

# ATHEISM AND ATHEISTS

## AGREEING ON THE BASICS BUT ON LITTLE ELSE

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Atheists vs what? (Note original sense of Greek term)  
Theists, deists, pantheists, Buddhists (?), agnostics (see later)

Keith Cornish & the Atheist stall at Adelaide (1999)

Correspondence & web-debate

- 1) Scope (and problems arising, eg re 1a relevance 1b change in scientific opinion)
- 2) 2a Degree & 2b grounds of conviction
- 3) General level of discussion (see [3], [4] below)

Classification of 'hard'/'firm' atheists (as per 2a) in terms of 2b

Degree	Ground
No! [1]	Notion of god incoherent ('No-one can rationally come to a well-founded belief that god exists') [Philosophical position: positing the existence of god in a world-picture makes it incoherent. Depends on type of god: some too much part of world (Greek gods, still more Asir; though presumably might still <b>exist</b> ), some perhaps too removed from world (Jewish-Christian-Muslim god?). Upheld only by some philosophers. Some claim against atheism that if this is valid the reverse is also valid; but this seems to depend on the precise way in which the notion is said to be incoherent.]
No! [2]	Excluded by scientific findings [Decisive? Limitations on scientific knowledge at any one time. Some of these permanent? 'God of the gaps']
No! [3]	Scientism [More extreme version of [2]. Apparently incoherent. Even if not, not axiomatically valid. But common enough on web & in non-refereed journals, and indeed among unphilosophical scientists. (This is where I differ most from Cornish etc; see also the issue of scope)]
No! [4]	Dogmatism [No more rational than blind faith; but often just below surface; some beleaguered American atheists are in this group. Another religion (as often represented by religious believers)?]

Note sequence [2]-[3](-[4]). Shift from [2] to [3] as [2] appears too weak. Cornish between [2] & [3]?

Note (philosophically fairly sophisticated) response to [1], involving reverse claim: Blanchard's version of 'God doesn't believe in atheists' (ie, the existence of god can be proved and it is the **absence** of god from a world-picture that makes it incoherent; ('No-one can rationally come to a well-founded belief that god does not exist').

Note in this context Tillich et al.: 'Even the question 'Is there a god?' is atheistic (compare medieval arguments).

Note issue of ability to consider such beings/the issue of their existence (cf Flatland; but note shadow of tesseract). If these matters cannot be considered intellectually, the existence or otherwise of such beings can be shown only mystically (etc), if even then. But without persuasive argument this may be merely an escape route! Note also that those who use such means do not always agree even on large/basic issues. Maybe this favours agnosticism, to the extent that it is valid.

Note (less sophisticated) response to [2]-[3]:

- (i) 'God doesn't believe in atheists'. But often aimed at those whose position is No ([2a], [3a]) rather than No!
- (ii) 'No-one is really an atheist' (doctrine [source?]; also applied to No below)

Note arguments for god involving Bible Code, Theomatics (Lucas & Washburn), etc; objections to stats and to linguistic claims.

In contrast with [3]: Knowledge of, eg, standard argument against link between religious & ethical propositions not widespread (philosophical objection rather than a scientific one, hence arguably **more** relevant/persuasive – within its scope – than Cornish's arguments, but not known to him)

In some respects, some atheists (eg, MN) find themselves aligned **with** believers **against** Cornish et al. (eg, opposing the idea that religious beliefs are axiomatically & patently nonsense, as per [3]). Accused of being a 'closet Christian'.

Note that some atheists (etc) go beyond this & have ethical (or other similar) **objections** to god's supposed behaviour, the nature of the universe as proposed by believers, etc (No!!). This surprises some believers, who expect thoughtful atheists to be 'reluctant atheists'. Note also Holloway's idea that no-one could wish to disobey a command known to be 'divine' (**not** true, unless *divine* be very oddly defined). (Though Holloway's main theme is ethics not based in religion.)

#### Classification of 'soft' atheists/ 'agnostics' (as per 2a) in terms of 2b

- No [1a] Philosophical objections  
[Notion of god – as variously interpreted - creates more philosophical problems than it solves: origin of universe, natural evil, apparent pointlessness & callousness of omniscient god creating universe at all, etc, etc; safe (to varying degrees) to bet **against** god (compare Pascal!); often with [2a], [2b]]
- No [2a] Excluded by scientific findings (etc) + Ockham's Razor  
[Safe (to varying degrees) to bet **against** god; often with [1a], [2b]]
- No [2b] Variant on [2a]: Possible truth of religion rendered redundant/excluded by scientific findings on psychology & anthropology (see Shermer etc; often with [1a], [2a]). On this account god **might** still exist (religion then 'natural'); but Ockham's Razor excludes without other grounds.

Whether these positions are described as atheistic or agnostic depends in part on epistemological theory adopted & definitions of relevant terms. This possibility discourages some such as Cornish, who regard them as agnostic & hence as too weak for their purpose ('You may only have a well-founded belief, but **I know!**).

'Genuine agnostics', saying:

'Given the present overall state of the evidence & argumentation as I see it, I for my part cannot even come to a well-founded belief either way'

or

'Given the present overall state of the evidence & argumentation (as I see it), no-one can rationally come to a well-founded belief either way'

or

'Given the permanent nature of the evidence & argumentation, no-one can rationally come to a well-founded belief either way'

(main technical use of term; 'hard agnosticism'):

Note that Shermer takes a 'hard agnostic' view from an essentially scientific perspective, perhaps not conceding enough weight to philosophical arguments.

See also modern/postmodern views of god as mainly a focus of mental activities **other** than belief (see Shermer etc). But this is (reasonably) eschewed by most serious believers.

