

Atheism

Atheism, in general, the critique and denial of metaphysical beliefs in God or spiritual beings. As such, it is usually distinguished from theism, which affirms the reality of the divine and often seeks to demonstrate its existence. Atheism is also distinguished from agnosticism, which leaves open the question whether there is a god or not, professing to find the questions unanswered or unanswerable.

The dialectic of the argument between forms of belief and unbelief raises questions concerning the most perspicuous delineation, or characterization, of atheism, agnosticism, and theism. It is necessary not only to probe the warrant for atheism but also carefully to consider what is the most adequate definition of atheism. This article will start with what have been some widely accepted, but still in various ways mistaken or misleading, definitions of atheism and move to more adequate formulations that better capture the full range of atheist thought and more clearly separate unbelief from belief and atheism from agnosticism. In the course of this delineation the section also will consider key arguments for and against atheism.

Atheism As Rejection Of Religious Beliefs

A central, common core of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam is the affirmation of the reality of one, and only one, God. Adherents of these faiths believe that there is a God who created the universe out of nothing and who has absolute sovereignty over all his creation; this includes, of course, human beings—who are not only utterly dependent on this creative power but also sinful and who, or so the faithful must believe, can only make adequate sense of their lives by accepting, without question, God's ordinances for them. The varieties of atheism are numerous, but all atheists reject such a set of beliefs.

Atheism, however, casts a wider net and rejects all belief in “spiritual beings,” and to the extent that belief in spiritual beings is definitive of what it means for a system to be religious, atheism rejects religion. So atheism is not only a rejection of the central conceptions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam; it is, as well, a rejection of the religious beliefs of such African religions as that of the Dinka and the Nuer, of the anthropomorphic gods of classical Greece and Rome, and of the transcendental conceptions of Hinduism and Buddhism. Generally atheism is a denial of God or of the gods, and if religion is defined in terms of belief in spiritual beings, then atheism is the rejection of all religious belief.

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Atheism And Theism

To say that atheism is the denial of God or the gods and that it is the opposite of theism, a system of belief that affirms the reality of God and seeks to demonstrate his existence, is inadequate in a number of ways. First, not all theologians who regard themselves as defenders of the Christian faith or of Judaism or Islam regard themselves as defenders of theism. The influential 20th-century Protestant theologian Paul Tillich, for example, regards the God of theism as an idol and refuses to construe God as a being, even a supreme being, among beings or as an infinite being above finite beings. God, for him, is “being-itself,” the ground of being and meaning. The particulars of Tillich’s view are in certain ways idiosyncratic, as well as being obscure and problematic, but they have been influential; and his rejection of theism, while retaining a belief in God, is not eccentric in contemporary theology, though it may very well affront the plain believer.

Second, and more important, it is not the case that all theists seek to demonstrate or even in any way rationally to establish the existence of God. Many theists regard such a demonstration as impossible, and fideistic believers (e.g., Johann Hamann and Søren Kierkegaard) regard such a demonstration, even if it were possible, as undesirable, for in their view it would undermine faith. If it could be proved, or known for certain, that God exists, people would not be in a position to accept him as their sovereign Lord humbly on faith with all the risks that entails. There are theologians who have argued that for genuine faith to be possible God must necessarily be a hidden God, the mysterious ultimate reality, whose existence and authority must be accepted simply on faith. This fideistic view has not, of course, gone without challenge from inside the major faiths, but it is of sufficient importance to make the above characterization of atheism inadequate.

Finally, and most important, not all denials of God are denials of his existence. Believers sometimes deny God while not being at all in a state of doubt that God exists. They either willfully reject what they take to be his authority by not acting in accordance with what they take to be his will, or else they simply live their lives as if God did not exist. In this important way they deny him. Such deniers are not atheists (unless we wish, misleadingly, to call them “practical atheists”). They are not even agnostics. They do not question that God exists; they deny him in other ways. An atheist denies the existence of God. As it is frequently said, atheists believe that it is false that God exists, or that God’s existence is a speculative hypothesis of an extremely low order of probability.



Søren Kierkegaard, drawing by Christian Kierkegaard, c. 1840; in a private collection.
 Courtesy of the Royal Danish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Copenhagen

Yet it remains the case that such a characterization of atheism is inadequate in other ways. For one it is too narrow. There are atheists who believe that the very concept of God, at least in developed and less anthropomorphic forms of Judeo-Christianity and Islam, is so incoherent that certain central religious claims, such as “God is my creator to whom everything is owed,” are not genuine truth-claims; i.e., the claims could not be either true or false. Believers hold that such religious propositions are true, some atheists believe that they are false, and there are agnostics who cannot make up their minds whether to believe that they are true or false. (Agnostics think that the propositions are one or the other but believe that it is not possible to determine which.) But all three are mistaken, some atheists argue, for such putative truth-claims are not sufficiently intelligible to be genuine truth-claims that are either true or false. In reality there is nothing in them to be

believed or disbelieved, though there is for the believer the powerful and humanly comforting illusion that there is. Such an atheism, it should be added, rooted for some conceptions of God in considerations about intelligibility and what it makes sense to say, has been strongly resisted by some pragmatists and logical empiricists.

While the above considerations about atheism and intelligibility show the second characterization of atheism to be too narrow, it is also the case that this characterization is in a way too broad. For there are fideistic believers, who quite unequivocally believe that when looked at objectively the proposition that God exists has a very low probability weight. They believe in God not because it is probable that he exists—they think it more probable that he does not—but because belief is thought by them to be necessary to make sense of human life. The second characterization of atheism does not distinguish a fideistic believer (a Blaise Pascal or a Soren Kierkegaard) or an agnostic (a T.H. Huxley or a Sir Leslie Stephen) from an atheist such as Baron d’Holbach. All believe that “there is a God” and “God protects humankind,” however emotionally important they may be, are speculative hypotheses of an extremely low order of probability. But this, since it does not distinguish believers from nonbelievers and does not distinguish agnostics from atheists, cannot be an adequate characterization of atheism.

It may be retorted that to avoid apriorism and dogmatic atheism the existence of God should be regarded as a hypothesis. There are no ontological (purely a priori) proofs or disproofs of God’s existence. It is not reasonable to rule in advance that it makes no sense to say that God exists. What the atheist can reasonably claim is that there is no evidence that there is a God,



Blaise Pascal, engraving by Henry Hoppner
Meyer, 1833.

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and against that background he may very well be justified in asserting that there is no God. It has been argued, however, that it is simply dogmatic for an atheist to assert that no possible evidence could ever give one grounds for believing in God. Instead, atheists should justify their unbelief by showing (if they can) how the assertion is well-taken that there is no evidence that would warrant a belief in God. If atheism is justified, the atheist will have shown that in fact there is no adequate evidence for the belief that God exists, but it should not be part of his task to try to show that there could not be any evidence for the existence of God. If the atheist could somehow survive the death of his present body (assuming that such talk makes sense) and come, much to his surprise, to stand in the presence of God, his answer should be, "Oh! Lord, you didn't give me enough evidence!" He would have been mistaken, and realize that he had been mistaken, in his judgment that God did

not exist. Still, he would not have been unjustified, in the light of the evidence available to him during his earthly life, in believing as he did. Not having any such postmortem experiences of the presence of God (assuming that he could have them), what he should say, as things stand and in the face of the evidence he actually has and is likely to be able to get, is that it is false that God exists. (Every time one legitimately asserts that a proposition is false one need not be certain that it is false. "Knowing with certainty" is not a pleonasm.) The claim is that this tentative posture is the reasonable position for the atheist to take.

An atheist who argues in this manner may also make a distinctive burden-of-proof argument. Given that God (if there is one) is by definition a very *recherché* reality—a reality that must be (for there to be such a reality) transcendent to the world—the burden of proof is not on the atheist to give grounds for believing that there is no reality of that order. Rather, the burden of proof is on the believer to give some evidence for God's existence—i.e., that there is such a reality. Given what God must be, if there is a God, the theist needs to present the evidence, for such a very strange reality. He needs to show that there is more in the world than is disclosed by common experience. The empirical method, and the empirical method alone, such an atheist asserts, affords a reliable method for establishing what is in fact the case. To the claim of the theist that there are in addition to varieties of empirical facts "spiritual facts" or "transcendent facts," such as it being the case that there is a supernatural, self-existent, eternal power, the atheist can assert that such "facts" have not been shown.

It will, however, be argued by such atheists, against what they take to be dogmatic aprioristic atheists, that the atheist should be a fallibilist and remain open-minded about what the

future may bring. There may, after all, be such transcendent facts, such metaphysical realities. It is not that such a fallibilistic atheist is really an agnostic who believes that he is not justified in either asserting that God exists or denying that he exists and that what he must reasonably do is suspend belief. On the contrary, such an atheist believes that he has very good grounds indeed, as things stand, for denying the existence of God. But he will, on the second conceptualization of what it is to be an atheist, not deny that things could be otherwise and that, if they were, he would be justified in believing in God or at least would no longer be justified in asserting that it is false that there is a God. Using reliable empirical techniques, proven methods for establishing matters of fact, the fallibilistic atheist has found nothing in the universe to make a belief that God exists justifiable or even, everything considered, the most rational option of the various options. He therefore draws the atheistical conclusion (also keeping in mind his burden-of-proof argument) that God does not exist. But he does not dogmatically in a priori fashion deny the existence of God. He remains a thorough and consistent fallibilist.

Atheism And Metaphysical Beliefs

Such a form of atheism (the atheism of those pragmatists who are also naturalistic humanists), though less inadequate than the first formation of atheism, is still inadequate. God in developed forms of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam is not, like Zeus or Odin, construed in a relatively plain anthropomorphic way. Nothing that could count as "God" in such religions could possibly be observed, literally encountered, or detected in the universe. God, in such a conception, is utterly transcendent to the world; he is conceived of as "pure spirit," an infinite individual who created the universe out of nothing and who is distinct from the universe. Such a reality—a reality that is taken to be an ultimate mystery—could not be identified as objects or processes in the universe can be identified. There can be no pointing at or to God, no ostensive teaching of "God," to show what is meant. The word God can only be taught intralinguistically. "God" is taught to someone who does not understand what the word means by the use of descriptions such as "the maker of the universe," "the eternal, utterly independent being upon whom all other beings depend," "the first cause," "the sole ultimate reality," or "a self-caused being." For someone who does not understand such descriptions, there can be no understanding of the concept of God. But the key terms of such descriptions are themselves no more capable of ostensive definition (of having their referents pointed out) than is "God," where that term is not, like "Zeus," construed anthropomorphically. (That does not mean that anyone has actually pointed to Zeus or observed Zeus but that one knows what it would be like to do so.)

In coming to understand what is meant by "God" in such discourses, it must be understood that God, whatever else he is, is a being that could not possibly be seen or be in any way else observed. He could not be anything material or empirical, and he is said by believers to be an

intractable mystery. A nonmysterious God would not be the God of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

This, in effect, makes it a mistake to claim that the existence of God can rightly be treated as a hypothesis and makes it a mistake to claim that, by the use of the experimental method or some other determinate empirical method, the existence of God can be confirmed or disconfirmed as can the existence of an empirical reality. The retort made by some atheists, who also like pragmatists remain thoroughgoing fallibilists, is that such a proposed way of coming to know, or failing to come to know, God makes no sense for anyone who understands what kind of reality God is supposed to be. Anything whose existence could be so verified would not be the God of Judeo-Christianity. God could not be a reality whose presence is even faintly adumbrated in experience, for anything that could even count as the God of Judeo-Christianity must be transcendent to the world. Anything that could actually be encountered or experienced could not be God.

At the very heart of a religion such as Christianity there stands a metaphysical belief in a reality that is alleged to transcend the empirical world. It is the metaphysical belief that there is an eternal, ever-present creative source and sustainer of the universe. The problem is how it is possible to know or reasonably believe that such a reality exists or even to understand what such talk is about.

It is not that God is like a theoretical entity in physics such as a proton or a neutrino. They are, where they are construed as realities rather than as heuristically useful conceptual fictions, thought to be part of the actual furniture of the universe. They are not said to be transcendent to the universe, but rather are invisible entities in the universe logically on a par with specks of dust and grains of sand, only much, much smaller. They are on the same continuum; they are not a different kind of reality. It is only the case that they, as a matter of fact, cannot be seen. Indeed no one has an understanding of what it would be like to see a proton or a neutrino—in that way they are like God—and no provision is made in physical theory for seeing them. Still, there is no logical ban on seeing them as there is on seeing God. They are among the things in the universe, and thus, though they are invisible, they can be postulated as causes of things that are seen. Since this is so it becomes at least logically possible indirectly to verify by empirical methods the existence of such realities. It is also the case that there is no logical ban on establishing what is necessary to establish a causal connection, namely a constant conjunction of two discrete empirical realities. But no such constant conjunction can be established or even intelligibly asserted between God and the universe, and thus the existence of God is not even indirectly verifiable. God is not a discrete empirical thing or being, and the universe is not a gigantic thing or process over and above the things and processes in the universe of which it makes sense to say that the universe has or had a cause. But then there is no way, directly or indirectly, that even the probability that there is a God could be empirically established.

Atheism And Intuitive Knowledge

The gnostic may reply that there is a nonempirical way of establishing or making it probable that God exists. The claim is that there are truths about the nature of the cosmos neither capable of verification nor standing in need of verification. There is, gnostics claim against empiricists, knowledge of the world that transcends experience and comprehends the sorry scheme of things entire.

Since the thorough probings of such epistemological foundations by David Hume and Immanuel Kant, skepticism about how, and indeed even that, such knowledge is possible is very strong indeed. With respect to knowledge of God in particular, both Hume and Kant provide powerful critiques of the traditional attempts to prove the existence of God (notwithstanding the fact that Kant remained a Christian). While some of the details of their arguments have been rejected and refinements rooted in their argumentative procedure have been developed, there is a considerable consensus among philosophers and theologians that arguments of the general type as those developed by Hume and Kant show that no proof of God's existence is possible. Alternatively, to speak of "intuitive knowledge" (an intuitive grasp of being or of an intuition of the reality of the divine being) is to make an appeal to something that is not sufficiently clear to be of any value in establishing anything.



Hume, David

David Hume, oil on canvas by Allan Ramsay, 1766; in the Scottish National Portrait Gallery, Edinburgh.

Prior to the rise of anthropology and the scientific study of religion, an appeal to revelation and authority as a substitute for knowledge or warranted belief might have been thought to have considerable force. But with a knowledge of other religions and their associated appeals to revealed truth, such arguments are without probative force. Claimed, or alleged, revelations are many, diverse, and not infrequently conflicting; without going in a small and vicious circle, it cannot be claimed, simply by appealing to a given putative revelation, that the revelation is the "true revelation" or the "genuine revelation" and that others are mistaken or, where nonconflicting, mere approximations to the truth. Similar things need to be said for religious authority. Moreover, it is at best problematic whether faith could sanction speaking of testing the genuineness of revelation or of the acceptability of religious authority. Indeed, if something is a "genuine revelation," there is no using

reason to assess it. But the predicament is that plainly, as a matter of anthropological fact, there is a diverse and sometimes conflicting field of alleged revelations with no way of deciding or even having a reasonable hunch which, if any, of the candidate revelations is the

genuine article. But even if the necessity for tests for the genuineness of revelation is allowed, there still is a claim that clearly will not do, for such a procedure would make an appeal to revelation and authority supererogatory. It is, where such tests are allowed, not revelation or authority that can warrant the most fundamental religious truths on which the rest depend. It is something else—that which establishes the genuineness of the revelation or authority—that guarantees these religious truths (if such there be), including the proposition that God exists. But the question returns, like the repressed, what that fundamental guarantee is or could be. Perhaps such a belief is nothing more than a cultural myth. There is, as has been shown, neither empirical nor a priori knowledge of God, and talk of intuitive knowledge is without logical force.

If these considerations are near to the mark, it is unclear what it means to say, as some agnostics and even atheists have, that they are skeptical God-seekers who simply have not found, after a careful examination, enough evidence to make belief in God a warranted or even a reasonable belief. It is unclear what it would be like to have, or for that matter fail to have, evidence for the existence of God. It is not that the God-seeker has to be able to give the evidence, for if that were so no search would be necessary, but that he, or at least somebody, must be able to conceive what would count as evidence if he had it so that he (and others) have some idea of what to look for. But it appears to be just that which cannot be done.

Perhaps there is room for the retort that it is enough for the God-seeker not to accept any logical ban on the possibility of there being evidence. He need not understand what it would be like to have evidence in this domain. But, in turn, when one considers what kind of transcendent reality God is said to be, there seems to be an implicit logical ban on there being empirical evidence (a pleonasm) for his existence. It would seem plausible to assert that there is such a ban, though any such assertion should, of course, be made in a tentative way.

Someone trying to give empirical anchorage to talk of God might give the following hypothetical case. (It is, however, important in considering the case to keep in mind that things even remotely like what is described do not happen.) If thousands of people were standing out under the starry skies and all saw—the thing went on before their very eyes—a set of stars rearrange themselves to spell out “God,” they would indeed rightly be utterly astonished and think that they had gone mad. Even if they could somehow assure themselves that this was not in some way a form of mass hallucination—how they could do this is not evident—such an experience would not constitute evidence for the existence of God, for they still would be without a clue as to what could be meant by speaking of an infinite individual transcendent to the world. Such an observation (the stars so rearranging themselves), no matter how well confirmed, would not ostensibly fix the reference range of “God.” Talk of such an infinite individual is utterly incomprehensible and has every

appearance of being incoherent. No one knows what he is talking about in speaking of such a transcendent reality. All they would know is that something very strange indeed had happened. The doubt arises whether believers, or indeed anyone else in terms acceptable to believers, can give an intelligible account of the concept of God or of what belief in God comes to once God is de-anthropomorphized.

Comprehensive Definition Of Atheism

Reflection on this should lead to a more adequate statement of what atheism is and indeed as well to what an agnostic or religious response to atheism should be. Instead of saying that an atheist is someone who believes that it is false or probably false that there is a God, a more adequate characterization of atheism consists in the more complex claim that to be an atheist is to be someone who rejects belief in God for the following reasons (which reason is stressed depends on how God is being conceived): for an anthropomorphic God, the atheist rejects belief in God because it is false or probably false that there is a God; for a nonanthropomorphic God (the God of Luther and Calvin, Aquinas, and Maimonides), he rejects belief in God because the concept of such a God is either meaningless, unintelligible, contradictory, incomprehensible, or incoherent; for the God portrayed by some modern or contemporary theologians or philosophers, he rejects belief in God because the concept of God in question is such that it merely masks an atheistic substance; e.g., "God" is just another name for love, or "God" is simply a symbolic term for moral ideals.

This atheism is a much more complex notion, as are its various reflective rejections. It is clear from what has been said about the concept of God in developed forms of Judeo-Christianity that the more crucial form of atheist rejection is not the assertion that it is false that there is a God but instead the rejection of belief in God because the concept of God is said not to make sense—to be in some important way incoherent or unintelligible.

Such a broader conception of atheism, of course, includes everyone who is an atheist in the narrower sense, but the converse does not obtain. Moreover, this conception of atheism does not have to say that religious claims are meaningless. The more typical and less paradoxical and tendentious claim is that utterances such as "There is an infinite, eternal creator of the universe" are incoherent and that the conception of God reflected in such a claim is unintelligible, and in that important sense the claim is inconceivable and incredible—incapable of being a rational object of belief for a philosophically and scientifically sophisticated person touched by modernity. It is this that is a central belief of many contemporary atheists. There are good empirical grounds for believing that there are no Zeus-like spiritual beings, and as this last, more ramified form of atheism avers, if there are sound grounds for believing that the nonanthropomorphic or at least radically less anthropomorphic conceptions of God are incoherent or unintelligible, the atheist has the strongest grounds for rejecting belief in God.

Atheism is a critique and a denial of the central metaphysical beliefs of systems of salvation involving a belief in God or spiritual beings, but a sophisticated atheist does not simply claim that all such cosmological claims are false but takes it that some are so problematic that, while purporting to be factual, they actually do not succeed in making a coherent factual claim. The claims, in an important sense, do not make sense, and, while believers are under the illusion that there is something intelligible to be believed in, in reality there is not. These seemingly grand cosmological claims are in reality best understood as myths or ideological claims reflecting a confused understanding of their utterers' situation.

It is not a well-taken rejoinder to atheistic critiques to say, as have some contemporary Protestant theologians, that belief in God is the worst form of atheism and idolatry, since the language of Jewish and Christian belief, including such sentences as "God exists" and "God created the world," is not to be taken literally but symbolically and metaphorically. Christianity, as Reinhold Niebuhr, a theologian who defends such views, once put it, is "true myth." The claims of religion are not, on such account, to be understood as metaphysical claims trying to convey extraordinary facts but as metaphorical and analogical claims that are not understandable in any other terms. But if something is a metaphor it must at least in principle be possible to say what it is a metaphor of. Thus, metaphors cannot be understandable only in metaphorical terms. There can be no unparaphrasable metaphors or symbolic expressions though, what is something else again, a user of such expressions may not be capable on demand of supplying that paraphrase. Moreover, if the language of religion becomes simply the language of myth and religious beliefs are viewed simply as powerful and often humanly compelling myths, then they are conceptions that in reality have only an atheistic substance. The believer is making no cosmological claim that the atheist is not; it is just that his talk, including his unelucidated talk of "true myths," is language that for many people has a more powerful emotive force.



Reinhold Niebuhr, 1963

Agnosticism has a parallel development to that of atheism. An agnostic, like an atheist, asserts either that he does not know that God exists—or, more typically, that he cannot know or have sound reasons for believing that God exists—but unlike the atheist he does not think that he is justified in saying that God does not exist or, stronger still, that God cannot exist. Similarly, while some contemporary atheists say that the concept of God in developed theism does not make sense and thus that Jewish, Christian, and Islamic beliefs must be rejected, many contemporary agnostics believe that the concept of God is radically problematic. They maintain that they are not in a position to be able to decide whether, on the one hand, the terms and concepts of such religions are

*Courtesy of the Rare Book Department,
Union Theological Seminary Library, New
York City*

so problematic that such religious beliefs do not make sense or whether, on the other, though the talk is indeed radically paradoxical and in many ways

incomprehensible, such talk has sufficient coherence to make reasonable a belief in an ultimate mystery. Such an agnostic recognizes that the puzzles about God cut deeper than perplexities concerning whether it is possible to attain adequate evidence for God's existence. Rather, he sees the need to exhibit an adequate nonanthropomorphic, extralinguistic referent for "God." (This need not commit him to the belief that there are any observations independent of theory.) Believers think that, though God is a mystery, such a referent has been secured, though what it is remains a mystery. Atheists, by contrast, believe that it has not been, and indeed some of them believe that it cannot be, secured. To talk about mystery, they maintain, is just an evasive way of talking about what is not understood. Contemporary agnostics (those agnostics who parallel the atheists characterized above) remain in doubt and are convinced that there is no rational way of resolving the doubt about whether talk in a halting fashion of God just barely secures such reference or whether it, after all, fails and that nothing religiously acceptable is referred to by "God."

Intense religious commitment, as the history of fideism makes evident, has sometimes gone hand in hand with deep skepticism concerning man's capacity to know God. It is agreed by all parties to the dispute between belief and unbelief that religious claims are paradoxical. Furthermore, criteria for what is meaningless and what is not or for what is intelligible and what is not are deeply contested. It is perhaps fair enough to say that there are no generally accepted criteria.

Keeping these diverse considerations in mind in the arguments between belief, agnosticism, and atheism, it is crucial to ask whether there is any good reason at all to believe that there is a personal creative reality that is beyond the bounds of space and time and transcendent to the world. Is there even a sufficient understanding of such talk so that such a reality can be the object of religious commitment? (One cannot have faith in or take on faith what one does not at all understand. People must at least in some way understand what it is that they are to have faith in to be able to have faith in it. If a person is asked to trust Irglig, he cannot do so no matter how strongly he wants to take something simply on trust.)

It appears to be a brute fact that there just is that indefinitely immense collection of finite and contingent masses or conglomerations of things and processes the phrase "the universe" refers to. People can come to feel wonder, awe, and puzzlement that there is a universe at all. But that fact, or the very fact that there is a world at all, does not license the claim that there is a noncontingent reality on which the world (the sorry collection of things entire) depends. It is not even clear that such a sense of contingency gives an understanding of what such a noncontingent thing could be. Some atheists think that the reference range

of “God” is so indeterminate and the concept of God so problematic that it is impossible for someone fully aware of that reasonably to believe in God; believers, by contrast, think that, though the reference range of “God” is indeterminate, it is not so indeterminate and the concept of God so problematic as to make belief irrational or incoherent. It is known, they claim, that talk of God is problematic, but it is not known, and cannot be known, whether it is so problematic as to be without a religiously appropriate sense. Agnostics, in turn, say that there is no reasonable decision procedure. It is not known and cannot be ascertained whether or not “God” secures a religiously adequate referent. What needs to be kept in mind, in reflecting on this issue, is whether a “contingent thing” is a pleonasm and “infinite reality” is without sense and whether, when people go beyond anthropomorphism (or try to go beyond it), it is possible to have a sufficient understanding of what is referred to by “God” to make faith a coherent possibility.

Finally, it will not do to take a Pascalian or Dostoyevskian turn and claim that, intellectual absurdity or not, religious belief is necessary, since without belief in God morality does not make sense and life is meaningless. That claim is false, for even if there is no purpose to life there are purposes in life—things people care about and want to do—that can remain perfectly intact even in a godless world. God or no God, immortality or no immortality, it is vile to torture people just for the fun of it, and friendship, solidarity, love, and the attainment of self-respect are human goods even in an utterly godless world. There are intellectual puzzles about how people know that these things are good, but that is doubly true for the distinctive claims of a religious ethic. The point is that these things remain desirable and that life can have a point even in the absence of God.

Kai E. Nielsen

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