

**“Prove to Me That God Exists”:
Getting Clear on Atheism, Agnosticism, and a Few Other Matters
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After speaking to the Philomathean Society—a debate club—at Union College in Schenectady, New York, a student approached me and demanded: “Prove to me that God exists.”

I asked him, “What would you take as an acceptable level of proof?”

The student paused and eventually responded, “I guess I haven’t even thought about that.”

The conversation, which turned out to be cordial enough, died out shortly thereafter.

Usually, when skeptics ask us Christians for “proof,” they’re usually calling for “*scientific* proof” for God’s existence, objective moral values, the soul, or life after death. We’ve come to expect such challenges in an age of *scientism*—the belief that science, and thus “scientific proof,” can alone yield knowledge. Since the 9/11 attacks, this “enlightened” modern criterion for knowing has been reinforced by the “New Atheists”—Daniel Dennett, Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and (the late) Christopher Hitchens. Richard Dawkins, for example, writes: “Scientific beliefs are supported by evidence, and they get results. Myths and faiths are not and do not.”¹

Such critics assume that Christians and other theists have a special burden of proof to bear to show that God exists. All the while, atheists may be sitting back and assessing whatever the theist can come up with. And if nothing is forthcoming or if it’s not sufficiently strong evidence to their mind, then they typically think themselves properly justified in their rejection of God. But is that the proper protocol demanded by rationality and other appropriate considerations?

In response to such challenges, it is wise to sort out and define our terms. What do we mean by *science*? What is *knowledge*? What’s the difference between an *atheist* and an *agnostic*? We should also get clear on “the rules of engagement” so that we can fair-mindedly converse about such topics.

Science, Scientism, and Knowledge

First, let’s clear away some confusions about *science* and *knowledge*. To do so, we should distinguish between *science* and *scientism*. As Christian philosopher of science Del Ratzsch defines *science*, it is the attempted objective study of the natural world and natural phenomena whose theories and explanations don’t normally depart from the natural world.²

Now, some will quibble with the word “normally.” This, they suggest, “smuggles God into science.” But to think this is a mistake. To insist that all that happens in the *physical* world demands a *physical* explanation is question-begging—that is, assuming what one wants to prove. But if God exists and has created and designed the universe, it would be quite fitting for him to act directly in the world according to his good and wise purposes. What’s more, God’s acts in the world would in principle leave detectable traces of such activity on or in the physical world—whether the Big Bang, the universe’s fine-tuning, or miracles like turning water into wine. For example, Craig Keener’s two-volume book *Miracles* is work that provides massive

¹ *River Out of Eden: A Darwinian View of Life* (New York: BasicBooks, 1995), 33.

² Del Ratzsch, *Philosophy of Science* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 15.

documentation for these physical traces—for example, healings and resuscitations from death carried out in Jesus’ name. Keener mentions possessing the actual x-rays from before and immediately after a number of these healings.³ So while *most* things that happen in the physical world have physical explanations, to demand *only* physical explanations for any physical phenomena actually goes beyond science to the rigid demands of scientism that presupposes that the physical world is all there is (i.e., naturalism). In the interests of pursuing truth, shouldn’t we be looking for the *best* explanation for a physical event—whether natural or supernatural—and not necessarily the best *natural* explanation?

In the movie version of Dr. Seuss’s *Horton Hears a Who*, the kangaroo insists that Horton the elephant is wrong about life on a tiny speck of dust. Exasperated at Horton’s belief in such small persons, the kangaroo pontificates in a naturalistic sort of way: “If you can’t see, hear, or feel something, it doesn’t exist!” Scientism declares that we can only know through scientific observation.⁴ But notice: this is a *philosophical* assumption; it’s *not* the result of scientific observation or research. It is a statement *about* science, not a statement *of* science. But how does one actually *know* that science alone yields knowledge? Or to put it another way, *How can you scientifically prove that all knowledge must be scientifically provable?* The “always prove it scientifically” demand is a self-contradictory one.

Let’s shift things a bit to what *knowledge* itself is. Cutting through a good deal of debate, we can say that knowledge has three components: it is (a) a *belief* that is (b) *true* and (c) has *warrant* (or, others might say, *justification*): *warranted true belief*. Now, essential to knowledge is that a belief be *true*. So I can’t rightly say, “I *know* that the earth is flat” or “I *know* that circles are square.” You can *believe* false propositions or statements, but you can’t *know* them. *Truth* is bound up with *knowledge*. Furthermore, knowledge requires that a true belief have warrant—or something that turns a true belief into knowledge. To have an *accidentally* true belief isn’t knowledge. To have a lucky hunch that turns out to be true isn’t knowledge. Or let’s say you conclude that it’s 2:12 by looking at a clock in a store window; it turns out that you’re correct, but only *coincidentally*: in actuality, the clock *isn’t* working! The belief that it’s 2:12 in this case doesn’t count as knowledge either.

Now since the time of René Descartes (1596-1650), a highly-rigorous but pernicious definition of knowledge has come to infect the modern mind—namely, that *knowledge requires 100 percent certainty*.⁵ So if it’s “logically possible” that you could be wrong, then you don’t *really* know. So many people turn out to be so tentative about what can rightly be called “knowledge.” But following such a rigid, absolute standard is silliness. Indeed, no one but God could live up to it! But no credible epistemologist (a philosopher who specializes in the study of knowledge) accepts this “100 percent knowledge” myth. One major reason for that is this: *you can’t know with 100 percent certainty that knowledge requires 100 percent certainty*. Furthermore, we can truly know lots of things that don’t rise to this level of absolute confidence. For example, you know that a world independent of your mind exists—even though it’s logically possible it is just an illusion—*maya*, as the Advaita Vedanta Hindu would call it. So let’s say that

³ Craig Keener, *Miracles*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011). For further documented miracle accounts, see chapter 7 in J.P. Moreland, *Kingdom Triangle* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007).

⁴ Scientism’s *weaker* version says that science is the *best* way to know, but it is usually articulated in the *stronger* version.)

⁵ Descartes’ criteria for a belief-acceptance are “self-evident,” “incorrigible,” and “evident to the senses.” Of course, these criteria are not self-evident, incorrigible, nor evident to the senses.

this logical possibility bumps down the “certainty level” to 97 percent. Does this mean you can’t *really* know that the external world exists? Well, how does the “100 percenter” know that we can’t really know the world outside our minds exists? The fact is, we know a lot of things with confidence, even if not with complete certainty. Indeed, there would be precious little we could know if we followed that demanding standard.

When it comes to the knowledge of God’s existence, the theist doesn’t have to live up to Descartes’ absolute standards. The believer can have plenty of *good reasons* for belief in God—even if not absolute, mathematically-certain ones. A helpful way to make a reasoned case for God’s existence is to ask, *Which context makes the best sense of important features of the universe and of human existence?* For example, we are aware of the existence of consciousness, free will or a presumed personal responsibility, personhood, rationality, duties, and human value—not to mention the beginning, fine-tuning, and beauties of the universe. These are hardly surprising if a good, personal, conscious, rational, creative, powerful, and wise God exists. However, these phenomena are quite *startling* or *shocking* if they are the result of deterministic, valueless, non-conscious, unguided, non-rational material processes. We have every reason to think a naturalistic world would *not* yield these phenomena—though not so with theism—and many naturalists themselves register surprise and even astonishment that such features should appear in a materialistic, deterministic universe.⁶

Theism, Atheism, and Agnosticism

A number of years ago, I was speaking at an open forum at Worcester Polytechnic Institute (Massachusetts). After I completed my lecture, one student stood up and confidently proclaimed: “The reason I’m an atheist is that there aren’t any good reasons to believe in God.” I told him, “You should be an agnostic then. After all, it’s possible that God exists even if no good reasons for his existence are available to us.” I then proceeded to ask what kind of agnostic he was.

This brings us to our second set of terms to clarify—*theism*, *atheism*, and *agnosticism*—and we should also tackle the question of who bears the burden of proof in the face of these conflicting views.

No doubt about it, the *theist* makes a truth claim in asserting that *God exists*—a maximally great, worship-worthy being. So theist, who makes a claim to know something, should bear a burden of proof. How is this belief justified? But does this mean that the atheist and agnostic aren’t making a claim? This would be an incorrect assumption.

Let’s consider the *atheist* for a moment. Michael Scriven, a self-proclaimed atheist philosopher, has actually mislabeled himself. He insists: “we need not have a proof that God does not exist in order to justify atheism. Atheism is obligatory in the absence of any evidence

⁶ For more on this, see Paul Copan, “The Naturalists Are Declaring the Glory of God: Discovering Natural Theology in the Unlikeliest Places,” in *Philosophy and the Christian Worldview: Analysis, Assessment and Development*, eds. David Werther & Mark D. Linville (New York: Continuum, 2012), 50-70; Paul Copan and Paul K. Moser, *The Rationality of Belief* (London: Routledge, 2003); Paul Copan, *Loving Wisdom: Christian Philosophy of Religion* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2007); William Lane Craig and J.P. Moreland, eds., *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2012).

for God's existence."⁷ He adds that the concept of *God* and the notion of *Santa Claus* equally share the status of being "unreal" because there is no evidence for either of them.⁸

There are at least five problems with Scriven's claims. The first is that *he has incorrectly defined atheism*. The late prominent philosopher Antony Flew—an atheist who came to believe in God toward the end of his life—defined atheism as "rejection of belief in God."⁹ Then there's the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (1967), which defines an "atheist" as one who "maintains that there is no God, that is, that the sentence 'God exists' expresses a *false* proposition."¹⁰ Atheist philosopher, Julian Baggini, defines atheism as "the belief that there is no God or gods."¹¹ The fact is, the standard definition of atheism is the *rejection* of belief in God/gods. The implication is clear: if atheism makes the knowledge claim that *God does not exist*, this stance is in just as much need of justification as the theist's claim, *God exists*. Both bear the burden of proof since both make claims.

Second, *Scriven's description doesn't allow for any distinction between atheism and agnosticism*. So what is the difference? The *agnostic doesn't know* whether God exists or not. In fact, she may believe that evidence for God is *completely* lacking. But let's say that this agnosticism is due to lack of *any* evidence for God whatsoever. But then wouldn't this mean that agnosticism is *identical* to atheism? That, however, would be a confusion of categories. Yet no such confusion exists if we take atheism to be *disbelief* in God—not simply *unbelief*, which would properly describe the agnostic. Of course, an agnostic might say that *some* evidence for God does exist, but that the some evidence against God prevents her from belief in God—let's say it's equally weighted at 50-50. But this latter matter is beside the point here. Scriven's definition of atheism doesn't hold.

Third, *the absence of evidence isn't evidence of absence*. As I noted earlier, if evidence for God is lacking, the more logical conclusion to draw would be agnosticism. After all, it's *possible* that God exist even if evidence for God is somehow absent. In this case, we should *suspend* belief, which would amount to mere *unbelief*, but that different from *disbelief* (i.e., atheism). Why think we're obligated to *disbelieve*?¹²

Fourth, *what if belief in God is "properly basic," even without supporting evidence?* Some Christian philosophers like Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff have argued that we commonly believe many things *without evidence or arguments*—for example, that other minds exist or that the universe is older than fifteen minutes. Why couldn't we say the same about God's existence—that it is "properly basic"? In other words, when our minds are functioning properly and directed toward the truth, then convincing or firm belief about God's existence could simply naturally arise out of this experience. These philosophers—they're called "Reformed epistemologists"—don't deny that there is evidence for God's existence—only that evidence isn't required for belief in God to be rational.

⁷ Michael Scriven, *Primary Philosophy* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), 102.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 103.

⁹ Antony Flew, *Dictionary of Philosophy* (New York: Macmillan, 1979), 28.

¹⁰ Paul Edwards, ed., "Atheism," *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 1:175.

¹¹ Julian Baggini, *Atheism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 3.

¹² For a discussion, see Alvin Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," in Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff, eds., *Faith and Rationality* (Notre Dame: University Press, 1983), 27.

Now, we could claim that belief in other minds or a universe older than fifteen minutes is just part of our commonsense, everyday experience *and thus is itself evidence*. So such basic experiences serve as evidence, even if this evidence hasn't been produced through rock-solid formal arguments. But if these Reformed epistemologists are correct, then we can speak of belief in God without argument or evidence.

Fifth, *to claim God and Santa Claus are on the same level is a flawed comparison*. We have strong evidence that Santa Claus does *not* exist. We know where Christmas gifts come from. We know that humans—let alone, elves—don't live at the North Pole. We can be pretty confident that a human Santa, if he existed, would be mortal rather than ageless and undying. This is evidence *against* Santa. By contrast, we *do* have evidence for God's existence—the beginning and fine-tuning of the universe, consciousness, rationality, beauty, human dignity and worth, free will. The evidence for God is on a different level altogether.

In light of these points, we should bring in another important distinction. There are two kinds of agnostic: (a) the *ordinary* agnostic, who says, "I would really like to know whether God exists or not, but I don't have enough to go on": and (b) the *ornery* (!) agnostic, who says, "I don't know whether God exists or not—and *you* can't know either." The latter—the hard-nosed or militant agnostic—makes the sweeping claim that *no one* can know God exists. Notice that the militant agnostic is also making a knowledge claim. Again, it stands in just as much need of justification as that of the atheist's or the theist's respective claims. While this brand of agnostic may not know God exists, why insist that *no one else* can know? What if God reveals himself in a powerful, though private, way to someone—say, at a burning bush or in a vision in her bedroom? Even if the evidence for such encounters isn't publicly accessible to the hard-nosed agnostic, the theist persuaded about God's existence through such encounters is warranted in that belief, and the agnostic couldn't fairly rule out such possibilities.

As mentioned earlier, evidence for God's existence is widely available through creation, conscience, rationality, and human experience. What's more, the biblical faith—unlike other traditional religions—is checkable; it opens itself up to public scrutiny. If, for example, Christ hasn't been raised from the dead, the Christian faith would be false, Paul argues in 1 Corinthians 15. Indeed, the Scriptures routinely emphasize the role of eyewitnesses, the importance of public signs and wonders to prompt belief (Jn. 20:30-31), and other historical evidences for all to consider.

While we can have *rational* reasons for belief in God, let us not forget ample *practical* or *existential* reasons for considering God. That is, the fulfillment of our deepest human longings is found in God. This is a theistic support the skeptic frequently overlooks. Our longing for identity, security, and significance, our desire for immortality and hope beyond the grave, our seeking forgiveness of our guilt and the removal of shame, or longing for cosmic justice—all of these yearnings are fulfilled by God in Christ, who has placed eternity in our hearts (Ecc. 3:11). If we are made for a filial relationship with God, why should such longings be discounted? Actually, we would be wise to consider these reasons—in addition to rational reasons—since we bear God's image, which goes beyond human rational experience to a broad array of considerations.

Faith and Evidence, Knowledge, and Ignorance

Where then does this leave the *ordinary* agnostic? Here we must make further distinctions. "Is the ordinary agnostic *innocent* in his ignorance of God, or is his a *culpable* ignorance?" When I

was in Moscow back in 2002, I took a picture of the “changing of the guard” at the tomb of the unknown soldier at the Kremlin wall. To do so, I stepped on the grass, and, knowing sufficient Russian, I saw no posted signs prohibiting my doing so. But a security guard whisked me away from the scene, insisting that I had done something terribly wrong—and probably hoping for a bribe. After asking me about my formal education, he exclaimed, “You’re a philosopher, and you do don’t know you shouldn’t step on the grass?” This truly was a case of *innocent* ignorance.

Now what if I’m speeding down the highway but not paying attention to the signs? If the highway patrol stops me, I couldn’t say, “I’m innocent; I didn’t see the sign.” My ignorance would be *culpable* since I have an obligation to pay attention to speed limit signs. I’m afraid many people who claim ignorance about God’s existence are more like *apatheists*, who *don’t care* whether God exists. Sadly, they devote their lives to all kinds of pursuits—Facebook, movie-watching, luxury cruises, golfing—but do not lift a finger to contemplate the most significant question of all, namely, God’s existence. Why should God reveal himself to the lazy and apathetic?

And why should he reveal himself to the proud and arrogant, who demand that God “prove himself” through divine pyrotechnics (Mt. 16:4)? Would that really produce genuine conversion and love for God? After all, the Israelites had plenty of signs—the ten plagues, the parted Red Sea, manna every morning, the constant presence of a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night. Yet most of the Israelites died in unbelief after displays of idolatry, rebellion, and murmuring (1 Cor. 10:1-13). Evidence—even a person’s rising from the dead—doesn’t guarantee trust in God (Lk. 16:31). God is interested in more than our justified true belief that he exists. Even the demons are solid monotheists (Jas. 2:19). The more pressing question is: Are we willing to know and be known by God, to submit to God as the Cosmic Authority?

To seek God with all our heart is fundamental to God’s revealing himself to us (Jer. 29:13). As the philosopher Blaise Pascal put it,

willing to appear openly to those who seek Him with all their heart, and to be hidden from those who flee from Him with all their heart, He so regulates the knowledge of Himself that He has given signs of Himself, visible to those who seek Him, and not to those who seek Him not. There is enough light for those who only desire to see, and enough obscurity for those who have a contrary disposition.¹³

Beyond this, God may have certain reasons for veiling himself—to encourage greater trust and perseverance, deepened character, and so on. He reveals himself on his own terms.

Summary Thoughts

In matters theistic, atheistic, and agnostic, we should be careful to define our terms. This includes an awareness of what counts for knowledge and ignorance. We’ve seen that *atheism*—the belief that God does not exist—is not the default position. The atheist, theist, and hard-nosed agnostic each make a claim, and this claim must be justified rather than assumed. Each bears the burden of proof—not just the theist. And even the ordinary agnostic may simply be an “apatheist” and thus would be culpably ignorant. Evidence is available and God is willing to reveal himself, but evidence—without humility of heart—will not yield the genuine trust and commitment God desires.

¹³ *Pensées* (Eng. *Thoughts*), #430.

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