

Arguments Against God

The Skeptic's Case, Stated as Its Defenders State It

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I. Why a Believer Wrote This Essay

This essay argues against the existence of God, and its author believes in God. The two facts belong together at the top of the page. Everywhere on this site the rule is the same: a position must be answered in its strongest form or the answer is worth nothing, and the strongest form of unbelief is not found in slogans about flying spaghetti or believers' stupidity. It is found in a small set of serious arguments, made by serious people, which deserve to be laid out at full strength, without a thumb on the scale, and without rebuttals whispered between the paragraphs. That is what this essay does. The replies belong to its companion, *Arguments For God*, and to the essay on suffering; nothing will be answered here.

One caution about what unbelief is. Unbelief is not a refusal to think about the question. For most who hold it, it is the result of having thought about it, and of finding that the

answers keep arriving after the fact. The reader who wants to meet real atheism should meet it here at its best, and then judge for himself whether the companion essay has answered it.

II. The Old Fork: Epicurus and Hume

The oldest argument is a fork, and it has been in the record for more than two thousand years. Hume gave it its permanent English form, in the voice of Philo, calling the questions “Epicurus’ old questions”: “Is the deity willing to prevent evil, but not able? then is he impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then is he malevolent. Is he both able and willing? whence then is evil?”¹

The force of the fork is its economy. It requires no theory, no scholarship, and no premise the believer does not already grant. A God who can prevent suffering and will not is not good. A God who would prevent it and cannot is not almighty. The world is full of suffering. So one of the three claims has to go: the power, the goodness, or the God. Every theodicy ever written is an attempt to blunt one of the fork’s tines, and the skeptic’s observation is that after two millennia the attempts are still being written, which is not what finished business looks like.

III. The Logical Argument from Evil

J. L. Mackie sharpened the fork into a formal claim: that the theist holds inconsistent beliefs, so that unbelief is not merely permitted but required. Religious beliefs, he wrote, are “positively irrational,” because “the several parts of the essential theological doctrine are inconsistent with one another, so that the theologian ... must be prepared to believe, not merely what cannot be proved, but what can be disproved from other beliefs that he also holds.” The three beliefs in question are these: “God is omnipotent; God is wholly good; and yet evil exists.”²

Stated so baldly, the inconsistency needs a connecting premise—something like: a wholly good, omnipotent being would eliminate every evil it could. Mackie knew this and supplied candidates. The skeptic’s point survives the technicalities: whatever the exact premise, the believer is committed to a being with every reason and every resource to prevent what happens every day, and to a world that looks in no respect like that being’s handiwork.

IV. The Evidential Argument from Evil

The argument’s modern form gives up the claim of strict contradiction and argues from evidence instead, and its classic statement is William Rowe’s. Two cases carry it. “Consider the case of a fawn, trapped in a forest fire occasioned by lightning, who suffers

for several days before dying... Or consider the case of the five-year old girl from Flint, Michigan who, on January 1, 1986, was raped, severely beaten, and strangled to death by her mother's boyfriend." The fawn answers in advance the reply about human freedom: no one's liberty was exercised in that forest. The child answers the reply about soul-making: hers ended at five.³

The inference is then plain. "How could a God who loved this fawn and this child and who had the power to prevent their suffering permit them to suffer so horribly?" A justifying reason would have to exist. When we look for one, in the argument's own words, "we draw a blank." That does not prove there is none. It makes it, the skeptic argues, more likely than not that there is none—and more likely still when the two cases are multiplied by every forest fire and every cruelty of recorded history. The usual reply is that freedom is worth its price. Grant it. It explains the torturer. It does not explain the tumor. A child dying of bone cancer is nobody's free choice, and an earthquake arriving under a sleeping city is not the abuse of anyone's liberty. Much suffering buys something. A great deal of it buys nothing that anyone has ever been able to name, and it is that remainder which tells.

V. Every Proof Has Been Answered

The second wing of the case is a history: every classical proof of God has been answered, and the answers have held. The argument from cause says everything must have one, then exempts God from the rule it just laid down. If one thing can exist uncaused, the universe is the obvious candidate, and it has the advantage of being here. The refinement that only *contingent* things need causes is, to the skeptic, a definition doing the work of an argument: the theist defines a category of thing that needs no explanation and then places his God in it, a move anyone can make for anything.

The argument from design was buried by Darwin, who showed how the appearance of design arises without a designer—blindly, gradually, and wastefully, which is not how craftsmen work but is exactly how selection does. Its modern replacement, fine-tuning, is answered either by a multiverse or by noticing that observers can only ever find themselves in a universe that permits observers; a fish astonished that its world is entirely water has not discovered providence. And the argument from morality mistakes an evolved social instinct for a voice from outside. Cooperation pays. Creatures that felt obligation left more descendants than those that did not, and the felt absoluteness of conscience is precisely what one would expect selection to build, since a negotiable conscience is useless.⁴

VI. The Success of Explanations Without God

Behind the individual rebuttals stands a pattern. Every gap once occupied by God has been filled by something else—disease, weather, the origin of species, the origin of the cosmos. Lightning was divine wrath until it was electricity; plague was judgment until it was bacteria; the diversity of life was special creation until it was descent with modification. The pattern is not encouraging for the remaining gaps. When Laplace was asked—so the story goes—where God appeared in his celestial mechanics, he answered that he had no need of that hypothesis; and the sciences since have been a long footnote to the reply. The skeptic does not claim science has disproved God. He claims something quieter: that a hypothesis which explains nothing that cannot be explained without it is carried as baggage, and that parsimony is not a prejudice but the way every successful inquiry has ever worked.⁵

VII. The Silence of God

Set the arguments aside and one fact remains: a God who wanted to be known could be known. He could say so, plainly, to everyone, and end the matter in an afternoon. Instead there is ambiguity, which is what absence looks like. The philosopher J. L. Schellenberg has given the fact its careful form: there exist nonresistant nonbelievers—people who would believe if they could, who have searched honestly and found nothing. A loving God, on the believer's own account of love, would not leave such people in the dark about the one relationship said to matter most. They are in the dark. The believer's God is a Father; and no good father, the argument runs, hides from a child who is looking for him.⁶

The stock reply is that unmistakable evidence would coerce, and love must be free. The skeptic finds this backwards. The believer's own Scriptures are a chronicle of God appearing, speaking, and working public wonders precisely to be believed; Thomas was shown the wounds, and the offer of evidence did not, apparently, violate his freedom. What changed, the skeptic asks, between the first century and this one—except the standards of documentation?

VIII. The Crowd of Gods

There are thousands of religions, each held with total conviction, almost all of which must be false. Their adherents report the same certainty, the same experiences of presence, the same answered prayers, and the same transformed lives that the Christian offers as evidence; and the religions contradict one another on nearly everything that would matter. At most one is right. The odds are on none.

The distribution of belief tells the same story. Faith follows geography: born in Riyadh, the child is a Muslim; in Varanasi, a Hindu; in Tulsa, a Baptist. A conviction that tracks

birthplace this tightly looks like inheritance, not discovery; truths of mathematics do not cluster by nation. The believer already applies to every religion but his own exactly the skepticism the unbeliever applies to one more. The skeptic's request is only for consistency: run the same test on the religion you inherited that you run, without effort, on all the ones you did not.⁷

IX. Belief Explained Without God

Finally, belief itself has explanations that require no God. Feuerbach argued that theology is anthropology—that the God of religion is humanity's own nature projected onto the sky, our fathers made infinite. Freud called religious doctrines illusions, “fulfillments of the oldest, strongest and most urgent wishes of mankind” as he put it—the terrified child's longing for a protecting father, carried into adulthood and cosmic in scale. Modern cognitive science adds mechanism: minds built to detect agents—because missing a predator cost more than imagining one—will detect agents in thunder, in luck, and in the dark, whether any are there or not.⁸

The skeptic states the limit of this argument himself, because it is stronger with the limit stated: explaining why people believe something does not show the belief false. What it shows is that the near-universality of religious belief, so often offered as evidence for God, is evidence for nothing but the shape of the human mind. Belief would look exactly as it looks whether or not any god existed. A witness who would give the same testimony either way tells the court nothing.

X. What the Case Claims, and What It Does Not

The case assembled here claims no certainty, and its best advocates never have. When Bertrand Russell was asked what he would say if he died and found himself facing God, his reported answer was not defiance but a complaint: not enough evidence. That is the whole case in three words. A God who made minds could have made the evidence equal to the claim; the claim is the largest ever made, and the evidence is a disputed fork, a contested fossil record of arguments, and a silence that has to be explained. None of this demands certainty. It asks only that the evidence be as good as the claim is large, and it is not.⁹

That is the argument at its strongest, as its defenders make it. Whether it survives its answers—whether the fork has been blunted, whether the residue of suffering is evidence or the limit of our sight, whether the silence is absence or courtship—is exactly the question of the companion essay, *Arguments For God*, and of the essay on suffering. The reader now holds both briefs. The site's whole wager is that he should.

Endnotes

1. David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1779), Part X, in the voice of Philo; quoted exactly, with the “Epicurus’ old questions” attribution, from the copies in the site’s reference library. Lactantius transmits the Epicurean form in *De Ira Dei* 13.
2. J. L. Mackie, *Evil and Omnipotence*, *Mind* 64 (1955); both passages quoted exactly as excerpted in the survey of the argument held in the site’s reference library.
3. The fawn and the Flint case are William Rowe’s, from *The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism* (1979) and his later work; quoted exactly from the presentation in Daniel Howard-Snyder and Michael Bergmann, *Grounds for Belief in God Aside, Does Evil Make Atheism More Reasonable than Theism?*, held in the site’s reference library — a paper whose authors argue against the inference, and state it fairly first.
4. For the classic statements: Hume, *Dialogues*, Parts II–VIII on design and cause; Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species* (1859); the anthropic reply to fine-tuning is associated with Brandon Carter and popularized by many since — all summarized rather than quoted.
5. The Laplace anecdote is reported by others rather than by Laplace and is flagged here as a story; its currency, not its documentation, is the point. The parsimony principle is Ockham’s, applied as every empirical discipline applies it.
6. J. L. Schellenberg, *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason* (1993), summarized rather than quoted. John 20:24–29 for Thomas.
7. The geography-of-belief argument is pressed in John Loftus’s *outsider test for faith* and has antecedents in Mill; summarized rather than quoted.
8. Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity* (1841), summarized; Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion* (1927), the quoted phrase being his standard formulation of religious ideas, cited from the common English translation; the agency-detection account is summarized from the cognitive-science-of-religion literature (Guthrie, Barrett).
9. The Russell anecdote exists in several tellings, all reporting the substance *not enough evidence*; it is cited here as a reported remark, not a text.

For Further Reading

Answering Atheism—How to Make the Case for God with Logic and Charity, by Trent Horn.

The Devil’s Delusion—Atheism and Its Scientific Pretensions, by David Berlinski.

Faith of the Fatherless—The Psychology of Atheism, by Paul C. Vitz.

The Myth of Religious Neutrality—An Essay on the Hidden Role of Religious Belief in Theories, by Roy A. Clouser.

Knowing with the Heart—Religious Experience and Belief in God, by Roy A. Clouser.

The Doors of the Sea—Where Was God in the Tsunami?, by David Bentley Hart.

Making Sense Out of Suffering, by Peter Kreeft.

Why a Suffering World Makes Sense, by Chris Tiegreen.

God, Evil, and Innocent Suffering—A Theological Reflection, by John E. Thiel.

God, Relationships, and Evil, by Loren Meierding.

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“How long, O Lord? Wilt thou forget me for ever? How long wilt thou hide thy face from me?” — Psalm 13:1

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.

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A Note on Authority

This essay is unlike the others on this site: it represents the author’s articulation of *the case against the existence of God, stated as its ablest defenders state it*. The author is a believing Catholic, and the essay exists because the site’s standing rule — answer a position at its strongest or not at all — requires that the opposing case be given whole, without rebuttal, in its own voice. The replies are made in the companion essay *Arguments For God* and in *Would a Good God Permit Evil and Suffering?*. Where this presentation is fortunate enough to state unbelief as an honest unbeliever would state it, the credit belongs to the writers it summarizes. Where it falls short, the responsibility is the author’s alone.