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# Why Take a Stance on God?

**By**

**[GARY GUTTING](http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/author/gary-gutting/?version=meter+at+22&module=meter-Links&pgtype=Blogs&contentId=&mediaId=&referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F&priority=true&action=click&contentCollection=meter-links-click" \o "More Posts by Gary Gutting)**

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*This is the 10th in a series of interviews about religion that I am conducting for The Stone. The interviewee for this installment is Keith DeRose, a professor of philosophy at Yale University and the author of “The Case for Contextualism: Knowledge, Skepticism, and Context.”*

**Gary Gutting**: You’ve made [the following statement](http://prosblogion.ektopos.com/2013/07/12/gods_existence/?version=meter+at+22&module=meter-Links&pgtype=Blogs&contentId=&mediaId=&referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F&priority=true&action=click&contentCollection=meter-links-click): “Since atheists’ only real hope of knowing that God doesn’t exist would be through some kind of philosophical argument (perhaps some argument from evil), their knowing that God doesn’t exist doesn’t seem to me a very serious possibility.”

I think many atheists would object that it’s wrong to require them to have an argument showing that God doesn’t exist. They’d claim their atheism is justified simply because there are no good arguments in favor of theism. After all, it’s theists who are making an extraordinary claim. Isn’t the lack of evidence for the claim that God exists sufficient grounds for denying it?

**Keith DeRose:** I think you can sometimes rightly claim to know that something doesn’t exist even if you don’t have a good argument for your claim. This is the situation with the currently infamous Flying Spaghetti Monster: We all find it bizarre and literally unbelievable and so reject its existence without any argument.

I, in fact, think some of our most important and interesting knowledge comes not through anything like arguments, but from just rightly rejecting as bizarre things that so strike us.

**G.G.**: Of course, what strikes us as bizarre can turn out to be true. It once seemed bizarre that the earth was round, and that the earth revolved around the sun.

**K.D.**: Right, but that just shows that what we once had good reason to think we knew can turn out to be false. It doesn’t change the fact that, at a given time, the bizarreness of a belief may give us good reason for claiming that we know it’s false.

In any case, the situation is very different with God. The thought that God exists does strike many atheists as bizarre. But, in contrast to the Flying Spaghetti Monster, there are all of these theists and agnostics who do not find the thought of God’s existence bizarre, and I really think they ruin our atheist friends’ hopes for easy knowledge here. The basic point is that, when there are many other apparently sensible people who disagree with you, you need a good argument to claim that you know they’re wrong.

**G.G.**: Are you saying that the mere fact that many disagree shows that we don’t have knowledge? Most of us deny without argument the existence of the gods of many religions (the gods of the ancient Greeks and of contemporary voodoo, the pantheon of popular Hinduism). Don’t we rightly claim to know these gods don’t exist, although many have and do disagree?

**K.D.**: When your basis is not evidence or argument, but just how the matter strikes you, yes, the fact that the matter strikes others differently can undermine your claim to know. So, in particular, I am very skeptical about claims to know that the beliefs of major religions are false just because they strike us as bizarre.

If we knew that adherents to other religions came to hold their beliefs in some way that discredits them (say, through brainwashing), we might still know those beliefs are wrong on the basis of how bizarre they seem to us. Of course there are probably some individual believers who have come to hold their beliefs in a way that discredits them. But we don’t know enough about many believers to discredit their beliefs. So I don’t think we can know they’re wrong just because their beliefs strike us as bizarre.

**G.G.**: O.K., maybe atheists can’t rightly claim to know that theism is false just because they find it a bizarre claim. But atheists also point out that theists don’t put forward any evidence for the existence of God that stands up to rational scrutiny. Isn’t a total lack of evidence for a claim sufficient reason for denying it?

**K.D.**: No. When there’s a genuine dispute, a lack of evidence on the other side does not give you knowledge if you don’t have evidence for your claim.

**G.G.**: Of course, many atheists insist that they don’t claim to *know* that there is no God. They at most maintain that God’s existence is highly improbable, but don’t claim absolute certainty that God doesn’t exist. So, for example, if theists came up with good evidence for God, they might change their minds.

**K.D.**: My suggestion is that neither theists nor atheists *know* whether God exists. And here I don’t just mean that they don’t know for certain, but that they don’t know at all.

It was about God, wasn’t it, that Kant famously wrote “I had to deny knowledge in order to make room for faith”? Whatever it does or doesn’t do for faith, my denial of knowledge here makes room for reasonable views on both sides of the question of whether God exists.

I don’t think the arguments for either theism or atheism lead to knowledge of their conclusions. But there are arguments on both sides from premises that someone might reasonably judge to be plausible. If you find it quite probable that God does not exist, I think it’s perfectly possible that you are reasonable to think as you do. But this doesn’t mean that someone who thinks it is likely that God does exist can’t likewise be reasonable in holding that position.

To know that God does (or doesn’t) exist, you have to show that there are no arguments for atheism (or for theism) that a reasonable person could find plausible. But to support that claim you would have to have better critiques of all those arguments than I’ve ever seen. In my view, it’s more likely those who claim to know whether God exists — whether theists or atheists — are just blowing smoke.

**G.G.**: Without getting into details, could you mention a theistic and an atheistic argument that you think a reasonable person could find plausible?

**K.D.**: My favorite theistic example is the [cosmological argument](http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/cosmological-argument?version=meter+at+22&module=meter-Links&pgtype=Blogs&contentId=&mediaId=&referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F&priority=true&action=click&contentCollection=meter-links-click), particularly as William Rowe discusses it in his “Two Criticisms of the Cosmological Argument.” This is the argument that tries to show that we need to posit God as the reason the universe exists. Negatively, it’s clear to me that this argument does not really establish its conclusion. For it to work you have to accept a quite strong form of the Principle Sufficient Reason (roughly, the claim that everything must have a reason). This principle is just too questionable for an argument based on it to produce knowledge. And, like Rowe, I in fact don’t buy it.

But positively, given the state of the philosophical discussion, which has produced good responses to the apparently knock-out objections, someone could certainly be reasonable in accepting the argument. This view has been cemented in place for me since I came to Yale, because my colleague Michael Della Rocca is a terrific, and very sensible, advocate of quite strong forms of the Principle of Sufficient Reason. He has never convinced me to join him in his rationalist ways, but because of him I would be willfully blind to think that even someone who understood the issue extremely well could not reasonably think as he does.

**G.G.**: How about an argument against God’s existence?

**K.D.**: I’m going to have to be conventional here and go with the usual suspect: the argument from evil. Without getting into any details, you can feel the force of the argument by choosing a suitably horrific example (the Holocaust, children dying of cancer) that leads you to say, “There’s no way a perfectly good God would have allowed *that*!” There is a huge, often fascinating, discussion that tries to refute such arguments. But I find this intuitively powerful case does stand up to scrutiny, at the very least to the extent that someone could reasonably accept it at the end of the day. I suspect that even God thinks there is something wrong with you if you are not at least tempted by such an argument from evil.

**G.G.**: So far, you’ve argued that both atheists and theists can have good reasons for their views, so that neither side can rightly claim that the other is just irrational. But you make an important distinction between reasonably believing something and knowing that it’s true, and you claim that neither atheists nor theists know whether God exists. Finally, what do you think of agnosticism, the view that, given the strong disagreement about theism, the most reasonable position is to remain undecided?

**K.D.**: In some ways, that view is right. One reading of “agnostic” is just someone who does not take herself to know. On that reading, I accept the view. After all, my suggestion is that those who are not agnostics in that sense are deluded! But “agnostic” often slides into meaning something more along the lines of someone who does not take a position on the issue, and is in that way “undecided,” as you put it. And while I certainly think someone could easily be, and many people are, reasonable in being an agnostic about God in that stronger way, there are important goals served by our taking stands on issues where we cannot be objectively certain, or even know that we are right.

**G.G.**: Could you explain that more fully? If you don’t know you’re right, why take a stand?

**K.D.**: In philosophy and other areas of controversy, like politics, we often come to adopt a view on a disputed matter. When this happens, then even if you recognize the reasonableness of contrary views, you can come to really feel that your view is right, to the point that it can feel as if you know that it’s true. And I think that taking such a strong stand on a disputed issue can be good. Those who take a strong stand may most effectively develop and defend their position. I don’t think it would aid philosophy or politics if we all quickly abandoned our positions whenever we hit significant resistance from well-informed opponents. Often, that’s just when things get interesting.

**G.G.**: But is the existence of God just a philosophical question, like, say, the definition of knowledge or the existence of Plato’s forms?

**K.D.**: The existence of God is not just any philosophical issue. It’s intimately tied up with what very many in our society feel gives meaning to their lives. As compared with other philosophical issues, many, including many professional philosophers, are especially protective of their position here. And on God’s existence, I think many are subject to often subtle, but also often powerful, pressure from their religious groups to feel and to act and even to try to be certain of their position. This no doubt creates special dangers. But it also seems that a life of religious faith can lead us to special values we can’t find elsewhere. At any rate, this too is a philosophical issue. In light of all that, I would not want to make any blanket pronouncement, either about philosophers or people generally, that the most reasonable stance on the existence of God is to stay on the sidelines.

*This interview was conducted by email and edited. All interviews from this series can be read*[*here*](http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/tag/philosophers-on-religion/?version=meter+at+22&module=meter-Links&pgtype=Blogs&contentId=&mediaId=&referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F&priority=true&action=click&contentCollection=meter-links-click)*.*