

## **“IS THERE A MEANING TO LIFE?” CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS**

**The Papers and Comments in this collection made up the October 18, 2013 “Is There a Meaning to Life?” Conference at Lincoln University, Jefferson City, Missouri.**

### **Is There Enough Evidence for God?**

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#### **Introduction**

There is a famous story of an atheist philosopher dying and standing before God at the gates of heaven. When God asks him, “Why didn’t you believe in me?”, the philosopher responds, “Not enough evidence, God, not enough evidence.” In other words, God didn’t do his part.

Today, I will argue that this philosopher was wrong. God has provided plenty of evidence. In order to show this, I will do two things. First, I will talk about the evidence God *has* provided, and whether this evidence is really “enough evidence.” Second, I will offer an explanation for why there are so many atheists if the evidence really is adequate.

#### **What Evidence Do We Have for God?**

Let me give three preliminary clarifications, and then I’ll describe what I think the evidence for theism looks like. First, I’m going to use the term ‘theism’ to describe the view that some God exists. Christian theism is a particular kind of theism, but mostly I’ll just be talking about simple theism. Second, I need to clarify something for the sake of my atheist listeners. This is not a debate about whether God exists. Nor is it a debate about whether there is evidence for God. The debate here is this: If there is a God, and God has given some evidence of his existence, *has God given us enough evidence?* This is what the atheist philosopher was implying in his

conversation with God—that God had not done enough in the evidence department, and that it was thus unjust to condemn the atheist.

Third, I need to clarify what ‘evidence’ is. I think if we get clear on what ‘evidence’ is, then we’ll see that God’s provided quite a bit of evidence for theism. When we talk about ‘evidence’ in philosophy, we’re not talking about the things you usually think of in a courtroom or on CSI. Fingerprints, murder weapons, DNA and eyewitness testimony only become evidence when you have certain experiences and form certain beliefs about them. Bob’s fingerprints on the gun aren’t what support your belief that Bob is guilty. Rather, it is your visual experience of the fingerprints on the gun, your belief that *Bob’s fingerprints are on the gun* and your belief that *his fingerprints wouldn’t be there if he were innocent*. So, ultimately, it is your experiences and beliefs that serve as your evidence for believing something. This is not some strange, religious view of evidence. I’m using the same idea of evidence used by atheist and Christian philosophers alike. The important point here is that experiences can count as evidence.

So, what evidence has God given us for theism? I think the average person has a lot of experiential evidence for God, even if they don’t respond to it with belief. I’m thinking of that sense of awe you feel when viewing the night sky in a rural area, or the Grand Canyon, or the ocean, or a lightning storm. Sometimes people experience God through the love of another person, or at the birth of their first child. I think everyone has had moments like this. Some people have even felt something more specific, like feeling God’s presence or God’s love directly. Or in some cases, experiencing God in visions or dreams.

These kinds of experiences aren’t the only kinds of evidence, though. If you add to this our experience of testimony from other people throughout history, our internal experience of moral

awareness, and our rational experience of philosophical arguments for God, then you get quite an accumulation of evidence.

Now, if you're an atheist, you'll have to remember that we aren't debating God's existence here. Nor are we asking whether any of this evidence is good evidence. We are asking something like this: If there is a God, and he's provided some evidence, has he provided *sufficient* evidence for his existence? In other words, has God done what he ought to do in making himself known to us? It would hardly be fair for God to judge the atheist if God has been slacking in the evidence department. So, even if we assume that God has provided some evidence, this leaves an important question to debate: Is this enough evidence?

My guess is that the atheist would say, "no." But I think this response rests upon a mistake. Next, I'll explain why I think God has provided enough evidence.

### **What Does 'Enough Evidence' Mean?**

So, we're assuming, and I think this is a very reasonable assumption, that there is some evidence for theism. But it is enough? Well, it depends on what we mean when we say, 'enough.' Why would I waste time wrangling over definitions? Because I think the disagreement here is semantic—we are disagreeing about a definition, not about the amount of evidence. I think atheists and theists (believers in God) have fairly similar notions about how much evidence we have. It's just that atheists don't think it is enough. But how do we determine how much is enough? Well, we must ask, "enough for what?" Let me illustrate.

Suppose I walk up and ask you, "Do you have enough money?" What would you say? You'd say, "Enough for what?" Your answer to my question would depend on my answer to yours. If I

said, “Enough to buy a plane.” You’d probably say, “No.” If I said, “Enough to buy some French fries,” you’d probably say “yes.”

So when someone asks whether there is “enough evidence,” we should reply by asking, “enough for what?” I think there are lots of answers to this question, but I only want to focus on two.

First, we might be asking whether there is enough evidence to *justify* belief in God for the average person. Second, we might be asking whether there is enough evidence to *produce* belief in God in the average person. What I want to do is explain both of these ideas, and then argue that when we talk about evidence for God, we should use the second sense of ‘enough’—enough to *produce* belief.

So I’ll start with the first sense—‘enough’ as ‘enough to justify belief for the average person.’

What does it mean to “justify a belief?” We believe all kinds of things, but not all of our beliefs are justified. Joe believes that the earth is round, but Joe also believes that aliens from Venus live in New Mexico. Joe has good reasons—evidence—for his belief that the earth is round.

That belief is justified. But Joe has no serious evidence for his belief about aliens. It is just a hunch he has. That belief is not justified. It takes a fair amount of evidence to justify a belief.

And lots of things can count as evidence, including other beliefs we have, logical reasoning, and experiences we have.

So, is there enough evidence to justify belief in God for the average person? This is where the debate has centered over the decades. It is hard to argue decisively one way or the other, assuming high evidential standards for justification. So, I’m willing, at this point, to say, “I’m not sure.” This leaves us in a stalemate.

But what about the other definition? On the second definition, ‘enough evidence’ means ‘enough to *produce* a belief in God for the average person.’ What does it mean to say that evidence *produces* a belief? It means that whenever you encounter evidence, there is an automatic process in your mind that takes that evidence and spits out a belief. Most of our beliefs start out this way. When you entered this room, you automatically, maybe unconsciously, formed beliefs like “There are other people here,” and “The lights are on.” Those beliefs were caused, in part, by evidence you gathered when you walked in—seeing other people, seeing the lights. It doesn’t take that much evidence to produce ordinary beliefs.

But is there enough evidence to produce *belief in God* in the average person? The answer to this is “yes.” This may surprise you, but let me explain. There has been quite a bit of research in recent years on how religious beliefs are formed in children. And the consensus seems to be that human beings are hard-wired for belief in God. In his book, *Born Believers*, psychologist Justin Barrett argues that “children naturally develop minds that encourage them to embrace belief in the god or gods of their culture.” Barrett goes on to cite study after study that show how children form beliefs in supernatural beings with almost no prompting from their parents or anyone else. He goes so far as to say that “Not believing in any sort of gods may prove to be a trait that is analogous to not being able to walk.”

What this means is that for the average person, it takes very little evidence to produce belief in God. There are exceptions, of course, but for a normally-functioning person in a normal environment, very little evidence is required to produce belief in God. So, if we define ‘enough’ as ‘enough to produce belief in the average person,’ then it seems that God *has* provided enough evidence.

Now, I have given two possible ways to define the idea of ‘enough evidence.’ On the first definition, where ‘enough’ means ‘enough to justify belief,’ it isn’t clear that God has given us enough evidence. But on the second definition, where ‘enough’ means ‘enough to produce belief,’ it seems that God has provided plenty of evidence, given that humans are hard-wired to believe in God.

The final step in this section is to argue that we should prefer the second definition over the first. My argument for this claim is simply that we should choose the definition of ‘enough’ that fits best with what we know about God’s own intentions. Go back to my money analogy. Suppose I came up to you and asked whether you had enough money, and suppose you said, “Sure.” Then I ask, “How much do you have?” You say, “\$2.” Then I say, “That isn’t enough! You should have brought more!” What would you say? I think you would say, “Hey, I only needed enough to buy a cup of coffee.” It would be silly for me to say, “No, you should have brought enough to buy me dinner!” The right definition of ‘enough’ here is the one that fits with your intentions—to buy a cup of coffee. If you had no intention of buying me dinner, then my definition is irrelevant.

The same is true with God. We need to ask, “What is God’s intention in providing evidence? What is his ultimate goal?” I think the most reasonable answer to this is that if God is providing evidence, then God wants people to believe that he exists, perhaps for some further goal, like having a personal relationship with every human. I don’t think he is overly concerned with giving us justified beliefs or satisfying our extremely high demands for evidence. That is something *we* worry about. So, if God’s goal is to produce belief in God, then it seems that ‘enough evidence’ should be understood as ‘enough to produce belief in God in the average

person.’ Furthermore, if this is the correct definition, and humans are hard-wired to believe in God, then we can affirm that God has provided enough evidence.

Now, a very reasonable question we might ask is, “If God has provided just the right amount of evidence, then why is it that there are so many atheists?” That is the subject of the next section.

### **Why Are There So Many Atheists?**

So, if it’s true that we have plenty of evidence, then how do we get so many atheists? Well, first of all, how many atheists are there? The highest estimate I found was from W.I.N.-Gallup International GLOBAL INDEX OF RELIGIOSITY AND ATHEISM, done in 2012. They estimate that 13% of the world’s population is atheist. Other sources, like Encyclopedia Britannica put the estimate much lower, at 2.3%. I would guess it is somewhere in between, since the poll respondents don’t include children. The 13% number is probably representative of adults. I’ll just assume a generous number of 10%.

So how is it that 10% of people don’t see or experience enough evidence to form a belief? Certainly it has nothing to do with intelligence. My own experience is that atheists tend to be brighter than the average religious person. Having said that, I think the reason they miss the evidence is because of something I’ll call cognitive malfunctioning. I think there are two kinds of cognitive malfunctioning going on: first, there is the kind that can’t be helped, and second, there is the kind that is our own fault.

So, what about this first kind—the kind that can’t be helped? Again, I refer to the research of Justin Barrett. Barrett thinks that “some people might have personal factors such as a biological

and psychological endowment that makes such belief extremely difficult.”<sup>1</sup> What he means here is that some people might be religiously-challenged—almost like a cognitive disability. Of course, I admit that some would consider this a good thing! Either way, there is research supporting this possibility that Barrett suggests. Psychologist Simon Baron-Cohen studies the variability in social cognitive abilities, and has controversially labeled the absence of strong social cognitive abilities “male-brainedness.”<sup>2</sup> Male-brainedness is primarily linked to high exposure to testosterone in the womb during fetal development. In its clinical extreme form, male-brainedness characterizes autism. Male-brained persons often have strengths in the sciences and mathematics, in systematizing and explaining how things work. But they are not exactly “people persons.” They tend to be weak in empathizing, in discerning others’ emotions and mental states. But Baron-Cohen makes clear that this is not necessarily a disability—male-brained people are often the highest achievers in many places, including the university.

Barrett and other psychologists suggest that the very things that cause the weak social cognitive skills among male-brained people may be the very the same things that cause a lack of belief in God. If this were true, you would then expect to find correlations between male-brainedness and atheism. Well, this is exactly what we do find. Obviously, men tend to be more male-brained than women, and atheists are five times more likely to be male. Secondly, there is a high percentage of male-brainedness among university faculty and researchers, and there is also an unusually high number of atheists in the university. So, if Barrett and other are right, then atheism may very well have neuro-biological roots, which would explain why many people don’t believe despite having sufficient evidence.

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<sup>1</sup> Barrett (2012), p. 203.

<sup>2</sup> Simon Baron-Cohen, “The Extreme Male Brain Theory of Autism,” *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 6 (2002): 248-254.



Now, recall that I mentioned *two* kinds of cognitive malfunctioning. The first is something that has its roots in fetal development, but the second kind is something that is rooted in human psychology and choice. There is a phenomena called ‘cognitive penetration’ that has generated quite a bit of discussion among scientists and philosophers recently. Cognitive penetration happens when your beliefs (or cognitive states) affect, or penetrate your perception of the world. In other words, you see what you want to see, rather than what is actually there. A classic case from science happened when 17<sup>th</sup> century biologists first looked at sperm cells under a primitive microscope. Prior to viewing the sperm cells, many believed that the embryo was fully formed in miniature inside the sperm cell. So, when they looked through the microscope, this is exactly what they reported seeing—tiny little human embryos in the sperm cells. Of course, they were completely wrong. But their perception was affected by what they already believed or wanted to believe. This is very similar to phenomena like *wishful thinking* and *confirmation bias*. So, we may sometimes see what isn’t there or fail to see what is there.

Atheists like Sigmund Freud have long accused theists of falling prey cognitive penetration. We see God in the stars and the sunset because we long for a father figure. But the Freud’s blade cuts both ways. Isn’t it possible that atheists are just as susceptible to cognitive penetration as religious people? Rather than seeing something that isn’t there, they fail to see something that is there. Like a person who fails to see the beauty or genius in the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, atheists miss seeing God in the world because they are already committed to atheism or simply don’t want it to be true. Philosopher Thomas Nagel, an atheist, admits to having such a bias. In his book, *The Last Word*, he writes

I want atheism to be true and am made uneasy by the fact that some of the most intelligent and well-informed people I know are religious believers. 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.<sup>3</sup>

Therefore, we should not be at all surprised that there are many atheists in the world, given the very plausible story I have offered about two ways we can miss the evidence for God. I should mention, as a side note, that I think atheists who suffer from the first kind of cognitive malfunctioning might not be held responsible by God for their atheism. But those who suffer from the second kind, cognitive penetration, probably would be responsible. But in either case, their failure to believe is not at all due to a lack of evidence or some failure on God's part.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, if there is a God, and he has provided us with some evidence of his existence, *and* I am right that very little evidence is needed to produce belief in the average person, then it is reasonable to say that the evidence we have is enough. God has done his job. It will not appear this way to a certain percentage of humans due to various kinds of cognitive malfunction regarding theistic belief, but rather than undermining theism, this is exactly what we should expect.

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas Nagel, "The Last Word", Oxford University Press: 1997