

Denying God, Denying Reality

Why we don't need evidence for God's Existence

By Hamza Andreas Tzortzis

Does God exist? This is the question I've constantly discussed with Atheist academics. The discussion is often put forward in different guises but the premise is always the same; does God exist and what evidence is there to support this belief?

In fact, I would argue that we don't need any evidence for God's existence. So the question itself needs debating. It shouldn't actually be "does God exist?", but rather "what reasons do we have to reject His existence?"

Now, don't get me wrong, I believe we have many good arguments which support a belief in God. The point I am raising here, however, is that we don't require any evidence for His existence: God is an axiomatic belief. In other words, God's existence is self-evidently true. Also known as a 'basic belief' in the language of philosophy.

The idea of self-evident truths are accepted by all. Take science for example: science takes the world's reality as a self-evident truth; it believes that the world is real. In other words, the physical world is separate and external from our minds and our thoughts.

So you may be thinking, 'I believe that the real world is real, as I can touch and feel it. I believe the world is real because other people also say that the world is as tangible to them as it is to me.'

However, this doesn't prove anything. Touching and feeling something doesn't prove that what you touch and feel is external to your mind. The thinking and feeling could simply be happening by the workings of your brain. Consider this; maybe your brain is in a jar on the Moon. There is an alien who has placed probes in it, who is making you think and feel what you're feeling right now.

You don't actually have substantial evidence for the reality of the world you experience. Evidence based on experience is unreliable as the experience could simply be produced in the brain. Evidence based on philosophy or complex logic is also a product of the mind. The external world may have no real existence apart from what is going on in your skull.

On reading this you may demand proof, proof that the real world is external to the brain... but we don't have any proof. Actually, we don't need it. That's why we call the belief in the real world an axiom, a self-evident truth or a basic belief. Therefore, I would argue, that rejecting God's existence is equivalent to rejecting that the world is real because they are both self-evident truths.

This is not a type of special pleading for God because there are a myriad of other self-evident truths and axioms that we believe in. These include:

- The existence of other minds
- The existence of objective moral values
- The existence of logical truths
- The validity of our reasoning
- The law of causality

Self-evident truths, axioms and basic beliefs are cross cultural in that they are not culturally bound. They are also innate in that they are not acquired via any form of information transfer, and they are also foundational. What is meant by foundational is that they provide the basis for a coherent worldview. These aspects of self-evident truths will be explained further while addressing the key objections to this argument.

Objection #1: What about the great pumpkin, or the spaghetti monster?

There are some objections to this argument. Some atheists and sceptics will say: ‘What about the great pumpkin, or the spaghetti monster?’ They highlight that if God is a self-evident truth, if God is axiomatic, then why can’t the spaghetti monster, or the great pumpkin be self-evident truths as well?

There are three ways of dealing with this false contention:

1. A Cross Cultural Belief: The ‘spaghetti monster’ and the ‘great pumpkin’ are not natural tendencies.[1] There is not a broad natural tendency to believe in a ‘spaghetti monster’ or ‘great pumpkin’. These are not natural tendencies, they are culturally bound. For example, if I believe in a spaghetti monster, I would have to have been brought up in a culture in which you are taught about spaghetti and monsters. However, the idea of God, the basic underlying idea of a creator, of a supernatural cause for the universe, is cross-cultural. It is not contingent on culture but transcends it, just like the belief in causality and the existence of other minds.

2. An Innate Belief: Properly basic beliefs, axiomatic beliefs, and self-evident truths, do not require information transfer. For me to understand what a spaghetti monster is, I require information to be transferred to me. For example, I require knowledge of western cuisine and Italian culture. But when it comes to the idea of God’s existence as the creator of the universe, you do not require any information transfer, whether from culture, or education. This is why sociologists and anthropologists argue that even if atheist children were stranded on a desert island, they would come to believe that something created the desert island.[2]

This is very critical to understand because we frequently hear ‘God is no different than believing in the spaghetti monster’. This is not true. If you understand self-evident truths, axiomatic and basic beliefs then you would see that they do not require information transfer. The basic concept of God does not require information transfer. The idea that monsters exist, or even that spaghetti exists, requires information transfer. Therefore the spaghetti monster is not a self-evident truth.

3. A Foundational Belief: The third point is that basic and axiomatic beliefs are foundational: they provide a basis for a coherent world view. They answer questions and facilitate knowledge. For example, God’s existence, explains conscious emergence, the fact that we have consciousness

within a material world.[3] It answers the questions for which we have no answer, like the question of language. Currently, evolutionary paradigms can't explain the development of language.[4] It also explains the existence of objective moral truths and offers a foundation for explaining why things happen.

Let's apply this to another self-evident truth: the validity of our reasoning. Trusting our minds and the very fact that we can reason to the truth is a basic belief. If we did not hold such a belief then how could we trust our minds? How could we reason to the truth? How could we understand the universe and ourselves? These questions are indicative of the foundational nature of the validity of our reasoning.

God's existence provides a foundation for a coherent world view, facilitates knowledge and answers key fundamental questions. A belief in the spaghetti monster or the belief in the great pumpkin, only provides the foundation for a few laughs.

Objection #2: Wasn't the belief in a flat earth once self evidently true?

Another objection is the belief that the earth was flat. This was once a self-evident truth, it was a basic belief. As science has progressed we have found that this is not the case. We now know that the world is round. I don't want to get into a big philosophical discussion about basic beliefs or self-evident truths and if they can be changed by future scientific evidence but what I will say is this problem is not applicable to God's existence. God, by definition, is a non-observed being and is outside of His universe. For example, if I made a chair, I obviously remain distinct and disjointed from the chair. I am outside of the chair. Likewise, the creator is distinct and external to the universe.[5] Therefore, the creator cannot be observed. We can't observe what's outside of our universe. So, from this perspective, the objection doesn't apply: it is only applicable to things which can be observed.

Science is based on a theory of knowledge called Empiricism. Empiricism stems from the idea that you can only have knowledge of something from experience based on direct or indirect observation.[6] An empirical rejection of God is impossible as it requires evidence from observation to form conclusions. To deny something that cannot be observed, by using the theory of knowledge that can only form conclusions based on observations, is absurd. The scientific world can never deny God's existence because science can only deal with things that you can observe. This is why the philosopher of science Elliot Sober, in his essay Empiricism asserts that science is limited to questions which observation can explain,

“At any moment scientists are limited by the observations they have at hand...the limitation is that science is forced to restrict its attention to problems that observations can solve.”[7]

God is not observed. How can you use the observed world to deny that which cannot be observed? It's impossible. This is why science can never directly reject God's existence. It can only do one of two things:

1. Stay silent on the matter
2. Suggest some evidence that can be used to infer His existence

A common reply to this answer includes ‘if it cannot be observed, you cannot believe it’. This is a misplaced assertion because observations do not encompass all phenomena. There are many things we believe in that we cannot observe. The Philosopher John Cottingham exposes this problem in his book *Rationalism*:

“But what about ‘all water at a given atmospheric pressure boils at 100 degrees Celsius’? Since this statement has the form of an unrestricted universal generalization, it follows that no finite number of observations can conclusively establish its truth. An additional and perhaps even more worrying problem is that when we reach the higher levels of science...we tend to encounter structures and entities that are not observable in any straightforward sense. Atoms, molecules, electrons, photons and the like are highly complex theoretical constructs...here we seem to be very far removed from the world of direct ‘empirical observation’...”[8]

Objection #3: The belief in God is not universal

A final key objection is that since self-evident truths must be universal, the existence of millions of atheists worldwide suggests that the God’s existence is not self-evident. There are two reasons why this objection is false:

1. Self-evident truths do not have to be universal: Self-evident truths, basic beliefs or axioms can be individualised and do not have to have universal appeal. Take for example your mother; you have a basic belief that the lady that you call your mother is the one that gave birth to you. You do not have a home DNA test kit and accept the fact that she is your mother because for you it is self-evidently true. However, to someone else, the lady that you call your mother could be your aunty, step-mother or adopted guardian. Basic beliefs and self-evident truths do not have to be universal. They can be individualised.

2. The belief in God is universal: In spite of the number of atheists in the world, the belief in God is universal. A universal belief does not mean every single person on the planet must believe in it. A cross cultural consensus is enough evidence to substantiate the claim that God’s existence is a universal claim. Evidently there are more theists than atheists in the world, and this has always been the case from the beginning of recorded history.

In order for atheists and sceptics to effectively challenge this thesis, they will have to explain that God is not a self-evident truth. They will have to explain that God is not a foundational belief, is culturally bound and is only acquired via information transfer.

Our Innate Nature (fitrah)

This whole idea of basic beliefs, of self-evident truths concerning God’s existence, is in line with the Islamic theological tradition concerning the fitrah. The fitrah is an Arabic word that essentially means the natural state, the innate nature, or the innate disposition of the human being. This innate nature acknowledges God and wants to worship Him.[9] As the Prophet Muhammad (upon whom be peace) said in an authentic prophetic tradition, “that every child is born in a state of fitrah. Then his parents make him a Jew, a Christian or a Magian...”[10]

The concept of the fitrah has been a topic of scholarly discussion in the Islamic intellectual tradition. The 14th century theologian and polymath Ibn Taymiyyah explained that “affirmation of a Maker is firmly-rooted in the hearts of all men...it is from the binding necessities of their creation...”[11] The 12th century scholar Al-Raghib al-Asfahani similarly asserts that knowledge of God “is firmly-rooted in the soul”.[12]

In spite of this, the fitrah can be ‘veiled’ or ‘spoiled’ by external influences. These influences, as indicated by the above Prophetic tradition, can include parenting, society and peer pressure. These influences can cloud the fitrah and prevent it from acknowledging the truth. In this light Ibn Taymiyyah argues that when the natural state of someone is “altered” that person may need “other evidences” for God’s existence:

“Affirmation of a Creator and His perfection is innate and necessary with respect to one whose innate disposition remains intact, even though alongside such an affirmation it has many other evidences for it as well, and often when the innate disposition is altered...many people may be in need of such other evidences.”[13]

These other evidences can include rational arguments. Ibn Taymiyyah asserts that the originated being “itself knows through clear reason that it has an originator”.[14] However these rational arguments must conform to Islamic theology and not adopt premises that contradict it. From this perspective, it is important to know that belief in God is not inferred from some type of inductive, deductive, philosophical or scientific evidence. Instead, this type of evidence acts as a trigger to wake up the fitrah, the innate natural disposition to believe in God. In addition to this, a key principle is that the Qur’anic arguments ‘unveil’ or ‘uncloud’ the fitrah. These Quranic arguments include encouraging reflection, pondering, and introspection:

“Thus do We explain in detail the signs for a people who give thought.”
The Qur’an 10:24

“Indeed in that is a sign for a people who give thought.”
The Qur’an 16:69

“Or were they created by nothing? Or were they the creators (of themselves)? Or did they create heavens and earth? Rather, they are not certain.”
The Qur’an 52:35-36

Evidence Supporting the Fitrah

Interestingly, the Islamic concept of the fitrah is supported by psychological, sociological and anthropological evidence. Below are some brief examples:

- Psychological evidence: the academic Olivera Petrovich conducted some studies concerning the psychology of the human being and God’s existence. She concludes that the belief in a non-anthropomorphic God is the natural state of a human being. Atheism is a learned psychology.[15] Theism is our natural state.

“The possibility that some religious beliefs are universal (e.g., basic belief in a non-anthropomorphic God as creator of the natural world) seems to have a stronger empirical foundation than could be inferred from religious texts. Some of the initial findings of research into early religious understanding are consistent with other areas of developmental research which suggest that there are cognitive universals in a number of domains of human knowledge...”[16]

- Sociological evidence: Take for instance, Prof Justin Barrett. Professor Barrett’s research in his book *Born believers: the science of children’s religious belief* looked at the behaviour and claims of children. He concluded that the children believed in what he calls “natural religion”. This is the idea that there is a personal being that created the entire universe. That ‘being’ cannot be human – it must be divine, supernatural.

“Scientific research on children’s developing minds and supernatural beliefs suggests that children normally and rapidly acquire minds that facilitate belief in supernatural agents. Particularly in the first year after birth, children distinguish between agents and non-agents, understanding agents as able to move themselves in purposeful ways to pursue goals. They are keen to find agency around them, even given scant evidence. Not long after their first birthday, babies appear to understand that agents, but not natural forces or ordinary objects, can create order out of disorder... This tendency to see function and purpose, plus an understanding that purpose and order come from minded beings, makes children likely to see natural phenomena as intentionally created. Who is the Creator? Children know people are not good candidates. It must have been a god... children are born believers of what I call natural religion...”[17]

- Anthropological evidence: Consider the atheism of communist Russia and communist China. They still had signs of what you would call a worship instinct, a sanctification instinct, awe of a greater being, which relates to the fitrah. For example their big statues of Stalin and Lenin were almost revered. When you look at different cultures you can see this worship instinct coming through. This instinct even manifests itself in Atheist cultures.

In summary, to deny God is like denying the real world is actually real. We previously discussed self-evident truths and that the reality of our world is one of them, although we have no evidence for it. This is why if you deny God, Who is also a self-evident truth, you are denying reality itself.

And this was confirmed via the teachings of our beloved Prophet (upon whom peace) over 1400 years ago.

“Can there be doubt about Allah, Creator of the heavens and earth?”
The Qur’an 14:10

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Footnotes

[1] Is Belief in God Properly Basic. Alvin Plantinga. *Noûs*. Vol. 15, No. 1, 1981 A. P. A. Western Division Meetings (Mar., 1981), pp. 41-51. You can find the journal online here: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2215239>.

- [2] BBC Radio 4 Today, 24 November 2008
http://news.bbc.co.uk/today/hi/today/newsid_7745000/7745514.stm. Accessed 17 December 2014.
- [3] For more on this please read “Consciousness and the New Scientist Magazine”, Hamza Andreas Tzortzis, 2014. <http://www.iera.org/research/essays-articles/consciousness-and-the-new-scientist-magazine-reflections-on-false-materialist-assumptions-hamza-tzortzis>. Accessed 17 December 2014.
- [4] “This highlights an important and difficult challenge facing the study of language evolution: the need for cooperation between different disciplines and between researchers working on different aspects of the problem. Without this cooperation a satisfactory account of the evolution of human language, and therefore of human language itself, is likely to be elusive.” ([Prefinal Draft] Kirby, S. (2007). The evolution of language. In Dunbar, R. and Barrett, L., editors, Oxford Handbook of Evolutionary Psychology, pp. 669–681. Oxford University Press.)
- [5] “To Ibn Taymiyya, the term ‘created’ implies something distinct and disjoined from God...” (Perpetual Creativity in the Perfection of God: Ibn Taymiyya’s Hadith Commentary on God’s Creation of this World. Jon Hoover. Journal of Islamic Studies 15:3 (2004) pp. 296.)
- [6] Elliot Sober “Empiricism” in The Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Science. Edited by Stathis Psillos and Martin Curd. 2010, p. 129.
- [7] Ibid, pp. 137-138.
- [8] John Cottingham. Rationalism. Paladin. 1984, pp. 109 -110.
- [9] Ibn Qayyim argued that the fitrah is truly an inborn predisposition to acknowledge Allah, the Oneness of Allah and the religion of Islam (al-Asqalani, Fathul Bari, p. 198).
- [10] Sahih Muslim
- [11] Dar’ al-Ta’arud 8/482
- [12] al-Dharee’ah p. 199
- [13] Majmu’ al-Fatawa 6/73
- [14] Nubuwwat, 266
- [15] Infants ‘have natural belief in God’. The Age National (Australia)
<http://www.theage.com.au/national/infants-have-natural-belief-in-god-20080725-313b.html>.
Accessed 17 December 2014.
- [16] Key Psychological Issues in the Study of Religion. Olivera Petrovich. psihologija, 2007, Vol. 40 (3), str. 351-363
- [17] Justin L. Barrett. Born Believers: The Science of Children’s Religious Belief. Free Press. 2012, pp. 35 – 36.