

DOES GOD EXIST?

I. Introduction

A. Atheism is popular again.

After the ugly atheism of Madalyn Murray O'Hair in the 1960s and the rise of Evangelicalism in the 1970s, atheism seemed to disappear from the landscape. But now atheism is in vogue again... at least judging by the sale of recent books.

- *The God Delusion* by Richard Dawkins.
- *Letter to a Christian Nation* by Sam Harris.
- *Breaking the Spell* by Daniel Dennett.
- *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* by Christopher Hitchens.

Militant and strident, these authors make their case with a zeal that would put most fundamentalists to shame. Dawkins, for example, describes God as

...arguably the most unpleasant character in fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.

But most Americans are not buying the argument... at least, not yet. A whopping 92% claim to believe in God and more than half wouldn't vote for an atheist for president. But God's existence cannot be proven by polls and popular opinion. The question remains: How do we know God exists?

B. Possible answers to the question.

1. The answer of **Atheism**: *No! God does not exist.*

What is ultimately ultimate? There are only two possible answers: God or **matter**. Atheism opts for matter.

The universe is all there ever was or is or will be (Carl Sagan).

The great flaw in the logic of atheism is that if God does not exist, then existence has no meaning. But if existence has no meaning, then how does one explain atheism itself (which is an attempt to explain reality)?

Consequently atheism turns out to be too simple. If the whole universe has no meaning, we should never have found out that it has no meaning: just as, if there were no light in the universe and therefore no creatures with eyes, we should never know it was dark. (C. S. Lewis, p. 31).

2. The answer of **Agnosticism**: *Maybe! Perhaps God exists but we can't be sure.*

But is this position logical? If a man concedes that it is possible to know something about God but chooses not to, then he is either lazy or he doesn't believe the knowledge of God is the most important thing (which means he believes something else is God).

The real problem is this: how can someone know that God is unknowable? A good question for an agnostic, therefore, is: ***Are you sure everything is unsure?*** Agnosticism is a cop-out. "I don't know" very often means, "I don't **want to know**."

3. The answer of **Theism/Deism**: *Yes! God exists.*

Though acknowledging God's existence is a huge step in the right direction, there are at least two questions such a position simply cannot answer.

- a. What is God like?
- Is he (she? it? they?) one or many?
 - Personal or impersonal?
 - Immanent or transcendent?
 - Material or immaterial?
 - Good or bad... or both?

These questions cannot be answered by human reason. Ultimately we can only know what God is like if God himself chooses to disclose who he is. The Christian faith announces that is exactly what he has done! This doctrine is called **revelation**.

Psalm 19 helps us to understand how God can be known. In verses 1-4 we see how God expresses himself through nature.

¹ The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. ² Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge. ³ There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard. ⁴ Their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world.

Theologians call the **General Revelation**. It announces boldly to every citizen of planet earth that God exists and he is powerful and glorious. But creation offers little or no information on what God is like or how we can have a relationship with him. Verses 7-12 complete the picture of what is needed. Here we see God expressing himself through his Word.

⁷ The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul. The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy, making wise the simple. ⁸ The precepts of the LORD are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the LORD are radiant, giving light to the eyes. ⁹ The fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever. The ordinances of the LORD are sure and altogether righteous. ¹⁰ They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the comb. ¹¹ By them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward. ¹² Who can discern his errors? Forgive my hidden faults.

Theologians call this **Special Revelation**. Only the Bible (law, statutes, precepts, etc.) can reveal who God is, what he really wants and how we can have a relationship with him.

Conclusion: The revelation of God through nature is sufficient to **condemn** us but not sufficient to **save** us. The only way to truly know God is through his self-disclosure, both the written Word and the incarnate Word.

- b. How can I have a relationship with him?

To **know about** God is not the same thing as **knowing** God. Human reason is sufficient to enable us to know about God. But knowing God demands **faith**, particularly faith in the God-man Christ Jesus, the Word (self-expression of God) made flesh. "Proving" God's existence may grant a measure of knowledge about God. But only coming to the cross of Christ enables a man to know God.

Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent (John 17:3).

- c. A contemporary illustration.

Perhaps the most notorious atheist of the 20th century is the philosopher Antony Flew. But recently, at the age of 81, he has announced that he now believes in God. This is marvelous. But it does not mean he has become a Christian.

- *I must stress that my discovery of the Divine has proceeded on a purely natural level, without any reference to supernatural phenomena.... My discovery of the Divine has been a pilgrimage of reason and not of faith. (p. 93).*
- *Some claim to have made contact with this Mind. I have not – yet. But who knows what could happen next? Someday I might hear a Voice that says, "Can you hear me now?" (p. 158).*

II. Faith Killers. The Case for Non-belief.

- A. The problem of pain and suffering.

The presence of so much pain and suffering in the world makes faith in God difficult if not impossible for many. Either God **could** do something but he won't (he is all-powerful but not good), or he **would** do something but he can't (he is good but not all-powerful).

Many have adopted a belief in the Absent God because of painful personal experiences in their lives (the death of a loved one, an unanswered prayer, etc.). C. S. Lewis, for example, turned to atheism when as a young boy his mother died, despite his fervent prayers. It is important to recognize the **psychology** of unbelief.

The short answer to the problem of pain is that God created man with a large measure of free will. When free will was used to rebel against God (Genesis 3) all manner of calamities was unleashed in the earth (human violence, natural disasters, disease, death, etc.). The source of evil is not God, but human freedom. God did not create evil, though he did create the **possibility** for evil.

B. Isn't our concept of God just a psychological projection, wish-fulfillment?

This position is most often associated with Sigmund Freud who argued that wishes for God stemmed from early childhood experiences. This position suggests that **we created God** in our image (not vice versa as the Bible proclaims)!

The problem with this view is that the God of the Bible is not the kind of deity one would typically wish for. C. S. Lewis exposed the flaw in this argument when he wrote:

We want, in fact, not so much a father in Heaven as a grandfather in Heaven – a senile benevolence who, as the say, “likes to see young people enjoying themselves,” and whose plan for the universe was simply that it might be truly said at the end of each day, “a good time was had by all.” (C. S. Lewis. The Problem of Pain. p. 32).

C. Many terrible things have been done in the name of religion.

Many pretend they can dispense with the notion of God because of all the horrible things that have been done in his name. If the water is polluted, they reason, the problem must be the water... never imagining that the real problem may be **the container!** (II Cor. 4:7).

While no one wants to minimize the despicable crimes that have sometimes been perpetrated in the name of religion, it is important to remember:

- Christianity has also been responsible for many very good things in the world (hospitals, orphanages, the abolition of slavery, etc.).
- When Christians (or people who claim to be Christian) do bad things, they are violating the faith they hold, not expressing it. Normally, other Christians have been quick to state this when specific instances are mentioned.
- What about the atrocities committed in the name of atheism (Hitler, Mao, Stalin, Pol Pot)? Statistically, they are far worse than anything the church ever did.

D. Miracles.

How can a **rational person** believe in miracles? Many modern people have pretended that science has disproved miracles; thus, we no longer need God as an explanation. But notice:

- While many “moderns” struggle with miracles, many “post-moderns” do not.
- To say that miracles are impossible because God doesn't exist is an example of circular logic (miracles can't happen because there is no God who could produce the miracles that happen).
- Once the concept of God is allowed... then miracles become possible. As Antony Flew admits, once you admit the possibility of God, then *everything else is open to omnipotence* (p. 157).

E. Folly.

The Bible equates atheism not with a lack of evidence but rather with moral perversity. Atheism is the result not of the lack of evidence but rather the **suppression** of it!

- *The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who **suppress** the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse. (Romans 1:18-20).*
- *The **fool** (the Hebrew word denotes one who is morally deficient) says in his heart, "There is no God." They are corrupt, their deeds are vile; there is no one who does good. The Lord looks down from heaven on the sons of men to see if there are any who understand, any who seek God. All have turned aside, they have together become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one. (Psalm 14:1-3).*

Some atheists have been honest enough to admit that the source of their unbelief lies more in their **moral choices** than in their academic pursuit of truth. Philosopher Thomas Nagel candidly acknowledges this.

I want atheism to be true.... It isn't just that I don't believe in God and, naturally, hope that I'm right in my belief. It's that I hope there is no God! I don't want there to be a God: I don't want the universe to be like that.... (quoted in Timothy Keller, p. 119).

Before his conversion, in his atheism, C. S. Lewis candidly speaks about not just his intellectual rationale for denying God, but of his deep desire to keep God out of his life.

No word in my vocabulary expressed deeper hatred than the word "Interference." But Christianity placed at the center what then seemed to me a transcendental Interferer.... There was no region even in the innermost depth of one's soul (nay, there least of all) which one could surround with a barbed wire fence and guard with a notice "No Admittance." And that was what I wanted; some area, however small, of which I could say to all other beings, "This is my business and mine only." (Surprised by Joy, p. 172).

TABLE TALK

1. Why do you believe atheism is popular again in America?
2. Describe someone you know who is an agnostic.... who is an atheist. Would you describe their position as intellectually honest? Why or why not?
3. Look again at the five "faith-killers" described on pages 3-5. Which one of these has been the greatest source of doubt in your own life? Why?

III. Seven Clues to the Existence of God.

Imagine yourself as a detective. On coming on the scene of the crime you must piece together the evidence to determine who did it. One piece of evidence will likely not suffice to draw a conclusion. But putting several pieces of evidence together will build a cumulative case that is very strong. Using this same mentality, now look at the universe. Who did it?

Clue #1. The universe is there. (The cosmological argument).

1. Basic argument: Nothing just pops into existence. Everything that is has some reason why it is. There must be a cause. In the case of the universe, there must be a First Cause.
2. Illustration.

If there is no first cause, then the universe is like a railroad train moving without an engine. Each car's motion is explained proximately by the motion of the car in front of it: the caboose moves because the boxcar pulls it, the boxcar moves because the cattle car pulls it, et cetera. But there is no engine to pull the first car and the whole train. That would be impossible, of course. But that is what the universe is like if there is no first cause: impossible. (Kreeft, p. 30).

3. Biblical basis:
 - a. Psalm 19:1-4. (p. 2)
 - b. Romans 1:18-20. (p. 5)

Clue #2. A designer universe. (The teleological argument).

1. Basic argument: Where there is design, there must be a designer.

Look at the order, the harmony, and the design found everywhere in the universe. This surely indicates intelligent design. This is a uni-verse, not a multi-verse. Thus, there must be an intelligent God who designed things to function in this way.

2. Illustration.
 - a. William Paley in 1802 proposed this famous argument:

In crossing a heath, suppose I pitched my foot against a stone, and were asked how the stone came to be there; I might possibly answer that, for anything I knew to the contrary, it had lain there forever. Nor would it perhaps be very easy to show the absurdity of this answer. But suppose I had found a watch upon the ground, and it should be inquired how the watch happened to be in that place; I should hardly think of the answer, which I had before given, that for anything I knew, the watch might have always been there... the watch must have had a maker... (quoted in Collins, p. 86).

- b. Imagine a computer placed in a cage of monkeys. What's the chance of getting a Shakespearean sonnet? And yet that is the type of thing we are asked to believe by those who propose that the world (infinitely more complex than a sonnet) was created by chance. (See Antony Flew, pp. 75-78).

Clue #3. The universe seems to have known we were coming (anthropic principle).

1. Basic argument: Our planet seems perfectly designed for human occupancy. It is almost as if someone knew we were coming and set out the welcome mat.
2. Illustration.

Imagine entering a motel room where your favorite music was playing, your favorite food was in the refrigerator, the TV was preset to your favorite stations, your personal toiletries are all carefully lined up on a shelf in the bathroom, and your favorite magazines are spread out on the coffee table. Could this be a coincidence? No. You would certainly conclude that someone knew you were coming! (told by Antony Flew, pp. 113f).

Clue #4. The human conscience. (The moral argument).

1. Basic argument. Everyone knows, deep down, that he should do what is right and avoid doing what is wrong. Conscience is the voice of God in the soul. If there is a law, there must be Law Giver.
2. Illustration.

The first section of *Mere Christianity* is entitled "Right and Wrong as a Clue to the Meaning of the Universe." C. S. Lewis begins his most famous book with these words:

Everyone has heard people quarrelling... I believe we can learn something very important from listening to the kind of things they say. They say things like this: "How'd you like it if anyone did the same to you?" – "That's my seat, I was there first" – "Leave him alone, he isn't doing you any harm" – "Why should you shove in first?" – "Give me a bit of your orange, I gave you a bit of mine" – "Come on, you promised." People say things like that every day...

Now what interests me about all these remarks is that the man who makes them is not merely saying that the other man's behavior does not happen to please him. He is appealing to some kind of standard of behavior which he expects the other man to know about... It looks, in fact, very much as if both parties had in mind some kind of Law or Rule of fair play or decent behavior or morality or whatever you like to call it... (Mere Christianity, p. 3).

3. Biblical basis:

Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them (Romans 2:14-15).

Clue #5. Irreducible complexity.

1. Basic argument. The complexity of many organisms and structures in the universe is such that they could not have occurred by numerous, successive, slight modifications as Darwinism demands.
2. Illustration.

A mousetrap contains five parts: a wooden base, a holding bar, a spring, a hammer bar, and a catch. All of them must work together in order to catch a mouse. If just one of these parts is missing, the mousetrap cannot do its job. It is irreducibly complex. It cannot have come into existence over a long period of time as a result of tiny changes in a series of predecessors. It must be assembled with all of its components as part of the system. (see Nash, pp. 301f.).

Clue #6. The argument from history.

Basic argument.

- a. History seems to be meaningful. It is going somewhere. There is a story line. It is not just random events. If atheism is true, then life really is "a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing" (Shakespeare).
- b. When God's laws are followed, people seem to prosper. When they are jettisoned, nations collapse. History seems to show that just as physical laws must be respected, so must moral laws. You ignore them at the risk of your very soul!
- c. Jesus Christ cannot be ignored. He was clearly a historical person. But how to account for his life? death? resurrection? influence? He claimed to be God. There are only three possibilities for accounting for such a man:
 - Liar.
 - Lunatic.
 - Lord.
- d. How to explain the growth on the Church? The Gospel has captured the hearts and minds of men on every continent. How is this possible?
- e. Individual testimonies must also be explained. How to explain the millions of people who bear witness to a personal relationship with God through Christ.

Clue #7. Man is incurably religious.

1. Basic argument: Through the centuries, many have tried to eradicate religion or pretended it would one day just wither and die. There appears to be a God-shaped vacuum in every human heart.

You have made us for yourself, O God, and our heart is restless until it rests in you. (Confessions, Augustine).

2. Illustration.

Creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for these desires exists. A baby feels hunger; well, there is such a thing as food. A duckling wants to swim; well, there is such a thing as water. Men feel sexual desire; well, there is such a thing as sex. If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world. (C. S. Lewis, p. 106).

3. Biblical basis:

...He has also set eternity in the hearts of men.... (Eccl. 3:11).

IV. The Limits of Reason.

A. Can we "prove" God's existence?

Arguments for God's existence can never compel acceptance regardless of how well they are presented. The case for God will not be based on a single argument but rather on the cumulative evidence of all the clues working together to help "build a case." Like strands in a rope, none of which does the whole work alone, the clues work together to make faith

- Plausible
- Rational
- Possible
- *You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. (Jeremiah 29:13).*
- *If anyone chooses to do God's will, he will find out whether my teaching comes from God... (John 7:17).*

Reason can take us to the diving board. But faith alone enables us to jump.

B. The ultimate proof of God is Jesus Christ.

I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well.... Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.... (John 14:6, 7, 9).

C. The Wager.

Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) recognized that we could not reason our way to either belief in God or to non-belief in God. Human logic simply cannot finally decide for or against the existence of God. A case can be rationally made for either position. Since indecision is impossible (not to mention unwise), we must "wager" for one side or the other. Where will you place your bet?

If you wager that God exists, and it turns out that he does not exist, you lose nothing. But if you place your bet against his existence, and then ultimately discover that he does, you lose

everything. So gamble on God! If you win, you win everything (eternity, heaven, infinite gain). If you lose, you lose nothing. Therefore: place your bets on God!

D. A good place to begin is the Skeptic's Prayer:

God, I don't know whether you exist or not. Maybe I'm praying to nobody, but maybe I'm praying to you. So if you are really there, please let me know somehow, because I do want to know. I want only the Truth, whatever it is. If you are the Truth, here I am, ready and willing to follow you wherever you lead. Amen. (Kreeft, p 47)

Jesus makes an astounding promise to every honest seeker.

⁷ ***Ask** and it will be given to you; **seek** and you will find; **knock** and the door will be opened to you.* ⁸ *For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened. (Matthew 7:7-8).*

TABLE TALK

1. What is the main thing you have learned today?
2. Has this study helped you with your own struggle with doubt? How?
3. Do you feel better equipped to witness to others of your faith in Christ because of what we have learned here?
4. Look again at the seven clues mentioned on pages 5-9. Which clues, in your opinion, are the strongest?
5. What is the real cause of unbelief?

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