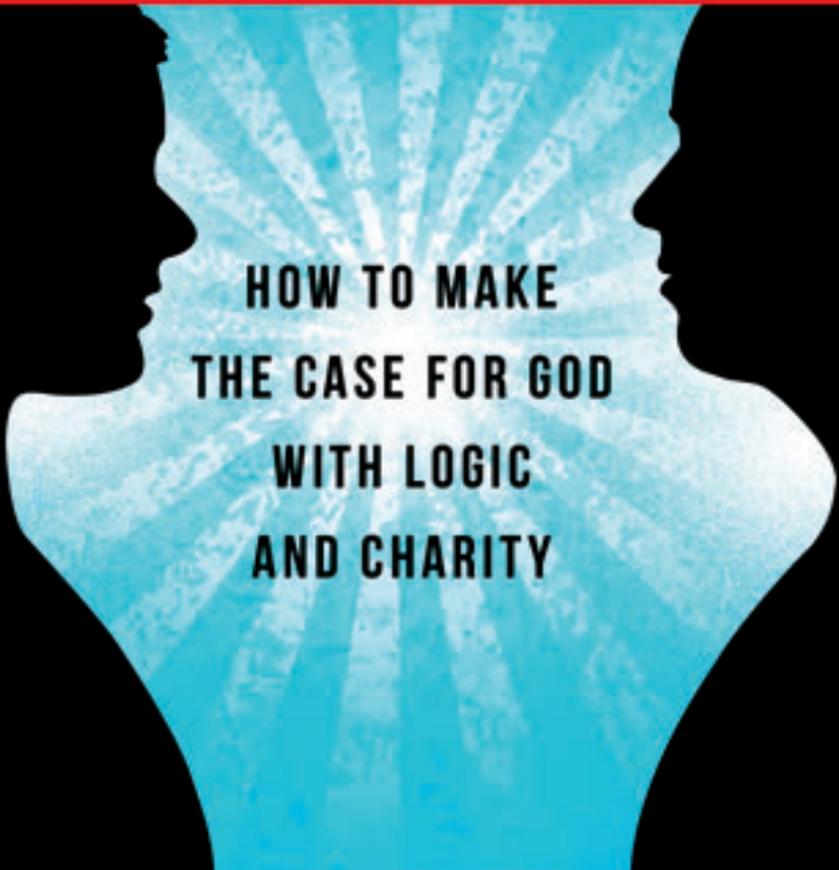


ANSWERING ATHEISM

The central graphic features two black silhouettes of human profiles facing each other. Between them is a bright blue sunburst or starburst pattern that radiates outwards, creating a focal point for the text.

HOW TO MAKE
THE CASE FOR GOD
WITH LOGIC
AND CHARITY

TRENT HORN

Trent Horn

Answering Atheism

How to Make the Case for God
with Logic and Charity



San Diego
2013

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Theism, Atheism, and the God Debate

I was once reading a defense of atheism while waiting to be served in a restaurant. The hostess looked over at my book, with its bold ATHEISM in the title, and asked, “How could someone ever be an atheist? I mean, everybody has to believe in something, don’t they?” Unfortunately, this woman confused *nihilism* (the belief that nothing matters) with *atheism* (the belief that God does not exist). It’s true that nihilists are usually atheists, but many atheists are not nihilists. They would say they believe in many things that matter, God just isn’t one of them.

Misconceptions, like the one held by this woman, can derail fruitful conversations about God and turn them into heated arguments. Instead of fighting, we should clear away misconceptions so that even if people disagree, they can feel respected, and both parties can move closer to finding true beliefs. Before I defend my beliefs about God, let’s define our terms so that the people who disagree about God’s existence can at least talk to one another instead of talking *past* one another.

What do we mean by God?

While various concepts of God differ across the world, they all usually describe God as the supernatural creator of the universe. In the Western philosophical tradition, God is a being that is necessary (cannot fail to exist), eternal (not bound by time), immaterial (not bound by space), all-powerful, and all-knowing. Finally, most Western theologians and philosophers claim that God is all-good, or he is the perfect embodiment of the virtues of love, justice, and every other good we know.⁴ He is, as St. Anselm of Canterbury declared, the being “than which no greater can be thought.” This definition

of God is consistent with the God worshipped by Christians, Jews, and Muslims, who believe that God revealed himself to mankind. Of course, if atheism is true, then we don't have to wonder which people God has revealed himself to, because God doesn't exist. So before we can find out if a certain *kind* of God exists, we should find out if God exists at all.

If God could be proven to exist, would it be possible to understand such an infinite being? Here we must distinguish between “basic understanding” and “advanced comprehension.” I don't *fully comprehend* how every part of a nuclear reactor works, because I'm not a nuclear engineer. But the facts provided by nuclear engineers that are printed in encyclopedias allow me to have a *basic understanding* of how a nuclear reactor works. I understand (at a basic level) that using nuclear energy to heat water creates steam, which spins turbines, which create electricity. Similarly, I may not comprehend how God knows all truths or how he created the world, but I can understand that such tasks are not impossible for an infinite being like him. According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*:

God transcends all creatures. We must therefore continually purify our language of everything in it that is limited, image-bound or imperfect, if we are not to confuse our image of God—“the inexpressible, the incomprehensible, the invisible, the ungraspable”—with our human representations. Our human words always fall short of the mystery of God.⁵

We must remember too that a good teacher can take a very complex topic and break it down into a framework that even a simple person can understand. So if God is an infinite being, then he is also the universe's infinitely greatest teacher. He is able to “come down to our level” and reveal himself through both nature and human experience.

Getting our terms right: Theism

Theists believe that a personal God exists who interacts with the world. Monotheists, like Christians, Muslims, or Jews, believe that only one God exists. Polytheists, like the followers of Greek and Roman mythologies, believe that many gods exist. Deists believe that one God created the universe, but unlike theists, they believe this God no longer interacts with the world he created. Some Founding Fathers, such as Thomas Jefferson, were deists: They rejected Christianity, but they did not reject what they called “nature’s God.”⁶

Monotheists, deists, and polytheists believe that at least one God exists, and he is not identical to the world he created. Pantheists, on the other hand, believe God exists but he (or she, or even it) is identical to the universe itself. The Catholic theologian Jean Daniélou called these pantheistic beliefs “cosmic religions” because their followers considered the cosmos itself to be divine.⁷ When Albert Einstein said, “God does not play dice,” he was most likely referring metaphorically to the laws of nature as having a divine quality about them. Einstein explicitly claimed on several occasions that he did not believe in the existence of a personal God.⁸

Getting our terms right: Atheism

Atheism literally means “without God” and can be divided into either strong or weak types. I remember once asking a student at Northern Arizona University if he believed in God. He responded, “Hell, no! I’m not just an atheist, I’m a super-atheist!” At first I was expecting him to show off his x-ray vision or super strength, but what he meant was that he was 100 percent confident that God does not exist. This view, also known as *positive atheism* or *strong atheism*, claims that it is a fact that “God does not exist.” In contrast, negative atheism

or weak atheism merely claim that there is insufficient evidence to prove that God exists.

Another name for atheism is *naturalism*, or the view that only the natural world exists.⁹ Naturalists may admit that there are things in our universe we cannot detect (like particles that are smaller than atoms) or natural objects outside of our universe (like “multiverses”), but they deny the existence of a supernatural being that transcends nature. Atheism is also sometimes called *materialism*, or the belief that only matter exists, and therefore an immaterial being like God does not. But atheism is not the same thing as materialism, because some atheists believe in the existence of immaterial things that are not God (like minds or numbers).

Getting our terms right: Non-religious

It’s also important not to confuse atheists with people who have no religion, or as they’re sometimes called, “nones.”¹⁰ No, these aren’t the women who wear habits, pray the rosary, and are quick to discipline unruly Catholic schoolchildren. These “nones” may believe God exists, but they don’t follow any particular religion. Sometimes the God “nones” believe in is not a person but something like the Force from *Star Wars*.

As a friend of mine once told me, “I believe in God, but not the Christian God. God is love. That’s all we need.” C. S. Lewis has an answer to this idea:

Of course, what these people mean when they say that God is love is often something quite different: they really mean “Love is God.” They really mean that our feelings of love, however and whenever they arise, and whatever results they produce, are to be treated with great respect. Perhaps they are: but that is something quite different from what Christians mean by the

statement “God is love.” They believe that the living, dynamic activity of love has been going on in God forever and has created everything else.¹¹

The other common conception of God among the religiously unaffiliated is what sociologists Christian Smith and Melinda Denton call *moralistic therapeutic deism*, which claims that:¹²

1. God exists and watches over the world.
2. God wants people to be nice, and good people go to heaven.
3. God is not needed in life unless there is a problem he can solve, because the purpose of life is to be happy.

Although such bland forms of deism are the majority belief among unaffiliated Americans, atheism is on the rise. The so-called “New Atheists” are putting forward arguments and attitudes that they hope will convert the “nones” to their side.

Getting our terms right: New Atheism

In his 2004 book *The End of Faith*, American atheist Sam Harris argued that religion is a mental illness and cannot be part of a rational worldview.¹³ British biologist Richard Dawkins followed in 2006 with *The God Delusion*, in which he claimed that religious education is a form of child abuse.¹⁴ Then came similarly bold anti-theism books from journalist Christopher Hitchens (*God Is Not Great*) and philosopher Daniel Dennett (*Breaking the Spell: Religion as Natural Phenomenon*). Before Hitchens passed away from cancer in 2011, these four were collectively known as the Four Horsemen of the “New Atheism.” What made these atheists “new” was

not their arguments but their *attitude* that religion should be reviled. Secular humanist Tom Flynn wrote:

The triumph of Harris, Dennett, Dawkins, and Hitchens was to take arguments against religion that were long familiar to insiders, brilliantly repackage them, and expose them to millions who would never otherwise pick up an atheist book. Let me say that again in bolder type. **There's nothing new about the New Atheism.**¹⁵

Getting our terms right: Agnosticism

Agnosticism (from *gnosis*, the Greek word for knowledge) is the position that a person cannot know if God exists.¹⁶ A strong agnostic claims that no one is able to know whether God exists. A weak agnostic merely claims that while *he* doesn't know if God exists, it is possible that someone else may know.¹⁷ Agnosticism and weak atheism are similar in that both groups claim to be "without belief in God."¹⁸ Pope Benedict XVI spoke sympathetically of such people in a 2011 address:

In addition to the two phenomena of religion and anti-religion, a further basic orientation is found in the growing world of agnosticism: people to whom the gift of faith has not been given, but who are nevertheless on the lookout for truth, searching for God. Such people do not simply assert: "There is no God." They suffer from his absence and yet are inwardly making their way towards him, inasmuch as they seek truth and goodness. They are "pilgrims of truth, pilgrims of peace."¹⁹

Because agnosticism seems more open-minded than atheism, many atheists are more apt to describe themselves

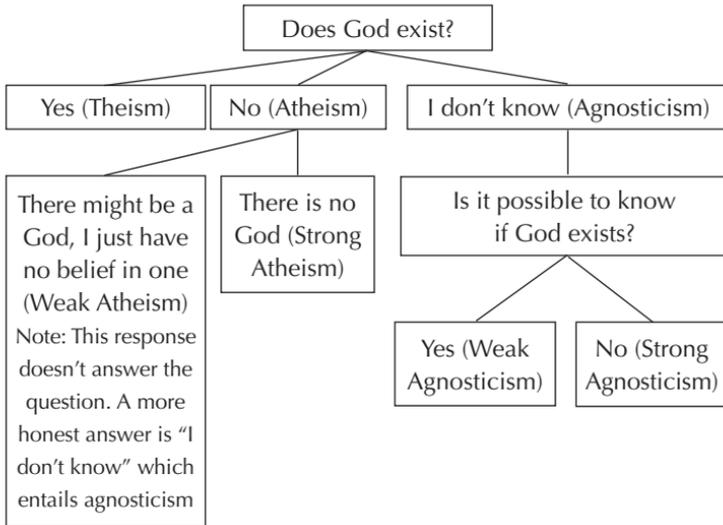
like agnostics even though they call themselves “atheist.” They say that an atheist is a person who lacks a belief in God but is open to being proven wrong. But saying you lack a belief in God no more answers the question, “Does God exist?” than saying you lack a belief in aliens answers the question, “Do aliens exist?” This is just agnosticism under a different name. For example, can we say agnosticism is true? We can’t, because agnostics don’t make claims about the world; they just describe how they feel about a fact in the world (the existence of God). Likewise, if atheists want us to believe that atheism is true, then they must make a claim about the world and show that what they lack a belief in—God—does not exist.

An illustration might help explain the burden of proof both sides share. In a murder trial the prosecution must show beyond a reasonable doubt that the defendant committed the murder. But if the prosecution isn’t able to make its case, then the defendant is found not guilty. Notice the defendant isn’t found innocent. For all we know, he could have committed the crime, but we just can’t prove it. Certain kinds of evidence, like an airtight alibi, can show the defendant is innocent. But it is the responsibility of the defense to present that evidence.

Likewise, even if the theist isn’t able to make his case that God exists, that doesn’t show God does not exist and therefore atheism is true. As atheists Austin Dacey and Lewis Vaughn write, “What if these arguments purporting to establish that God exists are failures? That is, what if they offer no justification for theistic belief? Must we then conclude that God does not exist? No. Lack of supporting reasons or evidence for a proposition does not show that the proposition is false.”²⁰ If he wants to demonstrate that atheism is true, an atheist would have to provide additional evidence that there is no God. He

can't simply say the arguments for the existence of God are failures and then rest his case.

The following flowchart should help you sort out what the different terms so far mean:



Is it just a matter of faith?

When most people think of proof, they think of mathematical proofs that cannot be doubted, like the proof for $2+2=4$. With that idea of “proof” in mind, some people claim that since so many people doubt that God exists, his existence must be beyond the realm of “proof” and is just a matter of “faith.” Now, God’s existence (along with many other things we think are true) cannot be demonstrated with 100 percent certainty. If it could, then there would be no need for faith. But that doesn’t mean belief in God is *solely* a matter of faith. Instead, saying one can prove God’s existence is shorthand

for saying that the balance of evidence in favor of God's existence outweighs the evidence against God's existence. The *Catechism* says that the proofs for God are a series of "converging and convincing arguments which allow us to attain certainty about the truth."²¹

It's like saying we can "prove" someone is guilty of a crime by using cumulative pieces of evidence that converge toward a particular verdict. In a trial, the prosecutor doesn't prove the defendant's guilt with a long mathematical equation on a chalkboard. Instead, he presents pieces of evidence to the jury that are best explained by the defendant's guilt. No one piece of evidence may prove the defendant is guilty, but taken as a whole they may very well accomplish that task.

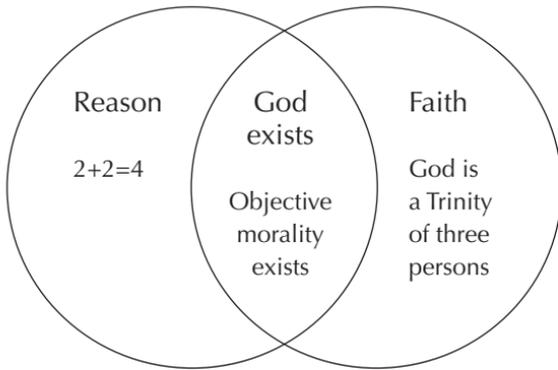
Likewise, a theist can present evidence from the natural world that is best explained by the existence of God.²² While personal experience of God (what some people call faith) can be a part of this evidence, this does not show that belief in God is just the result of wishful thinking or mere "blind faith."

Atheists will also become annoyed when they are told their belief in atheism is just a "matter of faith." They will respond that they have the same faith in the nonexistence of God as theists have in the nonexistence of Santa Claus. Some atheists will define faith as "belief in spite of the evidence," or more charitably as "belief in the absence of evidence."²³ But according to most traditional Christians, faith is not a belief in spite of or in the absence of evidence. Instead it is, as the *Catechism* defines it, "the theological virtue by which we believe in God and believe all that he has said and revealed to us."²⁴ Although we live in a culture that equates faith with "blindly accepting something as true," it may be more helpful to think of faith instead as a kind of "trust" that is based on good reasons.

Most of what we believe is taken on this kind of trusting faith, because as limited human beings we cannot directly research the truth about everything. We need to have confidence (or “faith”) in the authority of teachers, textbooks, maps, schedules, parents, and Internet websites, among many other things. Sometimes this faith is misplaced, and we end up believing false things. But if that happens, and if we are presented with good evidence that our beliefs are not true, we simply give up those false beliefs. An atheist might complain that there is a difference in having faith in people and having faith in God. We *know* people exist because we can experience them with our five senses and can investigate to see if what they say is true. But the same is not true for God, whose very existence is disputed.

But who says that the only way we can know if something exists is through the use of our five senses? If God existed, then he could reveal himself to a human being by causing that person to have an internal awareness of God. If that person does not doubt his own sanity, then why shouldn't he trust this personal experience?²⁵ Along with this personal, subjective knowledge, the First Vatican Council taught that God can also be known objectively, by reasons accessible to everyone. It said that God “can be known with certainty from the consideration of created things, by the natural power of human reason.”²⁶ Now, this doesn't mean that everyone will come to know God by reason but only that it is possible for anyone to come to know God with certainty in this way.

The diagram on the opposite page may help. On the far left, we see that there are some truths (like mathematical truths) that are known only through reason. On the far right, there are other truths that can only be known if they are revealed by God and accepted through faith (like the Christian belief that God is a Trinity). But some truths, those in between the



overlapping circles, can be known by either faith or reason. These include the truth that God exists or the truth that some actions are objectively right or wrong.²⁷

Both atheists and theists have “faith” in the sense that they believe statements that cannot be proven with certainty. For example, almost everyone believes that the world is not a computer simulation like the Matrix, or that the laws of nature that operate today will operate the same way tomorrow. We don’t carefully reason our way to these truths. They are merely assumptions we think are true because they just appear to be true. But calling belief in these basic truths “faith” would stretch the meaning of the word beyond recognition. Theists have religious faith while atheists have confidence in truths that cannot be absolutely proven.

Should we just keep to ourselves?

Some atheists, and even some theists, claim that discussing religion is too emotional and not worth the trouble. They say arguments don’t change anyone’s mind and that we should all just focus on being nice to one another. But it is simply not

true that no one ever changes his mind on this issue. Several books in just the last few years, for example, relate conversions to theism as well as “de-conversions” to atheism.²⁸

Furthermore, if an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-good creator of the universe *does* exist, that would have a profound impact on our lives—well worth any emotional responses that come from the discussion. Cambridge logic professor Arif Ahmed, himself an avid atheist, once said in a debate, “We’re discussing probably the most important question any of us will ever have to face in our life. If God exists, then you and I should change our lives. If I really believed it . . . then I would change my life.”²⁹

In a 2009 YouTube video, atheist and magician Penn Jillette described how a Christian approached him after one of his magic shows and gave him a Bible. Instead of being offended, Penn said the Christian was “a good man” and that if Christians actually believe their faith was true, then they should have no problem sharing it with other people. After all, if sharing what you believe dramatically affects someone’s eternal destiny, then, as Jillette says, “How much do you have to hate somebody to not proselytize? How much would you have to hate somebody to believe that everlasting life is possible and not tell them that?”³⁰

Being open to what’s true, as opposed to what we want to be true, is exactly the right attitude we all should have concerning the existence of God. In the next chapter, we will examine certain bad attitudes that theists and atheists both must overcome if we are to have fruitful conversations.