

Negative Atheism

God is that by definition that has sole ultimate value in itself and so it should have it with you. Lack of belief is absolute denial in a sense while it remains a lack of belief and is not a belief. Lack of belief is saying you will do the deciding instead of any God so you dethrone God and put yourself or humankind on the throne. It is still an atheistic action. It is atheism as in action. Action can deny God as much as belief that there is no God can so lack of belief in God is atheism.

Weak belief in God is a sort of denial of God too. To doubt something so big and major is in a way to deny it is what it is and what is it? IMPORTANT! It is key to how lacking belief in God can be classed as atheism. It is not agnosticism - it is not sitting on the fence.

To be without belief in God is to be against it for belief in God is needed for a God to connect with you and you with him and because if God is a good belief and what we should wish for (whether he exists or not) it is not a neutral matter. If God is morality as many say, then to be without belief is to reject God's existence in a sense. To be without faith in God is to be without God. If God does not reveal himself to me then nature reveals there is no God. Not to reveal is to let something else reveal he does not exist. When looked at this way, the lack of belief in God is a form of atheism for it is not the same as lack of belief in anything else. Lacking belief in the tooth fairy is not denying her existence but lacking belief in God is, in a way, denying his existence. God's existence gets a passive hostility that that of the tooth fairy does not get which is why it is easy to simply not reject God explicitly but just not believe and still be an atheist.

Do atheists who say atheism essentially is the absence of belief in God rather than outright denial think that we need the belief to be absent or lacked? YES! They indirectly deny God so they are truly atheists.

NEGATIVE AND POSITIVE ATHEISM

Etymologically the word atheism means "not theism ie not belief in God." But that does not mean it is the mere absence of belief in God for it could be a positive denial of God. Professor Antony Flew defined an atheist as a person who is not a theist. He says it is that simple. It is not for there is such a thing as being agnostic where you are not denying there is a God so you cannot be an atheist. However that aside Flew made contributions to our understanding of what is meant by an atheist. He at least alerted us that there are two atheisms.

Flew wrote in his book *God and Philosophy* that there are two kinds of atheist. The positive atheist uses evidence to prove that there is no God. The negative atheist does not do this but refuses to believe there is a God simply because she has no evidence for God. Flew's book is a defence of negative atheism. It argues that since there is no proof or reason to believe in God that makes sense we can assume there is no God and we should. It is up to the theist to prove there is a God. There must then be positive theists who say there is evidence for God and negative theists who say that there is a God for there is no evidence against him.

So keep the following in mind.

All atheists are negative atheists. They argue that there is no reason to believe in God because there is no evidence for his being real or for his being important. Many of these atheists are also positive atheists. A positive atheist agrees with the negative atheist and adds that there is evidence against the existence of God.

IMPLICIT ATHEISM?

Atheism can be implicit. A person can be atheist and not realise it. She or he is implicitly atheist. Negative atheism is implicit atheism.

WHERE DO YOU START?

If you want to refute atheism, you have to start with negative atheism.

Why?

Because the biggest question in relation to God is, "Is there any evidence that he exists meaning there is a reason to believe?"

The next biggest question is, "If there is no reason to believe, then is there evidence against God?"

You always need the evidence for something's existence before you can think about the evidence against it. Why bother looking for evidence against things when there is no reason to think they exist? There is no point. Looking for evidence for something comes first because if you show there is no evidence for it then the way is open for you to examine the evidence against. If you care about evidence you cannot do the con and not the pro. Doing the pro first avoids being biased against it. It is more important for there to be no evidence for something than for there to be evidence against it.

IS LACK OF BELIEF A BELIEF?

We are discussing negative atheism only now.

Here is an argument: "If a Catholic does not know that Hinduism exists, does that mean he believes there is no such religion as Hinduism? That makes no sense. Thus a lack of belief in God does not mean you believe no God exists."

Many say that a lack of belief is still a belief. They allege that an atheist who lacks a belief in God is adhering to a belief that no God exists. Their stance is nonsense for a lack of belief is not a belief. You are not denying the existence of God. That would be a belief. You are saying you have no reason to believe. That is not a denial and so it is not a belief.

How does that fit our assertion earlier that to lack belief in God implies that you do not believe and believe there is no God? Lack of belief on its own is not belief. But lack of belief in God is not on its own. It is not a direct denial of God but involves indirect denial. Lack of belief in the tooth fairy does not bring with it belief in her non-existence. Lack of belief in God is different for he is supreme explanation for all things and supremely important therefore to lack belief implies you have disbelief in God. The two go together.

The following is nonsense: "Atheists accuse Christians of believing in God without any or without sufficient evidence. But the atheists do this themselves for they believe that there is no God despite the fact that they have no evidence or have insufficient evidence for his non-existence." But we all treat things as non-existent if we have no evidence for them. God for some reason is the exception among the religious but he shouldn't be. Christians believing while having no evidence for God is not the same thing as atheists believing there is no God while having no evidence of his non-existence. If you believe a man lives in your attic without you having any evidence then you are crazy. You are not crazy if you lack belief in the existence of the man even though you have no evidence of his non-existence.

Suppose as the argument says, both atheists and believers were equally guilty of blind faith in relation to God's purported non-existence or existence. If both are irrational then which side would be the most irrational? If there is no evidence for a ghost haunting a house, and one person says there is a ghost that person is irrational. The person who sees no reason to believe and refuses to say there is one is rational.

THE DOG IS AN ATHEIST?

And here is a gem of an argument! "Would you suggest that as your dog lacks a belief in God that he is an atheist?"

Why not? A dog has intelligence.

You might say its different for humans for we have the choice to believe or not unlike the dog. But do we have a choice? You cannot really help what you think for you cannot help what evidence says to you. If you use emotion and desire to blind yourself to what you think, you are not choosing to change your mind. You are trying to hide the fact that you have not changed your mind.

OTHER REFUTATIONS

One might think the problem with negative atheism is that its reasoning would justify one believing that one's long gone wife is dead because there is no evidence that she is alive. Or that your employee is a thief for there is no evidence that he is not. But the difference is that if there is a God he will tell us he exists but the wife cannot for she does not know what one thinks or if one wants to know. She's not all-powerful and all-knowing like God and it is the same with the employee.

Also, the problem does not exist. Negative atheism does not justify thinking the wife is dead because of the absence of evidence that she is alive. It is not about whether she is alive or not but about the fact that you have no reason to think that she is. You are not believing anything. Saying there is no wife if there is no evidence or her existence is sensible but saying she must be dead as there is no evidence she is still alive is not the same thing. Not hearing from her may not mean she is dead.

The principle behind negative atheism is useful when you are on about whether an entity exists or not. If we are sure she did exist (past), evidence of her absence COULD BE evidence of her non-existence (current). But it IS NOT evidence for absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. However, if she does not exist and never did, evidence of her absence is evidence of her non-existence.

NEGATIVE THEISM

If lack of belief is a belief or leads to an implicit denial of God then negative atheism is believing there is no God in its own way.

Then what if you think there is a God because you suppose there is no evidence that he does not exist? You might call your view negative theism.

Negative theism in this form faces the problem of Santa Claus or the seventh wife of Henry VIII. It would have to say they exist simply because there is no evidence against them. This makes no sense. Something doesn't exist just because there is no evidence for it.

So if you have a choice between negative theism and negative atheism choose the latter. It is the most rational. It is the most rational even if both are irrational. Why is negative atheism the wise choice? Because it is stupid to believe in entities when you don't need to.

AGNOSTICISM?

It is easier to prove that you do not know a thing than that you do know it. This view indicates that there is a third option after theism or atheism which is agnosticism. Agnosticism is what you have when you are not deciding between negative theism or negative atheism. You consider the evidence that there is no God to be as convincing that there is so you do not know.

Anthony Kenny wrote that it is better to presume that you don't know something than that you do for it is easier to prove you don't know a thing than that you know it (page 58, What is Faith?). He says this means that it is better to presume agnosticism. Kenny argues that it is easier and more reasonable to assume God exists in the way negative theism does it than to assume that he does not like Flew wants us to. Both Flew and Kenny agree that there is no evidence for God.

In reply, if there is no evidence for the existence or non-existence of the ghost upstairs then it is clearly more reasonable to believe the ghost doesn't exist. If Kenny thinks it is more reasonable and easier to believe in God for God explains things then that is a denial that there is no evidence for God. Kenny must think that it is better to presume God exists in case he does. But we can't go about honouring nature spirits we don't believe in just because they might exist.

And as for agnosticism, when it says there could be a God and there is no need to believe in God it makes sense to make things simpler and just be an atheist. Reason bids us to go for simplicity. Agnosticism falls with theism for it is half-theism.

SO?

To be an atheist in your belief and thinking is to be a theoretical atheist.

Agnosticism is not theoretical atheism. It is just open to it. But it is practical atheism. Even if the agnostic is an Anglican bishop doing services he is still acting as an unbeliever.

A practical atheist is just one who thinks that he or she should live as if God has no say. You can be a believer and be one of these practical atheists.

With anything we must take two approaches. We must first avoid making errors. Second we must seek the truth or the best explanation.

Which one comes first?

Well we have to weed out errors first so that we can see clearly enough and find the straightest road to the truth. Then we will have more confidence that we have attained the truth. You do not want to be thinking wrongly that you have got the truth.

BE BOTH?

Can you be both an atheist and an agnostic? How? Usually you will define atheist as just not having a belief in God. You don't deny God but just don't believe. You may say that belief is not certain unlike knowledge. So then you might say you believe there is no God and that is what makes you atheist and you may say that you are agnostic as regards the stronger claim – knowing if there is or is not a God. That is splitting hairs. Agnostics and theists and atheists are believers not knowers.

SO?

Just not having faith or belief in God makes you an atheist simply because you are showing that your lack has implications which amount to denying there is a God. You have no duty make a case for atheism for you are not directly claiming anything. It is up to the believers who say there is a God, it is up to the atheists who directly deny God, to prove their case.

BOOKS CONSULTED

A Catechism of Christian Doctrine, Catholic Truth Society, London, 1985
A Common Faith, John Dewey, Yale University Press, Connecticut, 1968
AGNOSTICISM A VERY SHORT INTRODUCTION Robin Le Poidevin, Oxford, 2010
A Primer of Necessary Belief, Dawson Jackson, Victor Gollancz Ltd, London, 1957
Apologetics and Catholic Doctrine, M H Gill and Son Ltd, Dublin, 1954
Faith and Ambiguity, Stewart R Sutherland, SCM Press, London, 1984
God and Philosophy, Antony Flew, Hutchinson, London, 1966
In Defence of the Faith, Dave Hunt, Harvest House, Eugene Oregon, 1996
On Being a Christian, Hans Kung, Collins/Fount Paperbacks, Glasgow, 1978
Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy, Simon Blackburn, Oxford University Press, 1996
Reason and Belief, Bland Blanshard, London, George Allen and Unwin Ltd, 1974
Reason and Religion, Anthony Kenny, Basil Blackwell Ltd, Oxford, 1987
The Balance of Truth, El Watkin, Hollis & Carter, London, 1943
The Case Against Christ, John Young, Falcon Books, London, 1971
The Faith of a Subaltern, Alec de Candole, Cambridge University Press, 1919
The Fundamental Questions of Philosophy, A.C. Ewing, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1985
The Future of Belief Debate, Ed Gregory Baum, Herder and Herder, New York, 1967
The Student's Catholic Doctrine, Rev Charles Hart BA, Burns & Oates, London, 1961
Unblind Faith, Michael J Langford, SCM, London, 1982
What Do Existentialists Believe? Richard Appignanesi, Granta Books, London, 2006
What is Christianity? Very Rev W Moran DD, Catholic Truth Society of Ireland, Dublin, 1940
What is Faith? Anthony Kenny, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1992

THE WEB

THE PROBLEMS WITH BELIEFS www.nobeliefs.com/beliefs.htm

