

PHIL 1305

Are most people Closet Atheists?

Justin C. Fisher



Evidential vs. Prudential Reasons

Suppose Ben Stein will keep on paying you as long as you believe he's a beautiful woman.

You'd have strong **prudential reason** to try to look and act as though you believe he is a beautiful woman.



But there will still be all the **evidence** that he isn't.

You'd probably try to avoid this evidence, and not think about it. But could you ever completely forget it?

Or would there always be a part of you, deep down, that still knows full well he isn't a beautiful woman?

Meta-Atheism



Georges Rey

"Despite appearances, many Western adults who've been exposed to standard science and sincerely claim to believe in God are self-deceived; at some level they believe the claim is false."



Daniel Dennett

More people believe in belief (i.e., think it would be good to believe in God) than actually do believe in God.

Three sorts of Closet Atheists

Atheists believe (deep down) that God doesn't exist.
Closet atheists **say out loud** "God does exist."

The three sorts differ in what they think they believe:

1. "God doesn't exist" (**outright insincerity**)
:
2. "I'm not really sure" (**hidden doubts**)
:
3. "I believe in God" (**self-deception**, akin to being in denial about a spouse's obvious cheating)

Meta-Atheism is compatible with **Theism**

It could be that **God exists** but **most people today don't really believe in Him** (even ones who say they do)

Theists might be quite interested in **meta-atheism**:

- **Considering meta-atheism** might help shed light on how challenging true faith actually is.
- Many devout theists view popular culture as having fallen into decay and think most people today only pay empty lip service to God – **this fits nicely with meta-atheism.**

Why accept **Meta-Atheism**?

1. **Theoretical reasons** suggest many people would be **closet atheists** (**there's strong evidence against God, but strong incentives to claim to believe**)
2. People's **attitudes** towards religious claims differ from the attitudes people typically take toward claims they believe (people treat religious claims more like fiction than fact).
3. People **behave** as though they don't believe (they don't follow religious teachings; they grieve when good people die; and they try to ensure that the wicked are punished here on earth)

Arguments for God had obvious problems:

- Descartes' argument would have equally established the existence of a *perfect car*.
- Even if each causal chain had a supernatural start, they needn't all have been started by the same All-PKG person.
- Evolutionary theory better fits the distribution of traits we see in living creatures.

The arguments against God didn't:

- There clearly exists much suffering, and it's not at all obvious why God shouldn't be willing and able to help.



So, you'd expect people (deep down) to be atheists.

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But many people have incentives to hide it:

- Why risk hell?
- Offend friends/family.
- Lose feeling of meaningfulness.
- Face social stigma.
- Risk unraveling society?



So, you'd expect many people to be closet atheists.
Human psychology often uses self deception and denial
to repress beliefs we aren't prepared to accept.
So, people might not even know they're atheists.

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O₁: People take ancient texts as authoritative and unquestionable regarding religion.

H-Fact: ~~People take religion to involve matters of fact.~~

H-Fiction: People (deep down) view religion as fiction.

Regarding matters of fact, we typically appeal to current texts, updated in light of new discoveries.

- Nobody reads Newton's *Principia* now.

For fiction, we take the original text to be authoritative

- Holmes smoked a pipe if Conan Doyle said so – no need to update the story in light of new discoveries.



O₂: People aren't greatly disturbed by rampant genocide in religious texts.

H-Fact: ~~People take religion to involve matters of fact.~~

H-Fiction: People (deep down) view religion as fiction.

We would be disgusted and appalled by someone we thought actually killed all of a nation's first-born babies or deliberately drowned millions of people (especially if he had power to achieve his goals other ways).

For fiction, we detach ourselves from the everyday significance of characters' actions and enjoy reading the story.



O₃: People dodge requests for details, e.g., about how exactly God created the world.

H-Fact: ~~People take religion to involve matters of fact.~~

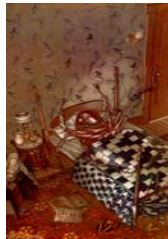
H-Fiction: People (deep down) view religion as fiction.

Regarding matters of fact, we are curious about details, and when details can't be worked out, we change our beliefs.

– “How exactly did OJ do it?”

For fiction, we take some events to just be stipulated, and laugh at requests for further details.

– “How exactly did Gregor Samsa metamorphose into a cockroach?”



If Christians took the bible to be factual wouldn't they worry how one person's crucifixion could atone for others' sins?

And wouldn't they worry whether Christ suffered enough for all our sins?

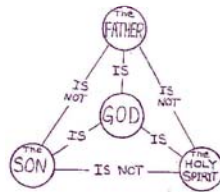
What if they took it to be fiction?

O₄: People applaud blind faith and embrace mysteries of religion.

H-Fact: ~~People take religion to involve matters of fact.~~

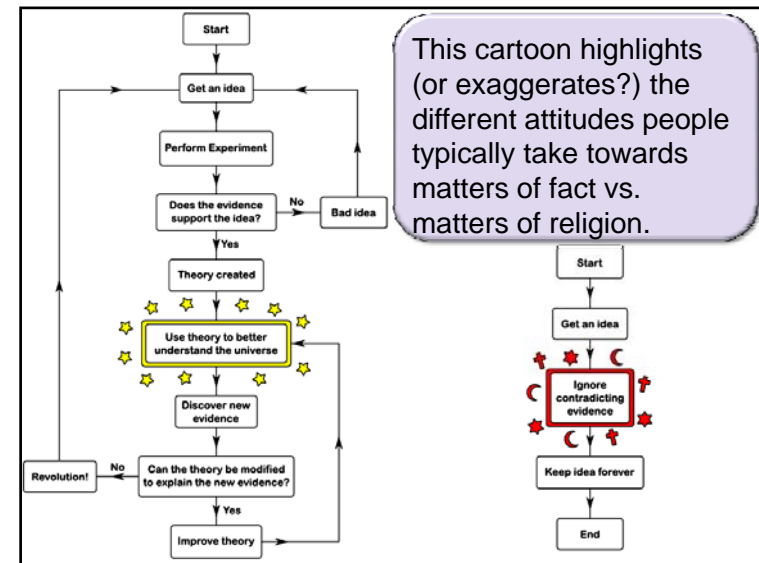
H-Fiction: People (deep down) view religion as fiction.

Regarding matters of fact, we typically applaud seeking evidence, and we take unsolvable mysteries to weigh against a view.



Fiction requires “willful suspension of disbelief”.

Building faith and leaving mysteries unexplored are crucial for deceiving oneself or others.



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All Christians believe they should sell all that they have and give it to the poor. Yet not one Christian in a thousand guides or tests his individual conduct by reference to those laws... The doctrines have no hold on ordinary believers – are not a power in their minds.



John Stuart Mill (1859)

Any one who reminded them that the maxims require an infinity of things which they never even think of doing would be ... very unpopular.

Suppose a rich benefactor transports your suffering loved one to a convalescence resort in the Bahamas, where she'll experience only happiness, and you can join her in two years?



A two year separation might be a bit sad, but overall this should be a joyful experience.

- Are people joyous when loved ones die?
- Or do they grieve as though they believed their loved ones were gone forever?

If we try to punish people for their sins, we may punish innocent people, or we may punish too much.



If people believe God exists and will punish sinners anyway, why try to punish them here?

Turn the other cheek... Judge not lest ye be judged...

- Do people act as though they believe God will give people what they deserve?
- Or do people act as though they believe we're on our own?

Supposing many theists are self-deceived...

Is theism a benign self-deception?

- It might be good to think your children are extraordinary (even if you know they aren't).
- It might be good to think your work is significant (even if you know it isn't).

Or is it malignant?

- Does religion license mistreatment of minorities?
- Does religion make people more prone to view things in absolutes (good vs. evil) and does this make us more prone to go to war?

Would the world be better or worse if all the atheists came out of the closet?