

literally means 'having no knowledge of God'. The philosopher and scientist Thomas Huxley invented the term in 1869 to describe his own stance towards religion and the universe and made the important clarification that agnosticism is not the same thing as atheism, although the two are closely related. While atheists purport to have *evidence proving there is no God*, agnostics merely claim to have *no evidence proving there is a God*. There are two general categories of agnostic: those who claim that God's nature and existence are *not known*, and those who claim that God's nature and existence are essentially *unknowable*.

Hume, Kant and the Enlightenment

Agnosticism was heavily influenced by the philosophical views of the Enlightenment scholars David Hume (1711–1762) and Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). Hume's position was sceptical; he argued that the only reliable assertions are those based on mathematical or empirical evidence, while Kant maintained that it is impossible for human beings to ever really know reality because information must always come via our five senses, and will therefore always be distorted. Kant also believed that it is impossible to ever ascribe an overall cause to anything we perceive because everything must have a series of causes that stretch infinitely backwards. An example of how this might conflict with religious arguments is the question of creation: if God created the Earth, then who created God and so on.

Agnosticism drew heavily on these and other ideas to conclude that the nature and existence of God are concepts that transcend the limited and finite capabilities of the human mind. In general, agnosticism does not categorically deny the existence of God, it simply maintains that our minds are inadequate to comprehend such an enormous concept: God, therefore, is either not known or unknowable. There are a number of different sub-categories of agnosticism including strong agnosticism, weak agnosticism, ignosticism, agnostic theism, and agnostic atheism. Its most famous proponents include Thomas Huxley, Robert G Ingersoll and the philosopher, Bertrand Russell. page 266

Atheism

Can I outline the essential features of atheism?

8.3.2 Essential features of atheism

Atheism defined

The word atheism comes from the two Greek words, *a*, meaning 'no' and *theos*, meaning 'God'. Thus it literally means that there is *no God*; there is matter and the universe and nothing more. It is the exact opposite of theism, therefore, which believes that God exists in and beyond the world. Atheism also differs from pantheism, which maintains that God is *the world*. Whereas the agnostic position claims to have no knowledge of whether God exists, the atheistic stance claims to explicitly know or believe that God *does not exist*. Atheism does, however, employ many of the same arguments as agnosticism, particularly the ideas of the Enlightenment scholars David Hume (1711–1762) and Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). Their respective views are given in the section above.

Types of atheism

As with agnosticism, there are various different types of atheism. Believers of traditional atheism, including Ludwig Feuerbach, Karl Marx and Jean-Paul Sartre, hold that there never was, or is, a God. Mythological atheists

such as Friedrich Nietzsche believe God once existed as a myth or model in the minds of human beings, but has since been 'killed off' because he has outlived his usefulness. Conceptual atheism believes there is a God but that he is obscured from our view and understanding—a belief similar to atheistic agnosticism.

Four main atheist arguments

Atheism maintains that there are compelling proofs against God's existence. Four of the main arguments supporting this view are as follows:

- the fact of evil—an all-good God who is the creator of everything cannot also have created evil, which undoubtedly exists;
- the purposelessness of life—as there is no clearly defined purpose of life then logically there must be no God;
- random universe—the universe was created randomly by purely naturalistic causes such as evolution;
- the First Law of Thermodynamics—energy can be neither created or destroyed.

Although there is a diversity of thought among atheists, the following tenets form a common core of beliefs:

- God does not exist, except in the minds of people;
- the universe is eternal and came out of nothing. It was not caused by anything or anyone;
- evil exists in the world but has no supernatural cause;
- human beings exist of matter only. There is no such thing as an immortal soul. All mental activity is dependent upon the brain and therefore ceases completely upon brain death. page 266

Humanism

8.3.3 Rational Humanism

Background to Rational Humanism

Rational Humanism is the name given to the philosophy or worldview that focuses on the values, achievements and interests of human beings and which elevates human reason as the highest form of authority in existence. In this way it is the very antithesis of the religious or spiritual worldview, which focuses on the things of God and sees divine revelation as the ultimate authority. Rational Humanism falls under the general umbrella of Secular Humanism, which comprises a diverse range of philosophies, including Cultural Humanism, Religious Humanism and Scientific Humanism. The various schools of humanist thought, including Rational Humanism, share a number of core beliefs that were summarised in three 'humanist manifestos', published in 1933, 1973 and 2003.

Humanism first arose in Greece in the fifth century BC when concepts of logic, metaphysics and morality began to assume importance. It regained prominence in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries during the Renaissance, when the God-centred, mystical worldview of the Middle Ages began to change to a more scientific outlook. Although Renaissance scholars still viewed God as creator and supreme authority, a renewed interest in human abilities to comprehend and control the natural environment via science and reason was emerging.

Can I outline the position of Rational Humanism?

Note Look at the Humanist Manifestos

Old ideas