



Carter, J. A. (2017) Are theism and atheism totally opposed? Can they learn from each other? In: Harris, M. and Pritchard, D. (eds.) *Philosophy, Science and Religion for Everyone*. Routledge: New York, pp. 82-92. ISBN 9781138234215

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Deposited on: 06 March 2017

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For *Philosophy, Science and Religion for Everyone*, (eds.) M. Harris & D. H. Pritchard, (Routledge, forthcoming).

ARE THEISM AND ATHEISM TOTALLY OPPOSED? CAN THEY LEARN FROM EACH OTHER?

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I. INTRODUCTION

One very natural dividing line that—for better or worse—is often used to distinguish those who (put roughly for now) believe in God from those who do not is that between **theism** and **atheism**, where ‘theism’ is used to mark the believers and ‘atheism’ the non-believers. Such contrastive labels can serve many practical functions (e.g., signifying social identity) even when the terms in question are not clearly defined. Individuals are often, on the basis of their beliefs and values, attracted (sometimes rationally, sometimes irrationally) toward one such label more so than the other. However, once a clear statement of the substantive difference between theism and atheism is requested, things become more complicated, much more so than our casual use of these terms would suggest.

What exactly is the best way to capture the *relationship* between theism and atheism? To what extent are they opposed to one another, and relatedly, to what extent should they be regarded as *exhausting* the available theoretical options? §2 will canvass a range of responses to this cluster of questions. In §3, we explore the **social-epistemic** dimension of the atheism/theism divide, by focusing in particular on the issue of **religious disagreements**, including those disagreements that take very different assumptions as starting points.

2. THEISM AND ATHEISM

The 20th century philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1888-1951) was sceptical that any sharp definition (e.g., in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions) of either theism (or by extension atheism, the denial of theism) could be fruitfully drawn. The term ‘theism’, which originates from the Greek term *theos* [θεός] meaning ‘god’, has historically been used to pick out a wide range of very different positions, all under the general description of ‘belief in God’, so many in fact that that we might wonder whether the term ‘theism’ (like the term ‘game’) is best understood as a kind of **family resemblance** term. Just as there is plausibly no set of conditions necessary and sufficient for counting as a game despite a cluster of properties shared by many but not *all* games, so likewise we might think there are no conditions necessary and sufficient for counting as ‘theism’ despite characteristic similarities between the views we use this term to pick out. Or so such a line of thinking would go.

Relegating ‘theism’ (and by extension, atheism) to nothing sharper than a family resemblance term, however, might be premature. For one thing, even if there are various kinds of differing views that purport to accept ‘belief in God’ (understood minimally as a divine creator of the universe), self-described theists (unlike **deists**) typically posit further attributes. Whereas deists deny that God either interferes in the world or reveals himself in some detectable way, theists typically maintain both of these claims. Moreover, the term ‘theism’ can be sharpened further by associating additional properties with God, and in particular, the classic properties attributed to God by **monotheistic** religions (e.g., Christianity, Judaism, Islam): an all-powerful, all-knowing, and infinitely good creator.

Even if theism is used in this more specific sense, however, a further philosophical issue arises when it comes to defining atheism *in terms of* the denial of theism. For no matter how much we sharpen the notion of ‘God’ with reference to which theism is defined, the further characterisation of atheism as a denial of theism requires some further elaboration. For there are multiple ways one might *deny* theism, not all of which comport with our ordinary usage of ‘atheism.’

Atheism is typically associated with the kind of denial that is the *rejection* of the existence of God or other deities. Though one might also deny the existence of God in a weaker fashion, by refraining from believing in God while not outright maintaining God’s non-existence, a position typically associated with **agnosticism**. Let’s look at each of these positions in turn.

One method of support for atheism challenges the **rationality** of religious belief. On this strategy, belief in God is, like any other kind of belief, the sort of thing that should be defensible via publicly available evidence that anyone, not just the believer herself, should be able to accept. Those who judge that the preponderance of such available evidence counts against the existence of God might then be atheists (i.e., they might reject the proposition that God exists) on such grounds. Interestingly, though, while some theists accept the evidentialist's assumption that belief in God is rationally appraisable (and then argue further that the evidence actually supports God's existence), not all do. According to **fideism** (e.g., Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855)), belief in God is better understood as a matter of faith, not a matter of evidence. Interestingly, this means that in response to the atheist who rejects the existence of God evidential grounds, the fideist can more or less agree with such an atheist interlocutor: that is, *both* the fideist and the atheist can agree that God's existence cannot be evidentially established. Where the conflict lies in this case is the matter of whether God's existence is rational or **arational**, not the matter of where in particular the evidence points (the point of contention between evidentialist theists and atheists).

But what exactly, from the subject's point of view, is involved in *rejecting* God's existence? Must one have a certain level of confidence, or outright belief, in the nonexistence of God to qualify as an atheist by rejecting God's existence, or might one simply possess some (perhaps strong) doubts? Such questions reveal that the line dividing atheism and agnosticism might not be so straightforward as a difference between on the one hand rejecting God's existence and on the other *refraining from believing* in God's existence.

Here it will be helpful to consider the definition of agnosticism offered by William Rowe (1931–2015) as 'the view that human reason is incapable of providing sufficient rational grounds to justify either the belief that God exists or the belief that God does not exist'. If one refrains from believing in God and does so because one thinks human reason is simply incapable of rationally arbitrating the matter, we might ask further: is this because human reason is *in principle* incapable of providing sufficient rational grounds one way or another, or rather, because one thinks human reason currently (i.e., situated within the current knowledge base available to us) is incapable of providing such evidence? We should note that there is scope for a further kind of agnostic: one who *grants* that there is no in principle limitation to human reason *as such* that precludes the possibility of rational belief for or against God's existence, while maintaining that *one self* is nonetheless incapable. An agnostic of this variety refrains from believing in God but not

because *human reason* (a power common to all individuals) is limited, but because *she* (perhaps for reasons that apply just to her, her personal background, her own psychology, etc.) is incapable of locating sufficient reasons to warrant any sort of conviction one way or another.

We've seen already that the theism/atheism distinction invites a range of more nuanced questions. One further such question concerns—at a greater level of generality than we've considered thus far—the *psychology* of theism, atheism and agnosticism in relation to the **will**, or the capacity of human volition. According to the 18th century Scottish enlightenment thinker David Hume (1711 – 1776) in *A Treatise on Human Nature*, the matter of what we believe, on any given matter, depends not on the will, 'but must arise from certain determinate causes and principles, of which we are not masters' (§ 624). This psychological and descriptive position about human belief, called **doxastic involuntarism**, has been given further expression by 20th century British ethicist Bernard Williams (1929 – 2003). According to Williams, if we could believe at will, and moreover if this is a power that is both common and not opaque to us, then it would be very hard to explain why we should ever be surprised when things turn out to be different than we believe. But we are invariably surprised in such cases, and so Williams thought we should reject that we possess the power to believe at will.

If Hume and Williams are on the right track, then whether one is an atheist, theist or agnostic is not something over which she has direct control. And this point, if correct, has potentially important ethical implications. Consider, for example, the '**ought implies can**' **principle**, often attributed to Immanuel Kant (1724 – 1804). As Kant wrote in his 1793 book *Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason*: 'For if the moral law commands that we *ought* to be better human beings now, it inescapably follows that we must be *capable* of being better human beings.' The crux of Kant's insight here is that the very suggestion that we *ought* to do something implies that we should be at least capable of doing it. With reference to Kant's principle, it looks very much as though Hume's and Williams' point about the non-voluntariness of believing would have an important implication—viz., that atheism/theism beliefs, no less than other beliefs, lie beyond the realm of *duty*, and thus that it would be a mistake to praise or for that matter blame individuals for holding such beliefs. To avoid this kind of conclusion (as will many who take belief in God to fall within the purview of praise and blame) it looks, initially at least, as though one must take issue with either Kant's principle or with the descriptive claim that belief in God is non-voluntary in a way that (paired with Kant's principle) implies this result.

In his famous essay ‘The Ethics of Belief’, W.K. Clifford (1845 –1879) goes the latter route. He thinks that there are various things we ought to believe (namely, for Clifford, all and only that which is supported by the evidence), and further that it is within our power to conform or to disregard this norm. The American pragmatist philosopher and psychologist William James (1842 – 1910) famously rejected Clifford’s ‘evidentialist’ norm of belief, though James (like many other pragmatist thinkers) is in firm agreement with the Clifford’s presumption (*contra* Hume and Williams) that we have enough control over our beliefs, including religious beliefs, that it makes sense to praise or blame us for them. If Clifford and James are (despite their differences) correct about this more basic point concerning the relationship between belief and the will, then theism and atheism can be viewed as a kind of choice, and thus, whatever separates theists and atheists is just a matter of what each chooses.

This is precisely the assumption that underwrote the French philosopher Blaise Pascal’s (1623–62) famous ‘gamble’ on behalf of the theist rather than the atheist position. **Pascal’s Wager** can be expressed the following idea: If one believes in the existence of God and God *does* exist, then one gains infinite reward, but if one loses this bet (and God doesn’t exist) one loses nothing. However, if one bets *against* the existence of God and is right, one wins nothing for one’s non-belief, though if one loses this bet, one receives an infinite loss. Thus, Pascal concluded, you should try to bring it about that you are a theist rather than an atheist.

Whether Pascal’s Wager accurately characterises a decision problem we face turns (among other things) on the more fundamental question of whether theism and atheism are positions we can choose in any meaningful sense, an issue that as we’ve seen is contested by philosophers more generally at the level of belief in general.

A final and important point about the theism/atheism divide concerns a separate dividing line, that between religion and science. It is not uncommon to encounter the following sort of fallacious reasoning: theism and atheism are fundamentally opposed; religion aligns with theism and atheism aligns with science; therefore, science and religion are fundamentally opposed.

One problem with this sort of dichotomous thinking—one that we’ve already seen—is that the dividing line between theism and atheism isn’t one that can be drawn without quite a bit of terminological ground clearing and care, and even then, various open issues remain. But setting this aside, it is doubly problematic to derive conclusions about the religion/science distinction from premises about the atheism/theism distinction. Firstly, both theism and atheism have been

supported on the basis of scientific considerations as well as on the basis of theological or religious considerations. Secondly, regardless of what kinds of considerations have been appealed to support theism/atheism, the relationship between religion and science is fundamentally of a different *kind* than the relationship between theism/atheism. For theism and atheism are positions that can be believed or not, whereas religion and science are not ‘beliefs’ as such (even if there are various specific beliefs characteristic to each), but rather ways of coming to form beliefs—viz., different epistemological methodologies. Thus, if the latter are in opposition, it will be because they are in opposition qua methodologies, not because (for instance) believing one excludes believing the other.

Nonetheless, methodologies can potentially clash for example by (i) mandating/forbidding incompatible methods; or by (ii) mandating/forbidding incompatible beliefs. As the philosopher Michael Murray (2017) has noted, there are three central views on the compatibility of religion and science: the *inevitable conflict model*, the *non-conflict model*, and the *potential conflict model*. The former insists that religion and science *inevitably* conflict with one another, given that religion and science offer genuinely alternative ways of coming to understand the world and our place in it, ways that issue various kinds of contradictions. At the level of methodology, for example, science forbids while at least some religions subscribe to divine revelation as a valid method; at the level of belief, Western science holds that the Earth is billions of years old, whereas some religions deny this. The non-conflict model by contrast denies that religion and science can even potentially conflict because religion and science concern **nonoverlapping magisteria**, or domains of authority. As American evolutionary biologist Stephen J. Gould (1941 – 2002), in defence of this position puts it, ‘The net of science covers the empirical universe: what is it made of (fact) and why does it work this way (theory). The net of religion extends over questions of moral meaning and value. These two magisteria do not overlap’ (1997, §1). If Gould is right, then it is a mistake to think of science and religion as even in the market for conflict.

A third position, the potential conflict model, maintains that religion and science can potentially conflict, e.g., as in the case where a religion advances verifiable empirical claims (e.g., the age of the earth). In response to potential conflicts, however, some thinkers, including the Italian polymath Galileo Galilei (1564 – 1642), have suggested that religion and science are at least potentially revisable with reference to the other (as opposed to mutually exclusive in light

of any potential incompatibilities observed). (For related discussion, see the chapter ‘Faith and Reason’, this volume).

3. RELIGIOUS DISAGREEMENT

Is *rational* religious disagreement possible? Can theists and atheists expect to fruitfully engage with one another in dialogue, or are theists and atheists better off ‘agreeing to disagree’? Such questions have been pursued in recent work in **social epistemology**, and in this section, we’ll consider how some of these insights might help us to think more clearly about religious disagreements and their potential significance.

Firstly, for some ground clearing: we need to distinguish between the **ethics** and epistemology of disagreement. The question of what you *should* do when you find yourself in a religious disagreement with someone might be one sort of thing (e.g., concede, compliment your interlocutor’s impressive arguing skills, etc.) from a point of view where ethical considerations are given priority, and a completely different sort of thing from a purely epistemic point of view—viz., roughly, the point of view where getting to the truth is what matters. Let’s hereafter restrict ourselves here to the following specifically *epistemic* gloss of the question: what is epistemically rational to do in the case of a religious disagreement? One lesson from social epistemology is that what rationality requires in the face of any sort of disagreement might vary considerably depending on what you already believe about the person with whom you are disagreeing.

Suppose we take ‘G’ to the proposition ‘God exists.’ You assert G, your interlocutor denies G. If your opponent is a child, or someone who you think hasn’t given due consideration to the question or perhaps lacks what you take to be information relevant to answering the question, you are not going to regard (prior to the disagreement) such an individual to be as likely as you are to be right on the matter. In such a case, the fact that such an individual disagrees with you might not be very rationally significant for whether you should continue to hold your belief.

Things become much more interesting, however, when we control for such differences. Suppose that, prior to finding out that your interlocutor disagrees with you on the matter of whether God exists, you regard your interlocutor to be an **epistemic peer**—viz., someone you

took to be just cognitively competent and well informed on the matter at issue as you are. What does rationality require of you now that you've found out this person disagrees with you?

There are two central positions on this matter. The **conciliatory** view says that, in a revealed peer disagreement, rationality requires that you adjust (to some degree) your confidence that the proposition at issue is true. Thus, if you discover that someone you think is as smart and as well informed on you in matters that are relevant to determining the existence of God disagrees with you about G, then according to the conciliatory view, it is rationally impermissible to remain just as confident as you were before on the matter of whether G is true. The **steadfast** view by contrast denies this claim and permits one to rationally 'hold one's grounds' in the face of a revealed peer disagreement.

It's a difficult and contentious matter in contemporary social epistemology which of these two positions is more plausible. And in the case of religious disagreement, things can get especially tricky. For example, the matter of determining who *counts* as an epistemic peer in the first place is relatively straightforward in the case of mundane, non-religious disagreements—say, about whether (say) a particular store is open on a Saturday. Anyone plausibly counts as your epistemic peer here provided they've been exposed to the same kind of evidence as you have and are in OK cognitive shape (i.e., not drunk, hallucinating). But in the religious case, it's not so clear, as there often times will not already be agreement on what counts as the right kind of evidence that's relevant to settling the dispute. For example, one who takes revealed scripture to be evidence relevant to the matter of whether God exists will perhaps not regard someone not acquainted with such scripture as equally likely to be right on the matter. To the extent that mutual recognition of epistemic peerhood seems more difficult to establish in the religious case than in more mundane cases where there is antecedent agreement on the matter of what kind of evidence is the relevant kind, the problem of accounting for the rational significance of religious disagreements becomes all the more philosophically challenging.

As philosopher John Pittard (2015) has suggested, one way to gain traction here is to distinguish between the **first-order** and **higher-order epistemic significance** of religious disagreements, by distinguishing more carefully between two kinds of evidence: *first-order evidence* which directly concerns the truth of some target proposition, *p*, and higher-order evidence *vis-à-vis p*; higher-order evidence doesn't bear directly on whether *p* but rather on the matter of whether one has *rationally assessed* the relevant first-order evidence. Thus, if the proposition

under discussion is *The bank is open Saturday*, then the testimony of the bank's manager constitutes first-order evidence; if the bank manager also tells me that I've ingested a mind-altering pill, then this new evidence has second-order significance. It doesn't directly concern the matter of whether the bank is open, but it concerns my capacity to rationally assess the first-order evidence I have.

With this distinction in mind, we can now briefly consider how the epistemic significance of religious disagreements might potentially differ (along the first- second- order dimension) across cases. For example, proponents of the conciliatory view will be inclined to suggest that, when we discover that someone we regard as an epistemic peer disagrees with us regarding the matter of whether God exists, this fact of such disagreement has a kind of second-order epistemic significance for us: it is not evidence that bears directly on the issue of whether God exists, but it bears (perhaps, as a kind of *higher-order defeater*) on our own ability to assess the first-order evidence.

By contrast, as Pittard notes, religious disagreement might also have a kind of first-order significance. Here, it will be helpful to briefly consider J.L. Schellenberg's (1959 –) problem of **divine hiddenness**, according to which God's hiddenness motivates an argument for atheism. As Schellenberg sees it, a loving God would not make rational non-belief possible, given that God is all-just and non-belief carries with it culpability on some Christian accounts. But the ubiquity of apparently rational religious disagreement is evidence for the possibility of rational non-belief, and thus has first-order epistemic significance vis-à-vis the question of whether God exists.

Here is of course not the place to attempt to adjudicate the divine hiddenness argument. Rather, the example is meant to be illustrative of how, generally speaking, there are two interestingly different ways to think about the epistemic significance of religious disagreements, and that this is so *regardless* of whether one is already inclined toward the conciliatory or steadfast view.

As a final point, it will be worth bringing together a lesson from §2 with the material surveyed in §3. In §2 it was shown that the matter of the distinction between religion and science is best understood as a standalone philosophical problem, one that is not helpfully thought of as mapping on to the theist/atheist divide. With this point in mind, it will be useful to now consider that disagreements concerning theism and atheism do not themselves settle, and should be regarded as independent of, disagreements on the matter of whether religion or science

respectively offers a better method of engaging with the world and our place in it. That said, the more general structural points concerning the significance of disagreements bear importantly on the latter kind of dispute much as they do on the former. In this respect, social epistemology offers important tools for thinking critically about both kinds of disputes.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

- The task of defining theism and atheism faces an initial difficulty given the variation in what people take ‘belief in God’ to refer to. This initial difficulty can be overcome to some extent by stipulating that God have certain properties, e.g., the properties typically assigned to God by classical monotheistic religions.
- Atheism is typically associated with the kind of denial that is the *rejection* of the existence of God or other deities. Though one might also deny the existence of God in a weaker fashion, by refraining from believing in God while not outright maintaining God’s non-existence, a position typically associated with *agnosticism*.
- One method of support for atheism challenges the rationality of religious belief. On this strategy, belief in God is, like any other kind of belief, the sort of thing that should be defensible via publicly available evidence that anyone, not just the believer herself, should be able to accept. This assumption that religious belief is rationally appraisable is denied by *fideists*, who regard religious belief to be arational.
- If the ought-implies-can principle is correct, then theism/atheism are praiseworthy or blameworthy only if the matter of whether we believe in God is in some relevant sense voluntary. The more general issue of whether belief is subject to our direct control is what separates doxastic voluntarists (e.g., Clifford and James) and doxastic involuntarists (e.g., Hume and Williams).
- It is problematic to attempt to deduce conclusions about the religion/science distinction from premises about the atheism/theism distinction. Firstly, both theism and atheism have been supported on the basis of scientific considerations as well as on the basis of theological or religious considerations. Secondly, theism and atheism are positions that can be believed or disbelieved, whereas religion and science are not ‘beliefs’ as such (even if there are various specific beliefs characteristic to each), but rather ways of coming to form beliefs—viz., different epistemological methodologies.
- An *epistemic peer*, relative to a given topic, is someone who is as cognitively competent and well informed on that topic as you are. According to the *conciliatory view*, rationality requires that you adjust (to some degree) your confidence about whether God exists upon finding that someone you regard as an epistemic peer on the topic of God’s existence disagrees with you. The *steadfast view* by contrast denies this claim and permits one to rationally ‘hold one’s grounds’ in the face of a revealed peer disagreement.
- *First-order evidence* directly concerns the truth of some target proposition, *p*; higher-order evidence doesn’t bear directly on whether *p* is true but rather on the matter of whether one has rationally assessed the relevant first-order evidence.
- Disagreements about theism/atheism, as well as disagreements about science and religion, can potentially be either first-order or second-order epistemically significant; however, it

is problematic to draw conclusions about the relationship between religion and science from facts about theism/atheism disagreements.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- Is the statement 'All deists are theists' true?
- On what issue are fideists and evidentialists divided?
- What is Rowe's account of agnosticism, and can this account be unpacked in different ways, to get different versions of agnosticism? Discuss.
- Does the theism/atheism distinction mark a difference in *choice*? What kind of answer would David Hume and Bernard Williams give to this question? What kind of answer would W.K. Clifford and William James give? Explain.
- What does Kant's 'ought implies can' principle have to do with the matter of whether theistic/atheistic belief is praiseworthy/blameworthy?
- What is Pascal's Wager? What is it intended to show?
- Which model, if any, do you think best represents the relationship between religion and science: the *inevitable conflict model*, the *non-conflict model*, or the *potential conflict model*? Explain and defend your answer.
- What is the difference between the conciliatory view and the steadfast view as regards the epistemology of disagreement?
- What is it for a religious disagreement to be second-order epistemically significant as opposed to first-order epistemically significant?

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GLOSSARY

- Agnosticism** Agnosticism is typically defined in terms of a *lack* of belief (or some related positive epistemic attitude) toward the existence of God or other deities. (Cf., **atheism**).
- Arational** A belief or viewpoint is arational if it lies beyond the proper scope of rational assessment; if something is arational, it is neither rational nor irrational.
- Atheism** Atheism is the denial of theism (see **theism**).
- Conciliatory view** On the conciliatory view of the epistemic significance of peer disagreement, rationality requires that you adjust (to some degree) your confidence about the target proposition upon finding out that someone you regard as an epistemic peer on the matter disagrees with you.
- Divine Hiddenness** The divine hiddenness argument is an argument for atheism; the argument represents a case where religious disagreements can have first-order epistemic significance.
- Doxastic involuntarism** Doxastic involuntarism is the view that our beliefs are not subject to our direct control
- Epistemology** Epistemology is a field of philosophy that is concerned with the nature of knowledge and rationality, and related notions such as truth, understanding, wisdom, and so on.
- Epistemic peer** An epistemic peer, relative to whether some proposition p is true, is someone who is equally cognitive capable and well informed as you are with respect to the truth of p .
- Fideism** According to fideists, religious belief lies beyond the scope of rational assessment.
- First-order evidence** *First-order evidence* directly concerns the truth of some target proposition.
- Higher-order evidence** Higher-order evidence doesn't bear directly on whether some target proposition p is true but rather on the matter of whether one has *rationally assessed* the relevant first-order evidence (see **first-order evidence**).
- Monotheism** The position that there is only one God; notable examples of monotheism include Christianity, Judaism and Islam.
- Nonoverlapping magisteria** Nonoverlapping magisteria are subject matters that are not in principle in conflict with one another.
- Ought Implies Can Principle** This philosophical principle, attributed to Immanuel Kant, says (roughly) that if it's true that we *ought* to do something then we must at least be capable of doing it.
- Steadfast view** The steadfast view is the denial of the conciliatory view (see **conciliatory view**).
- Theism** Theism is a philosophical position that is associated with belief in God.