passed, my questions only led to a deeper crisis of faith, and by 12 it was finally clear to me that I needed time to sort things out. I was about to begin training for Confirmation--which one is supposed to do at 13--to swear to be a good Catholic for the rest of one's life, and I knew that I could not possibly swear such an oath; it would be a lie. I was still trying to find a way to believe, but I knew well enough that my "faith" was precarious, and I could not say even how I would feel in a year, never mind 20. I was still operating under the default of Catholicism, but I also was not sure what I believed, and I needed to know before I swore to dedicate myself to any religion. I was permitted to stop going to catechism. By 13, I was allowed to stop going to church on Sundays, and then my real quest began. Now it was not even about particulars like the doctrine of the trinity, but rather more basic things, like did I believe in god? or if so, what did I believe about god? Many of these were still Catholic notions, but they were all becoming separate questions.

Certainly the depth of thinking that went into these questions was affected by something else going on in my life at the time... I was suffering from deep and chronic depression. In many ways my search for a belief in god was affected by this, and in some ways promoted it, because I desperately NEEDED some kind of emotional prop in my life. I spent a lot of time alone, and this intense emotionalism and long hours of contemplation time led me, I think finally, to a kind of conclusion that is at once rationalistic, and emotional. It is hardly the process of discovery through reason that science epitomizes, though I have been accused of letting my scientific bent go too far. I spent 3-4 years in this limbo of searching. Some days I would come very close to convincing myself I could believe... only to come back to my doubts again a couple days later. The books I recall being most influential were not philosophical tracts or logical proofs or even personal accounts, but rather the novels of Katherine Kurtz. They are fantasy novels to be sure, but it was easy to see how living in a world like that would convince one of the existence of god. Unfortunately, I didn't live in that world. And so things proceeded pretty much as is throughout my high school years, the only thing that changed was that I sank further and further into depression. My questions remained, so it seemed, eternally unanswerable.

These are the years in which I would classify myself as being a genuine agnostic. Not only didn't I know if there was no god, but even when pressed, I could not even have guessed the answer.

I suppose that in another life I could have just gone on questioning forever, trying to force myself to believe in the patently illogical doctrines of the Catholic Church forever, but instead, shortly after turning 17, I events took a turn that ultimately permitted me to escape the Catholic indoctrination of my upbringing, and start down a new road toward my current perspective of true atheism.

considerably less painful, less guilt-ridden, and America would have many fewer people running around claiming the earth is less than 10,000 years old. It's just a little insane. The madness has to stop.

The factors that led to this climax of sorts were, primarily, that I continued to struggle with my depression, and that while in my first year of college, the level of work I had been putting into my academics in order to manage it was taken away from me--in fact, I was not ALLOWED to work that hard/take enough classes--and consequently, I spent much more time thinking; this led ultimately to my depression managing me rather than me managing it, and I ended up flunking out of college--I had invested my whole self-worth in academics and at that moment I appeared to be a failure at that as well. Contributing to that was that my grandmother, a devout Catholic, knew I was struggling, but her advice was that it was part of God's plan, and that he was testing me.

This notion that God was testing me became the focus of much of my thoughts, and the more I came to feel, under its weight, that God was in fact out to get me. I was not up to this testing, couldn't he see that? I was breaking. I wanted to kill myself. If I could have gotten onto the roof, or lived in a hillier part of the country, or had access to alcohol, I probably would have. I was broken inside, and the only thing that kept me alive was not will, or even really so much fear of death--fear of messing it up and having to go on living worse off maybe--but it was merely lack of access. I didn't even have a garage I could asphyxiate myself in. They say that whatever doesn't kill us makes us stronger, but I would have been dead many times over and still, God would not let up on his "test".

This train of thought ultimately led me to a choice. I could go on trying to believe in God--and by default all this Catholic stuff I was raised with--and with that believe that I had no power to change the state of my life, that only God could eventually decide to let up on his "test"; OR I could believe that the universe was cold, that it didn't really care, and that only I could do something to change the way things were. It was an emotional decision, not a rationalistic one, and I acknowledge that wholeheartedly. I needed to empower my life. I needed to take back the control I had completely lost. I could not go on living the way I was feeling, helpless, and that nothing would ever change, waiting for "someone" or something to come to my rescue. This choosing to disbelieve was the means by which I began, finally, to try to take back my life.

The break was hardly a clean one. It was many years still that I searched for some kind of spiritual connection to the universe, but all of these were ultimately rejected. But I had come to the crossroads and changed the direction of my life. I had finally escaped my upbringing and was no longer constantly thinking of things in terms of default-to-Catholic. I was not trying to find a way to make god make sense, but rather, I was trying to make my life make sense without God, and ultimately, that proved to be a great deal easier. I had to start everything from scratch, but that was what I needed. I have been told that patients with TLE often experience several religious epiphanies. It seems to me unlikely for this particular patient that there will be more than just this one.

Many religious people, particularly non-Catholics, have challenged my conclusions at this moment in life. Why not simply choose a different religion, but they miss the point. My struggle was with Catholicism in particular, but the issues I struggled with were not all particular to Catholics. What is God? And why do good people suffer? How else would the Protestants answer this? How would the Jews or the Muslims? And would it make any more sense? Shortly after this, I took a class in comparative religions, and nothing made any more sense to me than the one I had left. I was able to choose to live without god, and once I realized that I could, there was no going back.

Having underlined the biographical and psychological basis of my atheism, it seems like the appropriate moment to discuss the "thing" I am rejecting. What do I mean when I say "god"? What does it mean to

say one doesn't believe in god?

The image of god I was raised with was the Catholic god, a god designed to be all things to all people, it seems. God, I was told to believe, was all-powerful, all-knowing, all-good, all-just, all-merciful, and timeless. I was told that god was three-in-one, a kind of split personality I guess. The notion that Jesus was the son of god was to be taken literally, and yet, Jesus was God and had existed for all time... the whole meaning of son has a kind of temporal component here that was clearly being defied, and yet, so the argument went, still to be upheld. Philosophers tend to get hung up on the all-knowing and all-good notions, and its implications for free will and so forth; rather, for me I got hung up on a more basic contradiction: the all-just and all-merciful combination. I recall pelting my mother and grandmother and the priest and even the Sunday school teachers with questions on this topic. What does it mean to be just? What does it mean to be merciful? I mean, certainly, one can balance these considerations, but how can one be both all-just--treating everyone the same under the law--and also all-merciful--forgiving a pauper who steals a loaf of bread, but what of a wealthy joker living on an inheritance who steals to support a drug habit, even if he swears he's sorry? is the first case not just (in the sense of upholding the law--let's not confuse this with our everyday notion of what is "just" being more-or-less similar to "fair").

This notion of the inherent contradiction of the Catholic/Christian definition of God is ultimately what I was trying to reconcile. In the many years I searched for belief, it was in many respects a two-fold search; first, to find a reason to believe in these inherent contradictions; second, if Catholicism was to be rejected, what exactly to replace it with. Despite a few moments where it looked like case one might be possible, generally, this was pretty much impossible. I really need for things to make sense, and contradictions just aren't going to do it for me. Catholicism has plenty of other problems, it's sexism for one thing, which is hardly exclusive to that denomination, and so Christianity was rejected along with Catholicism. The second case was very much an on-going thing for quite a number of years even after my so-called conversion to atheism.

Now to the point. What makes me an atheist? Atheism is, by definition, a disbelief or a lack of belief in god, but is this the Christian god?--well, then clearly I'm an atheist, since I definitely don't believe in the Christian god--or is this some more abstract notion of god that I'm rejecting? Well, what it came down to for me was a combination of rejecting "existing" definitions of god, i.e. those actually worshipped by some religion or another, and rejecting one at a time the attributes of a supposed "god"--or minimally, suggesting that convincing evidence for such a thing is lacking.

Let us speak of the major attributes of god, in no particular order: god is supposed to be eternal; god is supposed to be powerful, far more powerful than people, and it's certainly common to presume god is all powerful; god is supposed to be wise or knowledgeable to a degree unattainable by humans; god is supposed to be the creator/Prime Mover or the like; god is supposed to respond to prayers, and to punish the wicked and reward the good. Clearly, these are not all the possible attributes of god, but they are typical.

Let me start on this list with the ones that are easiest to eliminate (for me). The power of prayer, based on my personal biography, I have a great deal of experience with having prayers not work. Frankly, I consider belief in prayer to be a logical fallacy, specifically, **post hoc, ergo propter hoc**, the fallacy that since something happened after another thing in time, it was therefore caused by it--the idea that sometimes when you pray you get what you pray for means prayer works... but not the reverse. The only kind of god consistent with the universe is that prayer only works sometimes. To still believe, then, that god is still capable of answering prayers and does not, one has to ask, "why not?" more often. This

leads down a slippery slope into what I believe is a fundamentally disturbing consequence. Only by denying reality can one continue to believe in a god that answers prayers, and is not capricious in the application of this power.

Punishing the wicked and rewarding the good is clearly related to this notion of prayer. If god is capricious, we can't make any claim to this at all. But in general, I have to side with Voltaire, and suggest that lots of good things happen to wicked people, and bad things happen to good people, leaving us no evidence in this life that anyone but ourselves and random chance have anything to do with it. To sustain this claim ultimately requires some sort of belief in an afterlife or karma. I find no evidence for this, and I am certainly not comforted by it.

What about god being knowledgeable? Philosophers have spent copious amounts of time on the consequences to free will, so once again, I will defer here. However, one is forced to presume some kind of omniscience or one runs into the problem of humans possibly attaining the knowledge of god, perhaps not a single person, but as a species. If god's knowledge is not unlimited, then there is some limit, and it would be possible to acquire that much information (or approach it asymptotically). What then would be the problem with "playing god"? Limited information is clearly conceivable, but what does infinite knowledge mean? We must be clear, as well, that infinite doesn't just mean everything there is to know, no more than infinity means the largest number possible. Omniscience, in a way, implies finite knowledge. What does it mean for definitions of god if we then claim that knowledge is limited, that god is thus limited? I suppose one could get around this by supposing infinite universes, but this notion of god is completely beyond human comprehension. Historically, there was the optimistic claim that this universe was the best of all possible worlds, allowing for infinite "possible" universes, which god could then know about, even if there was only one actual universe. I don't really see that we can even convincingly make that claim, that there is only one universe--only one that we can know of, but how can we convincingly dismiss alternate universes that we can't experience in any way? Clearly, this can't impact our everyday lives in any way, but how can we then use it to justify other flights of fancy as if proving that we can't eliminate the possibility is actually a proof that it's true?

What about god as Creator of the universe? This question presupposes that god existed before the universe. But this is an interesting scientific question in itself--and can we know what was before time itself? This goes to a question I may address at a later time that relates to god being a way to answer the kinds of questions that science can't answer, like "why" instead of "how". I consider the notion of the prime mover the most innocuous of attributes of a god, as long as no other claims are made about what god might be like or why he might have done something... again, god attempting to answer the question of "why" is, to me, a philosophical quagmire. This question of creation of the universe, however, does not imply eternal (which is the next topic). Can one conceive of a being capable of creating the universe, but then disappearing (or dying if one prefers)? It seems to me that this is as conceivable as any of these other attributes.

The last attribute I listed was god as eternal. This is a claim that is inherently not only impossible to prove, but really difficult to even conceptualize. I am left with the impression that this is a necessary attribute for god, but suppose there was a being that reasonably satisfied several others of my criteria in some way? Would they really be gods, or just powerful beings? Eternalness would have to be the decisive characteristic. It should be noted here that I don't think that eternalness necessarily supposes an interest in humans or even the creation of the universe. If one does not accept the notion of eternity, how old is old enough to qualify as god?

So what this comes down to, I think, is that the most general definition of god would have to be an eternal being--regardless of "form"--that may or may not have created the universe. Clearly, if one accepts that god created the universe a certain amount of power is inherent, but I implicitly am avoiding the notion of "all-powerful" because it is too prone to logical fallacies (like "can god move an immovable object" nonsense). But otherwise, I am avoiding these other notions which I perceive as problematic, and it is this notion of generic eternal being that (possibly) created the universe that I reject a belief in, and thus claim the label of atheist. Along with god, I rejected most of his supernatural trappings, as well, like heaven and souls, and the like, but that's ostensibly independent.

So, to summarize what I said, I discussed some of the attributes that 'god' is supposed to have. I find many of these attributes, particularly when taken together, to be internally inconsistent and contradictory. I believe strongly in a universe in which something cannot be both p and $\sim p$. Some attributes of god, such as eternity, are not inherently contradictory, but are also impossible to demonstrate objectively. And the moment that one allows that the power of god is finite, it makes it possible that we ourselves will one day evolve into 'gods'. Surely, if one asked the Greeks about what makes a god a god, we can do today many of the things they attributed to gods, with the exception perhaps of controlling the weather and supposedly living forever (although, recall they needed to consume ambrosia, at least in some myths, to make this deathless thing work). As soon as we begin to set finite limits that are ultimately arbitrary, we run the risk of doing more than 'playing god'.

This strikes me as being more than problematical. The universe may be strange and wonderful, but ultimately I believe it is consistent and coherent. Few definitions of god appear to be so, and those that remain, besides being unprovable, do not necessarily suggest that 'god' gives a rat's ass about what is going on down here. God remains ultimately unknowable, so even if he/she/it exists, we are left with determining for ourselves what constitutes morality. For moral matters we must act as though there is no god, because even if god exists, we can't possibly know what is expected. Atheism may be the null hypothesis, but even if one chooses to believe in a god which is coherent, moral judgment has to come for them from the same place mine does. Logic and rational judgment.

I have often been accused by so-called god-fearing people that I can't be a moral person without god... or more insidious and hateful yet, that if I am moral I am tacitly acknowledging the existence of god so I can't be an atheist. To both these remarks, I wholeheartedly object. Morality, I believe, is finally based in what is best for the survival of the species. In this, I am something of a relativist, in that I believe that the needs for the survival of the species changes over time, but I also believe that certain moral standards are in fact absolutes, and that these standards remain the same despite changing conditions.

Despite the accusations leveled at me by theists, I realized immediately that by questioning god I was questioning all of the received moral values that had been imposed on me by my upbringing. One of the central questions of my quest for god was actually to find a basis for god in which morality made sense. I found the moral values espoused in the Bible to be contradictory, and as I've noted, I loath contradiction. The Bible is full of morals based on the do-as-I-say-not-as-I-do principle. This is unacceptable in an enlightened framework of living. Only by living up to my own moral standards as much as possible can I expect to hold others to that same principle. It is more than about rationalizing behaviour I already do, but to actually ask the question that has been asked for centuries and rarely lived up to, "How would I have others treat me?"

There has to be a balance of forces in whatever moral judgments we come up with. Our biology demands that we survive--and 'surviving' in some sense means passing something on to the next

generation since we can't live forever yet--and as a society, banded together to further that end, we are also demanded by biology and instinct to encourage the survival of our extended families, our communities, our nations (or any other group which we believe we have something important in common), and finally our species. These needs must all be balanced. Our most honoured sacrifices are when we forego our own survival for something further from us along that chain. Our ability to extend our instincts to groups significantly larger than our own families or villages is what makes us supremely modern human beings. When we are not able to make that extension, that by helping any other human survive we ourselves survive, we tacitly acknowledge that we have not yet made that great leap beyond pure animalistic instinct. Altruism, biologically, is ultimately selfish, but there is an intellectual component. When we think of people as 'the other', we will not make sacrifices for them. It is only through intelligence, education, and culture that we can stop perceiving some humans as 'the enemy' and not only will we not sacrifice for them, we will be perfectly happy to kill them.

Survival in this context, should mean more than just 'getting by', more than just merely living. We are intellectual creatures. Survival means not only living, but living well. Survival means more than just merely having babies, but passing on the fruits of our intellectual achievements, our intellectual children as it were. Our intelligence permits greater adaptability to crisis and change, but diversity does as well. Behaviours which might in one culture be seriously detrimental might in another hundred or thousand years (a blip in geologic time) suddenly become life-saving. Consider homosexuality/bisexuality as a perfectly good example. In the past, when only 1-in-5 to 1-in-10 children lived to adulthood long enough to reproduce, homosexuality would have been a problem because it did not produce children. When communities were struggling to survive, this could be a serious threat to our survival. But in modern society, when overpopulation is one of the most serious problems threatening even our ability to feed everyone, we no longer need everyone to reproduce, and are in fact demanding that people have fewer children, for the sake of the survival of the species at a sustainable level. Now, the ability to go without straight sex becomes suddenly supremely adaptable. It's hardly for everyone. The whole population can't stop having children, but it is hardly appropriate to force people into marrying. As we marry later and later in life, sex for the sake of children becomes less important, and the quality of the life we can give those children we do have becomes more important. They are more likely to survive, so we can dedicate more resources to them, emotionally and financially.

I don't have a specific list of things which are and aren't moral, instead I think about these two things. How does this moral judgment affect the survival, not only of myself but of my species, and secondly, whatever I decide, would I be satisfied if other people treated me this way. We have mirror neurons in our heads just for this purpose (not to mention they make learning easier). We are biologically designed this way. I've never really been able to understand why so many people ignore choose to ignore it. I am forced to come back to the question, "If god wanted us to ignore our biology, then why did he make us this way?"