

"The funniest book of philosophy since . . . well, ever." —MATT GROENING

DOES SANTA EXIST?



A PHILOSOPHICAL INVESTIGATION

ERIC KAPLAN

Does Santa Exist?: A Philosophical Investigation

Eric Kaplan

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Does Santa Exist?: A Philosophical Investigation Eric Kaplan

A humorous philosophical investigation into the existence of Santa—from a co-executive producer of *The Big Bang Theory*

Metaphysics isn't ordinarily much of a laughing matter. But in the hands of acclaimed comedy writer and scholar Eric Kaplan, a search for the truth about old St. Nick becomes a deeply insightful, laugh-out-loud discussion of the way some things exist but may not really be there. Just like Santa and his reindeer.

Even after we outgrow the jolly fellow, the essential paradox persists: There are some things we dearly believe in that are not universally acknowledged as real. In *Does Santa Exist?* Kaplan shows how philosophy giants Bertrand Russell and Ludwig Wittgenstein strove to smooth over this uncomfortable meeting of the real and unreal—and failed. From there he turns to mysticism's attempts to resolve such paradoxes, surveying Buddhism, Taoism, early Christianity, Theosophy, and even the philosophers at UC Berkeley under whom he studied. Finally, this brilliant comic writer alights on—surprise—comedy as the ultimate resolution of the fundamental paradoxes of life, using examples from *The Big Bang Theory*, Monty Python's cheese shop sketch, and many other pop-culture sources.

Finally Kaplan delves deeper into what this means, from how our physical brains work to his own personal confrontations with life's biggest questions: If we're all going to die, what's the point of anything? What is a perfect moment? What can you say about God? Or Santa?

Does Santa Exist?: A Philosophical Investigation Details

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From Reader Review Does Santa Exist?: A Philosophical Investigation for online ebook

Bandit says

I'm no philosopher, philosophaster at best. But I have an interest and a week from Christmas this made for some very interesting reading. Kaplan (with his terrifically random combination of qualifications, passions and education) reaches far and wide with his book, from Buddhism to Kabbalah, from logic to mysticism, there is just a lot going on, a lot of information and opinions are being disseminated. All with a much welcome dash of humor since nonfiction in general and philosophy in particular can be sort of tough to plow through. You don't have to agree with his thoughts, theories and conclusions, but they are intelligent, well informed and well formed for that matter, and at the very least educate, broaden the mind and provide ample food for thought. You may or may not find the meaning of life within the pages, but as far as entertaining overlook of philosophy goes, it's pretty great and well worth a read. Recommended.

Lily says

One: this book has a great hook - the title and the introduction, as well as the use of Santa to explore what we believe was very engaging and easy to follow.

Two: the rest of this book is not like the hook. It was, for the lack of better words, no longer engaging or easy to follow. Now, that could be blamed partially on the material. After all, philosophy is a pretty dense subject material to tackle in any shape or form. However, I think part of the blame still lies within the writing itself. Kaplan references a lot of philosophical concepts and people as if everyone reading knows exactly who or what he is talking about. Granted, he didn't claim this book as a philosophy primer so he has no particular reason to give background, but his title suggests that this book is meant for laymen, so there exists an inherent contradiction. If you're like me and don't know very much about philosophy outside the fact that Plato and Aristotle exists, then you're probably going to be confused for about 75% of time. Although being confused isn't inherently bad, it does suck the joy out of it.

Overall, did I like it? Eh, that's debatable. Did I gain something out of reading this? Yes. Every once in a while, you'll find a passage that really resonates with you or causes you to take a step back and re-evaluate yourself and your thoughts. Based on that alone, would I recommend this book? Depends, do you have an interest in philosophy and how we believe what we believe? If the answer is yes, then I recommend this. If not, then don't bother.

Final rating: ★★½

Barb Neaman says

Not at all what I thought this would be - not based on the title - but based on the comments that were provided. Maybe you have to be a philosophy student to like this book - in which case - I definitely made the wrong choice. I didn't get past the first 30 pages.

Heather says

Metaphysics isn't ordinarily much of a laughing matter. But in the hands of acclaimed comedy writer and scholar Eric Kaplan, a search for the truth about old St. Nick becomes a deeply insightful, laugh-out-loud discussion of the way some things exist but may not really be there-just like Santa and his reindeer. Even after we outgrow the jolly fellow, the essential paradox persists: There are some things we dearly believe in that are not universally acknowledged as real. In *Does Santa Exist?*, Kaplan shows how philosophy giants Bertrand Russell and Ludwig Wittgenstein strove to smooth over this uncomfortable meeting of the real and unreal-and failed. From there he turns to mysticism's attempts to resolve such paradoxes. Finally, he alights on comedy as the ultimate resolution of the fundamental paradoxes of life. Kaplan delves deeper into what this means, from how our physical brains work to his own personal confrontations with life's biggest questions: If we're all going to die, what's the point of anything? What is a perfect moment? What can you say about God? Or Santa?

I got this book because I thought it would be funny. There were funny parts but for the most part it was not funny. It was more about different philosophies and how they affect your life. There was very little about Santa Claus. The thing that saved this book was the narrator. I really liked his voice and continued listen long after I had lost interest just to hear his voice.

Jitse says

Brilliant easy philosophy read that answers some of the big questions quite nicely. It takes into account modern critiques of religion and gives a meaningful reply: Jewish mysticism. Also good: it's witty and makes you feel intelligent

James says

It's difficult to know whether I liked this or not. After a breezy and easy to follow opening in which Kaplan explored different parts of philosophy, it morphed into a personal theory that was harder to follow and too personal - it became about Kaplan, rather than Kaplan using his experience to illustrate points. And I'm not convinced by his conclusion, nor that he argued it well either.

Kaplan uses the question 'Does Santa Exist' as a starting point for discussion on philosophy, if a narrow branch of it. To be fair to Kaplan, he does stay on point as he discusses the logic and mysticism relating to 'existence', exploring the pros and cons of both in a light-hearted and informative manner. So far, so good.

At this point, Kaplan discusses comedy, veering from the central point and nailing his colours to the mast, treating comedy as a fusion of the two and fiercely defending it. As a discussion in itself, it was quite interesting, and the analysis here was astute and quite novel, so it is no surprise that Kaplan is a successful comedy writer. But really it was a couple of essays on 'what is comedy' and 'why non-comedians don't understand why a given joke isn't offensive' and ignoring the philosophical points beyond the initial duality.

After this, Kaplan chooses some rather niche figures from the world of philosophy and explains why he agrees with them. Unfortunately, the discussion of the Limitless felt a bit wordy, and the concepts became so

abstract that I struggled to follow the argument at times, though it seemed to be that we have a left-hemisphere and right-hemisphere brain, and like comedy, the mixture of the two is the answer. By this point there were also fewer interesting tangents, with a long chapter on what to do in the moment you know you are going to die having a lot of discussion and a facile, verging on non-existent, conclusion. All things considered, I think the book had lost its way by this point.

It's not easy to write accessibly about philosophy and Kaplan made a good fist of it but for a book that seemed to lead to a conclusion rather than merely offer an exploration, I don't feel that it was a convincing argument.

Sean says

I am very glad I read this book, and very glad it was written. It is the best I have read so far on its subject.

Kaplan uses the title question to explore the nature of the modern person's relationship with belief, and the possibility of meaning. As more and more materialists (the ones I read and watch on Youtube, at any rate) are forthrightly saying "Existence is meaningless," -- which naturally follows from a strictly materialistic philosophy -- some of them must begin to question whether that is a good thing, or even if it is true. Perhaps when the statement works its way from "Existence is meaningless" to "Well, then, I guess this video I made about science and my beliefs is also meaningless and pointless, as am I. It's all just filling up the minutes until death." then the ensuing confounding and fear and trembling will prompt honest philosophical inquiry. Kaplan is waiting to assist.

The subject is fascinating but something about his writing style began to grate around chapter 11 or so. It was almost too much. I can't lay my finger on the problem exactly, but there were too many sentences and paragraphs where I--a somewhat intelligent and moderately well-educated person who sometimes reads philosophy--had a difficult time following him. It was not because he is too smart and erudite for me. No, it is his writing.

But then part 5, chapter 13 happened. OH BOY! His discussion of Isaac Luria and the Infinite made it all worth while. I am glad I stuck it out. I hope you will be, too. Kaplan points to a way for a modern materialist to think about the possibility of meaning in existence, and he even provides some nifty clues for a thorough-going theist-who-isn't-exactly-certain-what-theos-actually-means to broaden his way of viewing the question.

I am grateful to Eric Kaplan for this book and to myself for reading it.

And yes, I believe in Santa Claus, of course.

Mj says

This book has a really great hook: it looks at how we form beliefs and what it means to be real. Essentially, Kaplan takes a fairly standard Intro to Metaphysics text and filters it through the lens of Santa Claus. This would have been fine, if he didn't lose the way over the course of the book.

Somehow this silly trip through Jingle Bell Lane takes us from Buddhism to Kabbalah to Reason and the Irrational. At times, Kaplan spends the entire chapter forgetting about the premise of the book and hurriedly jots down a sentence or two about Santa. This works okay at times, because Santa is an obvious stand in for God here (Kaplan argues the "meaning of life," but that too appears as a different way of saying God).

I actually very much enjoyed Kaplan's ability to blend Logic and Mysticism through Comedy. I believe, given a more focused attempt at forming a creed, he could have taken this much further. Some things are just paradoxes. We have to laugh at the absurdity sometimes.

I have to admit, I quickly became lost when we started in on the Ari, the Limitless, and the Many-Faced God. (Whoa -- just realized that Arya and the Ari actually have more in common than I expected this joke to point out...) It's not that it wasn't interesting, but it is a LOT to take in with one or two chapters. I'm not sure if I had trouble here because it wasn't explained well or if I didn't have trouble at first because I learned a lot of the base ideas at college. Either way, Kaplan spends a lot of time worrying about the Limitless and to me it just seems like a magic term that doesn't really do anything.

The ending of this book is really rough, I have to say. The last chapter, before the conclusion, is the world's most guided thought experiment where Kaplan literally tells the reader that they're thinking incorrectly. It essentially boils down to "Think of your happiest moment -- no, not that one." I understand what he wanted to do here, but it became very frustrating and I would have given up on the book if I had more than twenty pages to go.

Overall, this is a fun and quick, if inconsequential, read that helped whittle away the holidays over the last couple of months. I would say that everything up through the Comedy section is a solid read -- and I'm going to look into incorporating Comedy into my belief structure. After that, I quickly lost interest.

Ron Charles says

Claus confronts author of 'Does Santa Exist?'

Dear Eric,

Sorry I haven't gotten back to you sooner. It's been wicked busy here at the North Pole. The elves are trying to unionize again, and Mrs. Claus keeps complaining about how I never take her anywhere. But — enough! As co-executive producer and a writer for "The Big Bang Theory," you're busy, too. (Please tell Sheldon I got his list; we'll see what we can do about a new particle accelerator.)

I can't say I'm pleased with your new book, "Does Santa Exist? A Philosophical Investigation." You raise some interesting metaphysical questions about how we determine what's real and what's not, but you'd better watch out. I'm making a list. I'm checking it twice. First of all, the title kind of feels like you're pulling my beard, and second of all, some of these chapters aren't even about me, e.g. "Does Odin Exist?" Honestly? It doesn't help that you've been hanging out with Ludwig Wittgenstein. ("If a reindeer could talk, we would not understand him." — Blitzen and I had a good laugh over that one.)

So I have a few questions for you.

Claus: What would it take to convince you that I exist?

*To read the rest of this Q&A, go to The Washington Post:
<http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/s...>*

Andi says

I think I was expecting too much going into this book. With a review from Matt Groening that says, "The funniest book of philosophy since...well, ever," I was expecting it to actually *be* funny. There was a chuckle here or there, but there are other funnier books that tackle philosophical questions. I probably would have enjoyed it more if I had different expectations going in to it, though the lack of humor wasn't my only issue with it.

I would like to point out what I assume is an error on page 173 (of the hardcover edition). "Mystics, it seems, are experiencing a tuning down of the left hemisphere and tuning up of the right. If that's so, it would make sense that logic is a tuning up of the right hemisphere and a tuning down of the left, and comedy is an integration of the two hemispheres." I can only conclude that it should have read, "it would make sense that logic is a tuning up of the left hemisphere and a tuning down of the right..."

Lucie says

I think the point of this book is to make you think. What is the meaning of life? What is knowable and what isn't? Eric Kaplan happens to be one of the writers of The Big Bang, and he brings his humor to bear on the problems he puts forth. So this is a humorous book about metaphysics. Don't let the word metaphysics scare you, this is a very approachable book, with step by step explanations. Recommended for anyone who has ever wondered What is the point?

Caren says

This book wasn't really funny. It is actually a somewhat serious "philosophical investigation", as the subtitle says, from a guy who is working on his doctoral dissertation in philosophy and who also happens to write for "The Big Bang Theory". There were a few passages that made me smile, but on the whole I found it a bit dry and not all that easy to follow. Perhaps the fact that I am not a trained philosopher had something to do with that. Just be forewarned, don't look on this book as light, entertaining reading.

Two Readers in Love says

I'm conflicted. This book sparked some great internal discussions for me. However, since I found the majority of the thought experiments in the book to be case studies in the perils of faulty "Intuition Pumps" (to use Daniel Dennett's formulation), most of those internal discussions involved a good deal of internal counter-arguments, and sometimes rose to the level of internal foaming at the mouth... interspersed with

quite a bit of laughter.

Perhaps this is best seen as several books in one.

The strongest "book-within-a-book" is in the middle, which focuses on Comedy as a way of understanding life. As a professional comedy writer (e.g. for "The Big Bang Theory) the author has some interesting theories about what makes humor work, though "Inside Jokes" Matthew M. Hurley and Daniel Dennett has a much stronger thesis on the role of humor in problem-solving.

The next-best "book-within-a-book" is the author's memoir of the journey from his childhood atheism to (spoiler alert!) a personal understanding of Kabbalah-influenced Judaism. Imagine if the writer of "Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus" from 'The Sun' took so much LSD he thought he **was** the sun. Having recently read several memoirs of people raised in Orthodox/Fundamentalist families who, after a long and painful journey of philosophical inquiry and struggle, at last found peace by building a new life free from religion is was interesting to see someone get a ticket for the return-bound train. I briefly entertained the hypothesis that perhaps it didn't matter so much what your religion/philosophy was as long as it was the opposite of what you grew up with, as you would be filled with a sense of life-altering accomplishment. Then I realized that the vast majority of people are perfectly happy to stick with the faith/non-faith of their fathers -- however the lack of narrative movement doesn't make for much of memoir, ergo no book deal.

The most maddening book-within-a-book is the tour of philosophical arguments / sophistry in the pro- and anti- Santa camp. Here's where the internal spittle started to fly for me, as I found so much to be missated or malformed. The assumption under many of the author's arguments is that because when he held view X he felt like a sad shell of a human being who was not living life fully, that means that **anyone** who holds view X is a pitiable creature who is living a sad, shell of a life and in need of enlightenment; by conflating his feelings with the theory he held when he felt those feelings, he essentially mounts a series of (I believe, unintentional) *ad hominem* attacks posing as empathy.

That said, I can disagree violently with a book and still enjoy it immensely. And this book, despite its flaws, in the end does successfully make the case that you can disagree with a person's beliefs without plopping them into ready-made categories of "CRAZY" or "LIAR". Plus the "Suggestions for Further Reading" at the end is worth the price of admission in its own right, so all is forgiven.

The author is comfortable with holding contradictory beliefs simultaneously, so I hope he'll understand why I am rating his book both "5 stars, a fascinating insight into an alternate world view" and "1 star, throw the book across the room in frustration." **

(** Not a recommended action for e-readers.)

Steve Kohn says

This book starts as a pleasant stroll in the park but then, for me at least, spends too much time in the swamp.

It isn't the author's fault. I know it's mine. Kaplan is a fine writer, carrying us along as he shares his understanding of existence, and not losing us (at least not me, not too often) on the way.

The problem for me, maybe you, is that I'm not a deep thinker. I mentally bailed out of math class when the

teacher introduced imaginary numbers. (Don't get me started on sets.) For me a voltage is in or out of spec. A socket must be neither too large nor too small for the bolt. The angle of a miter joint is measured and an attempt is made to cut it exactly. Philosophy seems an impractical skill, like spending months practicing the Rubik's cube.

Kaplan is a deep thinker, one who can see more ways of looking at something than a bee with its compound eyes.

Me, I'm in need of rescue in the shallow end of the pool. A hewer of wood, a foot soldier. I've been here long enough to know there's more than one side to a story, but if it's too theoretical, abstract or uses big words, I'm gone.

This book is very theoretical, very abstract, and uses a lot of big words. I stayed, but at times it was a struggle.

It's finally on page 230 that Kaplan asks the real question: "So does God exist?"

His answer doesn't satisfy me. Too many words and concepts I can't get my head around (even if I enjoy Kaplan's attempt; as I said, he's a fine writer, and funny too).

My own answer -- deism -- isn't mentioned in the book, but it's what's worked for me all my life. And it can be described in two pages. (Here's a link, <http://www.stevenkohn.net/WhyBadThing...>, but if Amazon blocks it do a search for WHY BAD THINGS HAPPEN TO GOOD PEOPLE KOHN.)

So you're wondering: read the book or not?

If you enjoy pondering the universe, if you majored in philosophy, if you're often asking the meaning of life, you'll like this book.

If you're a hands-on kind of guy or gal, happy just to make the mortgage payment on time, trying to keep your marriage and family from imploding, working toward the day you can drop out of the rat race ... not so much.

Nancy says

A Philosophical Exploration of Santa's Existence

Tammi tells the author, Eric Kaplan, that her son, Schyler, can't be friends with his son, Ari, because Ari would tell Schyler that Santa doesn't exist. This causes Eric to be concerned that Tammi is sacrificing the children's friendship for a belief. Can people hold different beliefs and remain friends? Is it important that a belief be based on reality? The question then becomes: Does Santa Exist?

To answer this question Kaplan takes us through an abbreviated course in philosophy from the ancient Greeks, to medieval Jewish philosophers, and Buddhists. On the way we pass through neuroscience and folklore. The book contains some attempts at comedy to explain philosophical ideas, but I thought they generally fell flat.

I didn't dislike the book, but I did feel that Kaplan took a rather circuitous route to get to the conclusion. The book is not difficult to read. If you enjoy philosophical discussions, you will like this book. However, I can't recommend it. I felt it was rather pretentious, showing off the author's grasp of philosophy to come up with an answer that was intuitively obvious from the beginning.

I reviewed this book for Net Galley.
