

Because God Exists

Like many new college students, I was hungry for truth. My freshman year exposed me to countless new ideas, from politics to science, economics, and religion. It was an almost overwhelming cacophony, and I hardly knew where to start. But I did know one thing: I wanted the truth. I didn't just want to believe whatever my parents or professors fed me, nor was I fine just accepting whatever made me feel good. I wanted the truth.

The best reason to accept any belief system is because it's true. So that's a good place to start in this exploration—determining whether the claims of Catholicism are true. But to arrive there we need to walk through several steps. We can't just presume God exists or that Christianity is true and then quickly show how Catholicism is the right expression. That wouldn't be fair. There are several stages before that, so let's start at the very beginning. Let's start with the question of God.

One or two hundred years ago, in most communities throughout the world, the vast majority of people would have taken for granted a belief in God or a higher being.

Nearly all people were religious in one way or another. But that's not true today. Over the last decade, the Western world has experienced a surge of skepticism. This has been fueled in large part by the so-called new atheists, a polemical group of scientists and philosophers who, emboldened by the Enlightenment-era skeptics who came before them, paint religion as violent, irrational, and even dangerous. These fiery doubters include bestselling authors Richard Dawkins (*The God Delusion*), Sam Harris (*Letter to a Christian Nation*), and the late Christopher Hitchens (*God Is Not Great*). Their characteristically dismissive and snarky rhetoric has gained traction, especially among young people.

But polemics are one thing; truth, another. Oftentimes, rhetoric is just a facade covering up shallow arguments. So we should push forward past the zingers and slogans and focus on the single question that really matters in this first stage: Does God exist? Catholics and other theists say yes. Atheists say no. Both of them can't be right. So how do we determine the answer? Let's examine the evidence.

EVIDENCE FOR GOD

Someone once asked the great atheist philosopher Bertrand Russell what he would say if he found himself standing before God on judgment day and God asked him, "Why didn't you believe in me?" Russell replied, "I would say, 'Not enough evidence, God! Not enough evidence!'"²

I run a website where millions of Catholics and atheists engage in dialogue, and I must say that's the most common

refrain I hear: “Show me the evidence!” And I’m totally fine with that demand. It means the person is unwilling to accept beliefs without solid proof or support, and that’s commendable. But I usually ask for some clarification: What do you mean when you say you want *evidence*? In the realm of science, evidence refers to observable phenomena, in the natural world, that confirm or challenge a hypothesis. This sort of evidence is inevitably something you can see, hear, touch, taste, or smell. In other words, it’s empirical. And to be sure, this sort of evidence, in the context of science, is the right kind and has led to remarkable discoveries.

However, it’s easy to forget that sensory evidence isn’t the *only* type of evidence in our world. This is a crucially important fact. Sensory evidence is irrelevant, for example, when we consider questions of morality, meaning, or existence. You can’t hear morality; you can’t see meaning; and there’s no way to touch existence. Likewise, sensory evidence is not the best type of evidence when considering God. God is, by definition and whether you believe he exists or not, immaterial and transcendent. That means he is not composed of physical matter, nor does he exist somewhere in our cosmos, perhaps beyond our galaxy; he exists beyond all space and time. And since that’s the case, we would not expect to find direct, physical evidence of his existence in our world.

It’s not just that we *haven’t yet* found such evidence, though it may exist. It’s that such evidence is impossible, even in principle. Does that mean it’s impossible to show God exists? Not necessarily. It simply means that science

isn't the right tool, nor is scientific evidence the right sort of evidence, to settle the God question. Just as a metal detector isn't the right instrument to settle moral questions, we need other tools to probe the existence of God.

One such tool is philosophy. Philosophy is concerned with some of life's biggest issues, from beauty to morality, existence, and free will. It allows us to explore realities that can't be detected through our senses and is therefore a much more useful tool in the quest for God.

So let's return to our original question. Is there any evidence for God? Many people certainly think so, but it's a different type of evidence than we may be used to. Instead of physical, sensory evidence, these thinkers point to arguments and logical deductions to prove their case. They've identified no less than twenty arguments for God, arguments that range from the clear and simple to the super complex.³ Some of the arguments appeal to emotion or history; others depend on reason and experience.

We can approach the God question from many angles, and there's no one best way. But when I began seriously studying God, I did find some of the arguments stronger than others. In fact, three arguments stuck out to me, and I thought the evidence supporting them was overwhelming.

Before we dive into a few of these twenty arguments, though, I should add one more note. If terms such as *arguments* or *evidence* rub you the wrong way, it may be helpful to instead consider these as clues. Think of them as clues that converge and point to a common conclusion, much as road signs collectively guide you to a specific destination.

(Road signs don't *prove* the destination exists but show clear the way.) That's exactly what these arguments and evidence are: signposts to God. So let's look at each of them.

Clue 1: The Universe

We might as well start with the largest and most spectacular evidence that God exists, namely, the universe itself. The universe encompasses all energy, matter, space, and time. Despite its unfathomable size, it's easy to take the universe for granted. After all, we live in it and are surrounded by it every day. But in our most reflective moments, when faced with its staggering size and scope, we're led to wonder, Where did all this come from? Why does the universe exist? Why is there something rather than nothing?

From ancient times, people have posited some god or gods as the answer. This isn't just a Christian or Jewish idea. Early Greek thinkers such as Aristotle devised proofs for God based on the universe's existence. These proofs have been refined over the centuries to become simpler and clearer. Let's take a look at one popular formulation, known as the Kalam argument. Its name comes from the medieval Islamic theologian who first formulated it.

The Kalam argument is deceptively simple and runs like this:

Premise 1: Everything that begins to exist has
a cause.

Premise 2: The universe began to exist.

Conclusion: The universe has a cause.

The first premise is common sense and almost nobody denies it. It means that nothing just springs into existence randomly and without cause. For if that were the case, then our world would be a wild spree of things popping into existence like magic—only it would be worse than magic, since with magic you at least have a magician who pulls rabbits out of hats!⁴ But in a world that violated this first premise, you'd get rabbits popping in and out of being without even magicians or hats. Very few sane people believe the world works this way, and so pretty much all of us agree with this first premise.

The next premise is more controversial, or at least it used to be. For centuries, most scientists believed that the universe was eternal—it had always existed in the past. This conveniently avoided a universal beginning, which would imply a creation moment. But over the last hundred years, new discoveries from the big bang to quantum cosmology have produced a stunning reversal on this point. The scientific consensus today is that the universe had a beginning, and it occurred roughly 13.7 billion years ago. How sure are we about this? In the words of cosmologist Alexander Vilenkin, speaking at a colloquium for Stephen Hawking's seventieth birthday, "All the evidence we have says that the universe had a beginning."⁵ It's extremely rare for a scientist to speak with this measure of conclusiveness. It's not just that *some* of the evidence points to a beginning, or even the *majority* of evidence, but that *all* of the evidence points this way. Vilenkin elaborated, "It is said that an argument is what convinces reasonable men and a proof is what it takes to convince even an unreasonable man. With the proof now

in place, cosmologists can no longer hide behind the possibility of a past-eternal universe. There is no escape: they have to face the problem of a cosmic beginning.”⁶ (There are also strong philosophical reasons to think the universe must have had a beginning, but we won’t get into those here.)

So the first two premises are generally accepted by common people and scientists alike. But if that’s the case, the conclusion logically follows. If everything that begins to exist has a cause, and the universe began to exist, then it must have had a cause. This is required by logic.

But that leads us to natural follow-up questions: What is that cause? What’s it like? What could have been responsible for causing the whole universe? Well, for starters, it couldn’t have been anything *within* the universe, or even the universe itself, since things can’t cause themselves to exist. (Just as your arm couldn’t cause *you* to come into existence; before you existed, there was no arm!) This means the cause must be something beyond the universe, beyond all matter, energy, space, and time. In other words, it must be transcendent (beyond the universe), immaterial (beyond matter and space), and eternal (beyond time), and to create something so massively complex as the universe, it must have been tremendously powerful and intelligent.

A transcendent, immaterial, eternal, supremely powerful, intelligent cause of the universe—what does that sound like to you? There are only a few possibilities. Perhaps the cause was something abstract, such as the laws of physics, numbers, or mathematical functions. But those won’t work since, to use a bit of technical language, they’re causally

inert. They either *describe* reality or *represent* abstract concepts, but they don't *cause* things to happen. For instance, the law of gravity *describes* the forces between objects, such as a ball falling to the earth, but the law itself doesn't *cause* the ball to fall. It only describes what happens. It's not the law but the earth's force that is actually responsible for the falling ball. Likewise, the number seven is a helpful mathematical concept, but it doesn't *cause* anything to happen and certainly can't bring something into existence.

There's only one plausible option then, only one solution that accounts for all the scientific and philosophical evidence and makes sense of the universe's existence. That would be God.

Now admittedly, this proof for God is abstract. It doesn't generate the warm, personal faith you might derive from prayer or other religious experiences. And it doesn't prove the fullness of God, especially attributes that we could only know if God revealed them to us, such as that God is love or is a Trinity of persons. It doesn't show that Catholicism, Judaism, or Mormonism is true.

But it does present a substantial slice of God, a slice far too thick for any atheist to accept. It proves the truth of theism and thus helps us move to the next stage in our exploration.

Clue 2: Morality

Before getting to that stage, though, let's look at another clue to God. The universe is probably the most overwhelming line of evidence. But another clue strikes closer to home: morality.

What is right and wrong? Have you ever considered that question? It's one that has beguiled humans since our earliest days, and we've seen all sorts of answers. Some say morality is whatever brings the most happiness to the most people. Others claim we act rightly when we treat others the way we want to be treated. Still others claim might makes right, that morality is just shaped by whoever is in charge, whoever has the power.

But when we consider morality as a clue pointing toward God, we're not so much interested in *which* moral framework is correct but in the simple fact that almost all people agree there exists *some* moral standard that we're obliged to follow.

If you need proof of this, just look at young children. Even toddlers understand the idea of rights. They shout, "That's mine!" or get upset when brothers and sisters are unfairly rewarded. There's a basic moral logic that seems innate.

For another example, try cutting ahead in a long line. Brace yourself for wrath that even Dante didn't fathom: "Hey, what do you think you're doing? You can't skip! It's wrong! We've been waiting here!"

We all experience an innate sense that some acts are just right and some acts are just wrong—even if we subtly disagree about *which* acts fall into each category.

Yet that's not all. We also experience moral duties. It's not just that we see certain actions as right or wrong; it's that we feel compelled to do the right actions and avoid the wrong ones. Many people call this our conscience. We feel as if an invisible voice compels us to act in certain good

ways, even if they go against our inclinations, and even if they're socially unpopular. For instance, something compels us not to punch the man who insults our family or friends even though every urge in our body says we should. Something beyond us, or within us but distinct from us, constantly insists how we *ought* to behave.

Most of us agree with these two facts, that we experience moral values and moral duties. We have years of experience, years of evidence to back them up. But there's one more interesting facet about these values and duties: they often seem *objective*. They originate in something beyond human feeling and opinion. For instance, it is an objective fact that we should not torture children. This is not just our personal opinion, and it's not a moral fashion that changes over time, that is true today but perhaps false tomorrow. It's true at all times, for all people, without exception. This doesn't mean a few people, or even a few cultures, won't be mistaken about that fact. But in those cases, we don't just say they have a different preference, as if the child torturers just prefer chocolate instead of vanilla. No, we say they are wrong, emphatically wrong, and morally insane. (In fact, it's only because some acts *are* objectively wrong that we're able to look back through history and pass moral judgment, to say with confidence that human sacrifice and ethnic genocide were wrong even though some cultures happily embraced them at the time. The fact of their wrongness remained even though people were mistaken about the fact.)

So we all have moral values, we all experience moral duties via our conscience, and we know that at least some

of these values and duties are objective. They aren't just personal preferences, such as our favorite type of music or ice cream, but are real objective features of reality.

But if all of that is true, we must ask ourselves: Where do these objective moral facts come from? What grounds them? If there's a moral law that binds us, what or who gives it that authority? Where's the lawgiver behind the law?

Once again, there are only a few possibilities. Either these moral values and duties come from nature, from us humans, or they have a transcendent source. They couldn't have come from nature, since as the famous atheist David Hume noted, nature only shows us what *is*; it doesn't tell us how something *ought* to behave (this is the famous "is-ought" problem in philosophy). For instance, it's a fact that if I offer to give my wife a break and take care of our children by myself for a day, it will make her happy. But that doesn't necessarily mean I *ought* to do that. The only way to get from the *is* of that fact to the *ought* is by smuggling in a hidden premise, namely, that I ought to do what makes my wife happy, a fact I certainly agree with but can't derive from nature alone. Nature, by itself, can never tell us what we *ought* to do.

But what about evolution? Couldn't evolution ground our morality? Unfortunately, no, for the same reason. Evolution may show which moral behaviors lead to survival (another *is*), but it doesn't bind us to act in a certain way (an *ought*). We're under no obligation to behave in ways that lead to survival, unless we happen to choose that for our goal, a goal that others are under no obligation to share.