

# Why Be An Atheist?

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As a kid, my mother told me not to argue religion with my classmates. I think she saw it as dangerous work for a third grader with the notion that God was a very silly idea. So mostly I kept quiet about the subject, with the exception of a couple of fruitless arguments about evolution versus creationism on the bus home from school.

Today, I'm going to completely disregard my mother's advice. We're going to talk about God. We're going to talk about whether God exists or not.

If I throw out the simple statement, "God exists," the three most basic responses are: Yes, No, and Maybe. The theist says, "Yes. I know that statement is true. God exists." The atheist says, "No. I know that statement is false. God does not exist." The agnostic, being somewhere in the middle, says "Maybe. I don't know whether that statement is true or false. God may or may not exist."

Today, we're going to examine the most common arguments for those three positions: theism, agnosticism, and atheism. With theism, we'll be examining three attempted proofs of the existence of God: the Cosmological Argument, the Argument from Design, and the Argument from Experience. With agnosticism, we'll be examining four arguments for suspended judgment on whether God exists or not: the Argument from Impossibility, the Lack of Negative Proof Argument, the Opinion Argument, and the "Look at All the Churches" argument. We will then turn atheism, examining two arguments against God: Occam's Razor and the Contradiction Argument.

## **Arguments for Theism**

So let's jump into the arguments of the theists. Most of the theists' arguments attempting to prove God's existence were developed centuries ago; their refutations soon followed. Nevertheless, these arguments are used today in discussions of religion in order to persuade people that there are rational reasons for believing in God. After all, very few people are willing to believe in God on faith alone.

### *First argument: The Cosmological Argument*

The Cosmological Argument attempts to prove God's existence by arguing: "Everything has a cause. And so every cause must itself have a cause. Since we cannot have an infinite chain of causes, there must therefore be a First Cause, something that was not itself caused by anything else. God is that First Cause."

The most obvious problem with this argument is that it is self-contradictory. First, it says that everything must have a cause. Everything. Then, it says that there must be something (God) that does not have cause. The premise contradicts the conclusion.

It's as if I argued the following: "The earth is held up in the sky by a great turtle. What supports that turtle? Yet another turtle. Every turtle must be supported by a turtle below it. Since we can't have an endless chain of turtles, however, there must be an uber-turtle, one that does not be supported by other turtles."

Here, the postulation of an uber-turtle that does not need to be supported contradicts the premise that all turtles must be supported by other turtles. The cosmological argument has the very same problem: the postulation of a God that is uncaused contradicts the premise that all causes must themselves have causes.

However, the deeper problem with this argument lies in the idea that there must have been some cause, some mechanism by which existence emerged out of non-existence. For the theist, a Creator, a God, explains how existence came to be. But, as Objectivists, we know that non-existence isn't some special kind of entity. We know that existence never emerged from non-existence. Existence is all that has ever been and all that ever will be. So there is no need to postulate a God to explain why we have existence rather than non-existence.

### *Second Argument: The Argument from Design*

The Argument from Design attempts to prove God's existence by arguing: "The universe is so orderly, so complexly and perfectly interwoven, that there must have been a designer. Just as we would attribute a watch or an automobile engine to a purposeful creator, so we must attribute the wonders of animal life and the laws of physics to a purposeful creator. God is that creator."

When Phil Donahue presented this question to Ayn Rand in an interview, she asked him: What would a disorderly universe would look like? Just think about that for a second. What would a disorderly universe would look like? How could our universe be anything but orderly? How could it be anything but non-contradictory?

Another objection to the argument from design is that we already have an explanation for the complexity of living beings: the theory of evolution. Evolution shows us that the alternative to God creating all life is not sheer luck, but rather a naturally emerging process regulated by the nature of the organism and the environment in which it lives. We don't need God to explain the complexity of living organisms; Darwin did it for us.

Finally, we can argue that, if we accept the Argument from Design, then God must also need a designer, for he is even more complex and perfect than the world. So who designed God? And who designed God's designer? As you can see, we have a problem of infinite regress here, just like our stack of turtles supporting the earth.

However, the Argument from Design isn't dead yet. There is a modern, more scientific version that argues as follows: "There are so many variables in the universe, such as the strength of forces and mass of particles, that had to be precisely their current values in order to produce human life. We cannot reasonably attribute such a perfect integration of factors to luck. Thus, there must have been a Creator, a God, to make the universe so hospitable to human life.

It's certainly true that if the gravitational constant of the universe were different, human life might not have evolved. But so what? We wouldn't be around to notice the difference! Some other life forms might be pondering whether God exists or not, thankful that the universe was tinkered just right to suit their existence.

Let me make this counter-argument more clear. Imagine that a friend asserted the following: "There are so many chance events, such as my parent's schedule that day and what they ate for lunch, that had to be precisely right in order for me to be conceived. I can't reasonably attribute that perfect integration of factors to luck; it's just too improbable. Thus, there must have been someone coordinating the conception effort, just to produce me!"

What would you tell your friend? You would tell him that if he hadn't been conceived, no one would know the difference. There would probably be some other kid, born two months later, in the family. Everyone would think how lucky it was that events worked out to conceive that

child. In other words, you know that his parents weren't trying to conceive him; they were just trying to conceive.

In the case of the universe, there isn't even any evidence that life was a goal, let alone human life. Yet this form of the Argument from Design presupposes that the evolution of human life was the purpose that the universe was trying to achieve, that the universe would be flawed without us in it. And so God had to step in to be sure that human life happened. But, in fact, without human life, the universe wouldn't be flawed, just different.

Additionally (and this is my favorite counter-argument) even if we accept that the universe has been fine-tuned by God, we humans might not be what God was fine-tuning for. Perhaps God's chosen creatures are e coli bacteria. Perhaps, in God's eyes, humans and other animals are only a convenient breeding ground for his beloved bacteria. Doesn't sound reasonable? Well, as they say, God works in mysterious ways. And he does have a plan for us all.

In sum, the most we can claim here, contrary to the Argument from Design, is that human beings have evolved and that the nature of the universe allowed that to happen. (That's called the weak anthropic principle.) We cannot infer from the improbability of our existence that a God orchestrated that existence.

### *Third: Argument from Experience*

The Argument from Experience is actually a collection of arguments based on personal experiences with God. People will argue for God's existence because the Bible is an accurate historical account of God's influence in human affairs or because people who were pronounced dead and then revived reported experiencing heaven or because people claim to have spoken to God or witnessed miracles.

Note that all of these justification for God's existence -- the accuracy of the Bible, and near-death experiences, and miracles -- appeal to experiences that you haven't had. God hasn't spoken to you lately. You haven't seen any spontaneously combusting bushes or partings of the Pacific. And you weren't around in Biblical times to see the Ten Commandments given. In all likelihood, the person making this argument to you hasn't spoken to God or seen any burning bushes lately either. These are third, fourth, and 100th-hand accounts of God's influence. As a result, you have a serious problem of heresy.

Second-hand information isn't necessarily unreliable. Much of the second-hand information we get on a daily basis is true. Imagine, for example, that my mother called to get my recipe for carrot soup. I'm not home, so Paul takes a message and tells me, when I arrive home, that my mother called. That's second-hand information. But I can reasonably say that it's true. After all, my husband has no reason to lie to me. He knows that he would be in trouble if he did. And he knows that I will verify that my mother called when I call her back.

Something very different often happens when such information passes through many hands over time. Imagine again that my mother calls for the recipe and Paul takes the message. Then Paul tells Joe, "Diana's mother called." Joe tells Bob, "someone in Diana's family called about my mother." Bob tells Kelly, "Someone in Diana's family called about her mother; Diana has call her father back right away." And then Kelly tells me, "Something terrible must have happened with your mother. You have to call your father immediately. So I call my father expecting to hear of a terrible car crash when my mother just wanted a recipe for carrot soup.

So, as you can see, sometimes information gets distorted as it passes between people. No malice or deception required, just bad memories and active imaginations, which most people have in abundance.

The Argument from Experience attempts to appeal to people's desire to see the goods with their own eyes, so to speak. People want more than abstract arguments about why the world needs a designer or a First Cause; they want empirical evidence. But the empirical evidence we have been presented with here is not reliable or trustworthy. It has been passed from person to person, often over centuries, for the express purpose of converting people to belief in God. So anyone who presents such evidence to us has a great deal of work to do if they wish to convince us; they need to verify the claims they are making.

Now, I'm not going to go through all of the elements of verification here, just three that are particularly relevant to questions of God's influence. First, we should see if there were multiple witnesses and whether they all independently reported experiencing the same phenomena. If accounts varied substantially or there were no witnesses, we should be even more skeptical. Second, we should investigate the possibility of alternate, non-supernatural explanations for the phenomena being described. People used to explain earthquakes as the work of God, but now we know them to be the result of tectonic plate movement. From scientific studies, we know that the sensations of near-death experiences are the result of oxygen deprivation to the brain. We need to rule out all possible natural explanations before we even consider supernatural ones. Third, we should look for inconsistencies and contradictions in the accounts, as we find in the Bible. Accounts that have internal contradictions cannot be true.

Claims of God's influence usually can't pass muster upon applying these three criteria -- independent accounts from others, impossibility of scientific explanation, and consistency. If the theists arguing with us cannot provide this very basic form of verification, they we have no reason to believe their claims. In fact, they have no reason to believe their claims.

So we've now addressed three of the most common arguments for the Existence of God: the Cosmological Argument, which says that existence requires a cause and that cause is God, the Argument from Design, which argues that the world is too well-ordered and complex not to have a designer, and finally, the Argument from Experience, which argues from miracles, near-death experiences, and the Bible in order to prove God's existence. None of these arguments can prove the existence of God. And none of them even gets close to proving the particularities of the Jewish, Christian, or Muslim God.

### **Arguments for Agnosticism**

So let's move on to the four common arguments for agnosticism: the Argument from Impossibility, the Lack of Negative Proof Argument, the Opinion Argument and the Look at All the Churches Argument. But first, let's be clear on what agnosticism is. Agnosticism is a school of thought that advocates suspended judgment on the issue of the existence or non-existence God and other supernatural beings. The agnostic argues that we cannot reasonably claim that God does or does not exist for two basic reasons: either we are incapable of such knowledge or we do not presently have enough evidence to decide.

#### *First: The Argument from Impossibility*

The Argument from Impossibility goes something like this: "We are finite, limited beings, unable to interact with the infinite, unlimited realm in which God does or would reside. We are like small fish living at the bottom of the sea, arguing whether the blessed mountain goat really does exist. Given that we are limited to the bottom of the sea, we cannot possibly know what exists at the infinite expanse at the top of the mountain. So for small fish such as ourselves, we must acknowledge that there is not and could not be any evidence for or against God's existence. It is

simply unavailable to us. And so we must acknowledge that we are unable to prove that God exists and unable to prove that he does not exist.”

At this point, we have some hard questions to ask the agnostic, such as: How do you know that God is unknowable? Aren't you claiming knowledge about God -- knowledge which ought to be impossible by your own theory? The agnostic has been caught in a self-contradiction by claiming to know that God is unknowable.

Additionally, the term “God” loses all of its meaning if we can know nothing about the entity it allegedly refers to. At that point, we can't say anything intelligible about God, not “God loves me,” not “God is vengeful,” and not even “God exists” or “God does not exist.” We have no idea what we are saying in those cases unless we have at least some idea of God's nature.

So we can set aside the Argument from Impossibility.

### *Second: The Lack of Negative Proof Argument*

The Lack of Negative Proof Argument asserts that it is possible to prove or disprove God's existence, but the evidence for or against is insufficient. It says: “The alleged proofs of God's existence have all been carefully examined and refuted. So we can't conclude that God does exist. But -- and this is the key -- the attempts to prove that God does not exist are also lacking. So we can't conclude that God does not exist. The only conclusion to reach is that we should reach no conclusions at all: we should not claim that God does exist and we should not claim that God does not exist. In the courtroom of theology, the jury is hung, unable to render a verdict.

But is this really a fair argument? No, because the agnostic is expecting the atheist to prove that God does not exist, when the responsibility should be laid squarely on the shoulders of the theist to prove that he does exist. The atheist is not required to prove that God does not exist, for if the theist fails to prove God's existence, then the atheist's case has been made. The relevant principle in this case is called the burden of proof principle, which states: Proof is the responsibility of those asserting the existence of something, not those denying it. Let me repeat that: Proof is the responsibility of those asserting the existence of something, not those denying it.

Let me make this principle more clear. Suppose that my husband accuses me of having a lover. Since I am baffled by his accusation, I ask him why he has accused me of such a thing. He says that I have been working late. I reply that it was due to a big project for work. He tells me that I was whispering on the phone last night. I tell him that I thought he was asleep and didn't want to wake him. And so on, until all of his reasons have been exhausted. But then, instead of acknowledging that his accusations were incorrect, he tells me that he still can't trust me. He doesn't know whether I have a lover or not. He tells me that I must prove that I do not have a lover.

What I am to do? Get sworn affidavits from every man in town swearing that he is not my lover? The only recourse with my husband, apart from divorce, is to appeal to the burden of proof principle. I must argue that I am not responsible for proving that I do not have a lover. If all of his arguments for my having a lover have been refuted, then he ought to recognize that I do not have a lover. After all, if those refutations didn't convince him, then what could? Nothing I could say would ever be enough.

We must make this exact same counter-argument, namely an appeal to the burden of proof principle, in response to the agnostic's argument that we must prove that God does not exist. We must argue that we are not responsible for proving that God does not exist. If all of the arguments for God's existence have been refuted, then the agnostic ought to recognize that there is no God.

After all, if those refutations aren't convincing, then what would be? As with my husband, I suspect that nothing I could say would ever be enough.

As you can see here, the burden of proof principle is not some abstract principle used only by philosophers. We all -- including the agnostic -- use it in everyday life. Agnostics will use it to deny the existence of leprechauns, the Greek gods, or unicorns. But in certain select cases, such as God and angels, the principle is forgotten. Proof that such supernatural entities do not exist is demanded. In reality, the burden of proof principle applies equally to questions of whether God, angels, or lovers exist. In all such cases, the burden of proof is on those who assert the existence of such beings, not those who deny their existence.

So the lack of Negative Proof Argument fails; atheists have no duty to prove that God does not exist.

### *Third: The Opinion Argument*

The Opinion Argument isn't quite an argument; it's more like an attempt to stop the conversation before it gets too heated. What happens is the agnostics throw their hands up and say "Well, it's really just all opinion. Religious people have their opinions that God does exist. You have your opinions that God does not exist. Who is to say who's right? Since we can't know whose opinion is correct, it's silly to take one side or the other. I'm just staying out of it. I don't know."

This argument is somewhat similar to the Impossibility Argument, for the agnostic here is claiming that we really can't know whether God exists or not. Because of that similarity, the Opinion Argument is subject to the same criticisms that we leveled against the Impossibility Argument. How does the agnostic know that it's all just opinion? Is that an opinion or a fact?

However, let's leave aside the contradiction of decidedly and certainly claiming that there can be no certainty in the case of God's existence and examine whether this idea is consistent with the agnostic's other ideas of the differences between facts and opinions.

Let's imagine our friend the agnostic going to the doctor's office to find out the results of a biopsy checking for cancer. If the doctor told the agnostic, "Well, we can't really know. We have the test results in, but it's really all just opinion. Some people see these test results and are convinced that they have cancer. Some people see them and still deny it. We can't know who is right, so we just shouldn't come to any conclusions. We'll just see how you're doing in two years. If you're alive, make an appointment." What would the agnostic do in such a case? Find a new doctor, of course, one who recognized that there are more than opinions in these cases, that there are facts.

Like with the burden of proof principle, the agnostic generally lives by the idea that facts are facts. We can't change those facts by hoping for otherwise. We can't change them by calling them opinions. We have to recognize them as they are if we wish to do anything about them. In the case of cancer, if we have it, we have to accept that we do, so that we can get the proper treatment. Wishing for no cancer would not change the fact that we have it; it would only prevent us from getting treatment. That's not a matter of opinion, it's a fact that we are capable of knowing and experiencing the consequences of. Most people, agnostics included, recognize that there are real facts which may or may not correspond with the opinions people hold.

However, by saying that "it's all just opinion" where God is concerned, the agnostic is creating a special exception for select cases. Somehow, with those issues, there are no facts, merely opinions. But we know that the lack of evidence for God's existence is a fact, just like cancer is a fact. We know that we ought to have proof -- or at least some evidence -- before

believing that God exists. And if there is no proof and no evidence, then we must admit that no such god does exist. If we ignore these principles, then we have indeed only opinions and no facts, but not because there are no facts to be grasped, but because we chose to ignore them.

#### *Fourth: The Look at All the Churches Argument*

The Look at All the Churches Argument for agnosticism says: “Although the arguments for God’s existence have failed, we cannot ignore the fact that so many people believe in God, that there are so many churches and temples. All of these people who believe in God must have some reason for doing so; perhaps I simply have not been provided the evidence that others have. Therefore I cannot rule out the possibility that God exists.” In other words, this argument accepts the beliefs of others as a weak form of evidence; not enough to prove God’s existence, but enough to prevent us from denying it. It basically adds up to reasonable doubt in the agnostic’s mind.

The obvious problem with this argument from the Objectivist perspective is that it fails to examine whether others’ beliefs in God are, in fact, rationally supported by evidence. Since people claim to know that God exists and that Jesus loves them for other irrational reasons (like faith), how can those beliefs constitute genuine evidence for God’s existence?

To make this more clear, let’s say that you walk into a classroom where ten people are sitting. They tell you that the dean wants to see you. You ask them how they know. They reply that he came into the room five minutes ago looking for you. These ten people have real evidence for their belief that the dean wants to see you. You are justified in acting on their information and paying a visit to the dean.

But imagine that when you asked them how they knew, they gave answers like, “I felt his desire to see you in my heart”, “I believed it and it changed my life,” and “It was in my horoscope today.” The only reasonable response would be “And? Don’t you have any real evidence?” If those reasons were all that they could provide, you would just ignore them.

People’s beliefs in God are obviously like the second case rather than the first. They believe because they feel Jesus in their heart, because they couldn’t live in a world without God, or because the Bible is the word of God. And so, given that their beliefs are not rationally justified, we cannot use those beliefs as any kind of rational justification ourselves. We cannot regard the opinions of others as equivalent to the facts of reality, particularly not when those opinions are not based in any fact. We must stick to the facts out in the world, not the stuff we make up in our imaginations.

So now we’ve addressed the common argument for agnosticism: the Argument from Impossibility, which says that our limited nature prevents us from knowing anything about God, the Lack of Negative Proof Argument, which argues that atheists must prove that God does not exist, the Opinion Argument, which asserts that there are no facts, only opinions about God, and the “Look at All the Churches” Argument, which uses the religious beliefs of others as weak evidence for God’s existence. These arguments, like those of the theists, all fail to prove that we should suspend judgment on the issue of whether God exists or not.

#### **Arguments for Atheism**

These failed arguments of the theists and agnostics, by default, leave us as atheists, as believing that God does not exist. But does atheism itself have any arguments worth examining? Yes, Occam’s Razor and the Contradiction Argument.

#### *First: Occam’s Razor*

Occam's Razor is a general scientific principle that states: One should not increase, beyond what is necessary, the number of entities required to explain anything. Let me repeat that: One should not increase, beyond what is necessary, the number of entities required to explain anything.

For example, let's suppose that I walk into the bathroom and find my bath towel missing. Instead of being on its rack, it's laying in a heap on my bed. My mind comes up with two explanations: (1) that I forgot to hang it up after I dried my hair and left it on the bed or (2) that I did put the towel back on the rack, but an intruder entered my home without my noticing, moved my towel from the rack to the bed, and then quietly left. Both explanations fit the data. But Occam's Razor advises me to opt for the first explanation, the simpler one of my being forgetful, because there is no need to postulate a second entity, an intruder, to explain the location of the towel. My forgetfulness explains everything just fine.

As atheists, we can appeal to Occam's Razor in the question of whether God exists or not. We can argue as follows: "Human beings used to be very ignorant of the natural world, unable to explain natural phenomena like eclipses, earthquakes, and the diversity of animal life. So gods and other supernatural beings were postulated to explain these mysteries. But gradually, science has provided us with a greater understanding of our universe. We know that eclipses are the result of the particular positioning of the sun, earth, and moon, not omens of evil. We know that earthquakes are the result of tectonic plate movement, not the angry hand of God. We know that evolution explains the rich diversity and complexity of living beings, not creationism. We know that morality arises from our nature as human beings and the fundamental alternative of life versus death, not commandments from God. Therefore, we have no need to postulate a God to explain the nature of the universe. He explains nothing. He serves no purpose. And therefore, asserting that God exists violates Occam's Razor. If we can explain our universe without appealing to God, then we ought not postulate a God at all."

Now, of course, we don't know everything about the universe -- at least not yet. But even with all in the universe that we do not yet understand, postulating a God is still unnecessary. We should only do so when it is absolutely necessary, when no other explanation is possible. But somehow, I doubt that day will ever be reached.

### *Second: Argument from Contradiction*

Argument from Contradiction asserts that common conceptions of God involve internal contradictions, which therefore would preclude such an entity from existing. I'll just go over three here today, although perhaps we can think of more in the discussion.

First, there is the well-known paradox of whether God could create a stone so heavy that he could not lift it. This example attempts to show that omnipotence, in the Godly sense of being able to do anything, is self-contradictory. If God is omnipotent, he should be able to create anything. If God is omnipotent, he should be able to lift anything. In this paradox, however, he can only do one thing or the other, not both. So he cannot be omnipotent.

Second, we must wonder whether God's omniscience and our free will are compatible. If God is omniscient, then he knows everything that I will do tomorrow. And if he knows everything that I will do tomorrow, then my day is determined; I have no real choice in my actions. So either I do not have free will or God is not truly omniscient.

Third, there is the problem of evil. If God is all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-loving, why does he permit evil to occur? A number of explanations can be given at this point, but how can any of them be more than uninformed conjecture? Perhaps God isn't as all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-loving as we imagined him to be, in which case, he wouldn't be much of a god.



These Arguments from Contradiction have all been debated for centuries; theists do have responses to them. They are not as simple as they might first appear. For that reason, I wouldn't recommend using them too often. Instead, adhere to the burden of proof principle; make the theists prove their case. Don't let theists sucker you into arguing against God's existence.

So now we've examined the two most common arguments for atheism: Occam's Razor, which asserts that God is an unnecessary explanation and the Argument from Contradiction, which states that God is self-contradictory. Neither of these arguments really proves that God does not exist. But they point to some good reasons for doubt. And again, if the arguments of the theists and the agnostics fail, then atheism wins by default.

### **Conclusion**

So where does all of this leave us? Well, the holidays are approaching, which can be awkward for those of us not interested in praising Our Lord and Savior. We want to be thankful to our friends and family, but not to God. Hopefully, if the topic of your heresy arises, the arguments and counter-arguments that I've presented here will help you more effectively defend your disbelief. Or, you can just silently roll your eyes as those around you attribute all their success this year to God's marvelous plan for them. "Yeah, right," you'll say to yourself, "it's all part of God's marvelous plan to breed bacteria."