

Believe in God? Why or Why Not?

Believing in God is one of the most important things in a person's life. The more important a thing is, the more closely it should be examined and verified.

The above paragraph can be re-written as a logical argument. It is a bit like diagramming a sentence. For example:

1. Belief in God is one of the most important things in one's life.
2. Important things ought to be closely examined.
3. Therefore, one's belief in God ought to be examined.

In this structure a number of premises are offered. If those premises are accepted, then a conclusion is drawn. All arguments can be diagrammed like this. I find it helpful to do so when dealing with complicated or important arguments. One can recognize a bad argument if any of the premises are wrong or if the conclusion is absurd. For example:

1. If I say something must have a cause, it has a cause.
2. I say the universe must have a cause.
3. Therefore, the universe has a cause.
4. Therefore, God exists.

This is a bad argument because the first premise (1) is absurd. Just saying something is so does not make it so. It is a [naked assertion](#). Also, the conclusion (4) is a *non sequitur*, for it does not follow from (3). Even if we grant (3), it does not mean God exists, it just means the universe had a cause. The only appropriate conclusion (4) that can be drawn is "Therefore, the universe has a cause."

Why atheism?

Atheism is simply the lack of a belief in all gods. To paint with a broad stroke, Jews do not believe in Brahma or Christ. Hindus do not believe in Yahweh or Christ. Christians do not believe in Brahma. Atheists agree with all of them.

When an assertion about reality is made, it must be provable using empirical evidence. Empirical is a word that I'll be using a lot. It refers to ideas that are capable of being verified or disproved by observation or experiment. Empirical evidence is not simply one type of evidence, but rather it is the only evidence that we can rely on, because it is reproducible. Empirical evidence is the basis for physical science.

That's not to say every persuasive argument is objective and empirical! In fact, some of the most powerful arguments specifically avoid evidence. These arguments are rhetorical in nature, and particularly effective at [controlling others](#).

But these rhetorical arguments, though initially persuasive, are hollow and unfulfilling. In order for an assertion to be of any practical or moral use, it must be provable using empirical evidence. Why? Because no human mind to my knowledge has the ability to see the future with 100% accuracy. The best any human can do is deal in probabilities.

For example, you make plans to go shopping tomorrow, not because you know you will be alive to go shopping, but because you think it is probable. You could have a stroke in the middle of the night and die in your sleep. However, this is unlikely, so you make your plans. Why is it unlikely? Because you have run a number of experiments in the past. You go to sleep, and wake up fine in the morning. This almost always works. So (perhaps unconsciously) you assign a high probability to your being alive tomorrow.

So in everything we do we deal in probabilities, and probabilities (to my knowledge) can only be derived from empirical evidence. It is as simple as doing something and seeing what happens. And then repeating it often enough to feel confident about a probability.

It is interesting to note that this only makes sense if one accepts that there is an objective, external reality that does not change on a whim. The freedom to make reasoned decisions about the future is dependent on having the freedom to say two and two make four. If two and two can, sometimes, make five, then there would be no point in making any decisions based on observation.

If a belief is important, then it should be verifiable, because it follows that having the wrong belief about something so important could be bad. We want to avoid bad things.

So, when someone says "God exists" we want to verify that. If they are wrong about such an important thing, well I might get hurt investing my belief in an error.

Because of this, it is necessary for the one who claims God exists to offer proof. If a person tells you hitting your head against the wall will make you smarter, you would be wise to insist on empirical evidence. Everyone would like to be smarter, but hitting one's head against a wall is not something one wants to do, and can in fact be harmful.

Likewise, if someone says "God doesn't exist" we want to verify that. Proving negatives can be harder than proving positives. I can prove a pink duck exists by picking up a pink duck and showing you. I could only prove no pink ducks exist by finding every duck in existence and checking to see if they are pink. This is technically impossible. Not all negatives are unprovable, however. I can prove no pink ducks exist in your refrigerator by opening your fridge and checking. I can prove round squares cannot exist because they are logically inconsistent. I can also prove two and two does not make five for the same reason.

I have found a number of proofs that demonstrate certain kinds of specific gods cannot exist, due to logical inconsistencies. A quick example is a God which is fundamentally unknowable or un-understandable or beyond logic. This kind of God cannot exist, because it is the equivalent of asserting two and two make five. If a God is beyond logic or un-understandable, then it is by definition absurd. Additionally, if such a God did exist, it would be less than meaningless to worship such an entity or do what such an entity commanded. If the God is beyond understanding, we can by definition never know if it actually meant "Thou shalt not kill" -- after all, for a being that is beyond logic, the command "Thou shalt not" could mean "Thou shalt." If we perceived that such an un-understandable force wants us to do good, we can't know if that it is accurate, because the force is un-understandable.

So, I know of some proofs that disprove certain specific Gods. I do not know of any proofs at all that prove the existence of any God whatsoever. I have made a good-faith effort to find such proofs, but I have never seen one.

Whenever I find a proof of God's existence, I carefully diagram the proof into logical arguments. The proof, to my disappointment, is then shown to be false. In fact, my very first example of a bad argument is a real proof for God used by many genuinely intelligent people.

For example, when I found this paper at [New Advent](#) I was excited. It is well-laid out and intelligently written. It claims to have proofs of God's existence. I was dismayed to find this held up as a proof: "Motion, i.e. the passing from power to act, as it takes place in the universe implies a first unmoved Mover (primum movens immobile), who is God; else we should postulate an infinite series of movers, which is inconceivable."

This argument can be diagrammed to this logical statement:

1. If I say something must have a cause, it has a cause.
2. I say the universe must have a cause.
3. Therefore, the universe has a cause.
4. Therefore, God exists.

I have already shown how this is false. Even if we grant that every motion must have had a mover (which, incidentally, it does not. Unmoved motions have been empirically observed, and are described as the Casimir effect), the only conclusion which can be drawn is that every motion must have a mover. It cannot be concluded that God exists, much less a specific God.

To date, every instance of an argument for the existence of a specific God relies upon the use of a particular [rhetorical technique](#), which can be seen in the argument above. It is remarkable how these arguments exhibit a kind of intellectual athleticism:

an ability at one moment to make the most delicate use of logic and
at the next to be unconscious of the crudest logical errors.

In conclusion, here is a series of logical statements:

1. Important beliefs should be verified.
2. Belief in God is very important.
3. Therefore, belief in God should be verified.
4. God cannot be verified
5. Therefore, no belief in God should be.

If you believe (4) is in error, or that I have made an error anywhere else on this subject, please let me know.

Some reference links:

Perhaps you are unconvinced that empirical evidence is the only proof we can use. Or maybe you just want to know a little more about the scientific method, and what exactly 'empirical evidence' is. If so, you are welcome to read the companion piece to this Why God essay: "[Believe in the Scientific Method?](#)"

For a related examination of persuasive arguments, please check out my essay, [Rhetoric: The Power of Persuasion](#).

My definition of 'empirical' was lifted wholly from this very long (and well-written) essay: [Why Atheism](#)

[Over 300 Proofs of God's Existence](#) is a list of logically false statements frequently used to prove God's existence. Many are tongue-in-cheek and not used by anyone serious. However, quite a few are routinely employed by serious believers in God. As always, I find it helpful to reduce an argument to its logical components, which makes it easier to detect falsehoods.