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“An insightful and enthralling read highlighting the atheist armory for the non-existence of god.”

Dr. Adam Hamlin,
Charles Sturt University, Australia

“This book will make God very, very angry.”

Phillip Adams,
Australian broadcaster, *Late Night Live*

**HOW TO PROVE GOD
DOES NOT EXIST**

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**The Complete Guide to
Validating Atheism**

Trevor Treharne



Universal-Publishers
Boca Raton

*How to Prove God Does Not Exist:
The Complete Guide to Validating Atheism*

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For Jen

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CONTENTS

Preface 15

I. The Atheist Stance 21

- *Isn't atheism a religion too?*
- *Doesn't atheism require faith too?*
Isn't it better to believe in God and him not exist, than not believe in him and discover he does?
- *Without comprehensive proof of God's nonexistence, surely being an agnostic is the only truly logical option?*
- *But you can't prove the nonexistence of God can you?*
- *What if you're wrong?*
- *Why do you care about religion anyway? You exert such effort towards a god that you do not think exists.*
- *You bemoan religion being forced upon you, but aren't you forcing your atheism on us?*
- *What does the atheist position offer people? How has it improved your life? Why will it improve others' lives?*
- *It must be a sad existence for you atheists, living your life knowing it has no purpose or meaning.*
- *Atheists can be just as fundamentalist and militant.*
- *There are no atheists in foxholes.*
- *The Bible may dictate that homosexuality is a perversion, but considering the inability of gays to reproduce – an integral part of atheists' motivation in life – then surely atheists think homosexuals are unnatural too?*
- *Shall we have this conversation again on your death-bed?*
- *Is there any part of you, considering you could be proven wrong, that fears Hell?*
- *Don't children deserve to learn about religion themselves and make up their own minds? Are you not indoctrinating them into atheism?*
- *What do you consider the probability of God's existence?*
- *Atheists must be doubly scared of dying, thinking that is the end for them?*
- *Isn't it possible to be both religious and not believe in the "supernatural creator" you suggest is a theist hallmark?*
- *Is the absence of proof, proof of absence?*
- *When you voice your atheist viewpoints in the direction of the religious – what do you hope to achieve?*

HOW TO PROVE GOD DOES NOT EXIST

- *Will religion ever completely die out?*
- *Do you think that all religious activity is harmful, or just the fundamentalist variety?*
- *What would it take for you to believe in God?*
- *Why do atheists have to be so arrogant and hostile?*

2. **Morality**..... 95

- *Why would you bother acting morally without a god?*
- *The existence of objective morality is proof of God.*
- *What about Hitler, Pol Pot and Stalin? Weren't they all atheists?*
- *You ask for the separation of state and church, but look at Cuba, China and Russia and their record of secular human decency.*
- *A prime example of religious morality is our pro-life stance on abortion.*

3. **Science**..... 115

- *Religious belief is constant, but science changes its view constantly. How can you be so sure about a vacillating approach?*
- *Order is exhibited in nature. Order requires a designer.*
- *While there are two possible theories – Evolution and Intelligent Design – shouldn't both be taught in schools?*
- *Evolution is just a theory.*
- *How can something as complex as the eye just have evolved?*
- *If we have no soul, why do we feel conscious of ourselves?*
- *Science can be just as evil. What about the atomic bomb?*
- *Is carbon dating truly reliable?*
- *How can something come from nothing and why is there something rather than nothing?*
- *Everything that begins to exist has a cause. The universe began to exist, so there must have been a cause?*
- *Science doesn't know everything.*
- *How can you criticize religion's perceived far-fetched notions, when the Big Bang suggests nothing smashing into nothing and formed the world?*
- *Everything created has a creator – the watch has a watchmaker – we must have been made by someone or something?*
- *How come the world around us is a perfect environment for us to exist – fine-tuned for our inhabitancy? Physics has demonstrated that a designer is required.*
- *What of the probability that life can originate from just natural causes?*

4. Religious Validations 163

- *Would the world really be a better place without religion?*
- *Some people need religion.*
- *Religion assists people suffering from great hardship.*
- *Can the positive influence of religion be quantified and measured against the negatives? Does religion do more good than bad?*
- *Humanity has an innate desire to worship.*
- *It's called faith for a reason!*
- *The Ten Commandments have underpinned civilization for thousands of years. Where would we be without them?*
- *Jesus/Muhammad existed as an historical figure.*
- *Other biblical stories aside, you can't deny the overwhelming evidence to validate the resurrection of Jesus?*
- *Religion has numerous charitable causes compared with atheism. Would an atheist-filled world be a less charitable one?*
- *We don't believe in a man in the sky with a white beard anymore, are atheists out of touch with religious views?*
- *Proving God is like proving love. You can't explain love can you? Would you ask your child for proof they love you?*
- *Billions of people believe in God.*
- *This country was built on my religion's values.*
- *Much of the scriptures are symbolic and written for the time.*
- *I've had a personal experience with God.*
- *What of all the fulfilled prophecies of my scripture?*

5. Arguments for Atheism 229

- *The argument from Lack of Evidence*
- *The argument from Human Nature*
- *The argument from Evil*
- *The argument from Silence and Personal Revelation*
- *The argument from Religious Diversity*

6. Closing Considerations 263

Notes and References 303

Index 315

PREFACE

Children are fine purveyors of truth. Through often discourteously direct questions, they negate the need for social graces in the pursuit of truth and knowledge. While writing this book, I flew domestically within my current country of residency, Australia. While queuing to pass security, we were asked to forfeit oversized liquid products and bag the smaller permitted versions – a common custom in this age of potential airborne terrorism. Ahead of me were a mother and her child. The average four-year-old asks around 400 questions a day. This pre-pubescent was getting their fill at this strange ritual of discarding or bagging liquid and toiletries. The child asked why their innocent bottle of water was not allowed on a flight where his mother would be demanding ample consumption of the drab liquid. The mother's notion that it was simply not allowed on the flight failed to satisfy this probing young mind. The incredulous youth pressed, "But why?" The mother snapped: "Just because!" Most children muster a longer range of "But whys?" before reaching this dead-end, but such was the sensitive nature of the questioning, the mother buckled early. The truth is not one for innocent children's ears. Yet this bizarre ritual has become so ordinary, a regular traveler seldom blinks an eye.

It was as a "But why?" -driven child that the nonexistence of God dawned on me. While my parents were indifferent to religion, but would culturally classify themselves as Church of England, my primary school was focused on indoctrination through its highly religious heritage and then headmaster. This headmaster even wrote his own song for the school to croon, with the chorus: "God first, others second, self last." The schooling centered on being told how God had created me and a world perfectly fashioned for my inhabitancy. One particularly hot summer's day (rare considering my English childhood) before being permitted playing rights in the garden, my mother did her maternal duty by smothering me in an overly thick layer

of sun block. “Buy why?” I asked. “Because the sun would burn your skin otherwise.” I gave a similarly puzzled look as the child at the airport. “Why has God made the planet so hot that it burns me just to be outside?” Further into my childhood indoctrination I would be informed that “sin” justified such worldly imperfections. The idea then – that my innocent skin deserved a fierce scalding based on the foolhardy actions of others prior – struck me as petty, unjust, illogical and transparently man-made. In adulthood I have felt no need to amend that childhood evaluation.

Why write this book? It joins an increasingly crowded atheist book marketplace after all. For thousands of years atheists have been considered everything from a dangerous minority, an excuse to live a life of vice or simply a misled belief system. In the last decade, the rise of “New Atheism” has placed religion, and the polar views of atheism, on the table of critical discourse in a manner previously unwitnessed. I could not think of a healthier progression, even if it is overdue. Which leads to the *raison d'être* for these pages. An *American Sociological Review* paper, “Atheists As ‘Other’: Moral Boundaries and Cultural Membership in American Society”, proves the most comprehensive and least sensationalist aggregation of views towards nonbelievers available. The paper found that “atheists are less likely to be accepted, publicly and privately, than any others from a long list of ethnic, religious, and other minority groups.” This includes the majority of Americans saying they would not vote for an atheist presidential candidate. While in rankings of ‘This Group Does Not At All Agree with My Vision of American Society’ and ‘I Would Disprove if My Child Wanted to Marry a Member of This Group’, atheists topped both lists by a safe distance, ahead of Muslims and Homosexuals in the former category, and Muslims and African Americans in the latter. The paper found that “this distrust of atheists is driven by religious predictors, social location, and broader value orientations... increasing acceptance of religious diversity does not extend to the nonreligious.” The paper concludes that even while the rejection of Muslims spiked in post-9/11 Amer-

ica, rejection of atheists was still higher. Respondents of the report were not believed to be reacting to “actual atheists they had encountered, but were responding to ‘the atheist’ as a boundary-marking cultural category.” There was deemed to be a lack of exposure to such diversity. Ignorance breeds detestation, and while such discrimination thrives, understanding how to articulate the atheist view and erode such bigotry remains a chief responsibility. In the five years since the publication of that *American Sociological Review* paper, I have been researching and writing a book to arm atheists with the knowledge and confidence to buck such an unsavory trend. This is that book.

I wanted to empower and invigorate an atheist and agnostic community to be able to defend and validate the noble view of disbelief. Atheists, regardless of their historical tag of a dangerous minority, should be proud. They are part of the most important minority group in all of history. And by offering slices of information on how to articulate the nonbeliever stance, I hope they will be able to puff their heathen chests out with more confidence. There will inevitably be the languid accusation that this book is intended as a conversion guide to recruit atheists. It isn't. If precisely no-one turns to atheism because of my words then I will be no less satisfied. There is no question that an atheist should not be able to satisfactorily answer with conviction. It is my aim by this book's final page turn that the basics we would expect from such discussions will be best served.

Much of the book's core focuses on answering the most common questions that atheists field. I aggregated well over 1,000 questions from theists for this work; my final selection was based on the most frequent and challenging of these. However, there was a criterion for those more universal questions. I have avoided scripture quotes as the sole basis for questions – the more informed theists are aware they carry no weight in such a discussion. Researching this book I've been quoted Psalms 14-1 (“The fool says in his heart, There is no God”) more times than I care to remember. I will admit one thing – it is a conversation stopper, not for its stunning depth,

but for its futile diversion. Isolated scripture quotations are not the only posers I have omitted, there were several questions whose inclusion would have done theists, some of which are commendable crafters of arguments, a disservice.

There can be no talk of the inclusion of any ‘straw men’ – every question is authentic and widespread amongst theists. Any disagreeing theists must readjust their perspective of the level of questioning from fellow theists. In terms of ‘going over old ground’, by including arguments that have long been answered by atheists and omitted by theists, the same rationale applies. For example, before undertaking this project, I wrongly assumed the watchmaker argument from 1802 had been so heavily criticized it had vanished. The truth was, despite Charles Darwin ending the ‘argument from design’ over 150 years ago and Richard Dawkins ripping the analogy apart in his 1986 book *The Blind Watchmaker*, it remains one of the most popular views from my research. In terms of Intelligent Design questions, it ranked number one.

This book incorporates varied quotations and direct references, sometimes at length. Perhaps such an approach requires a brief justification. On the most basic level, if someone has said something better than you before, there is nothing wrong with quoting them verbatim. The book is ambitiously broad, because the discussion at hand is likewise. By craft I’m a journalist. As such, aggregating information is the basis of my working life. For example, how the eye evolved is an important aspect of explaining evolution to theists, if only by virtue of the regularity of the question. I’ve deferred to the world’s finest evolutionary scientists to construct an answer all can use – there would be no other acceptable approach. It is also healthy to understand how atheists for centuries have protected their position. Quoting them at length here should double as an introduction to their work on the topic. I hope to have mustered a smorgasbord of the best minds, alongside my personal views, to offer something new to the debate. Work on this topic without such supporting quotations and citations flirts with the type of opinion that floods the internet. Nothing

wrong with that, but the printed word must extend beyond such rudimentary soap-boxing.

I would summarize why this book has been written in two key points:

- a) There is no query of atheism or deconstruction of theistic views that cannot be articulated fully by the nonbeliever. The explanation of how to answer both of these sides of the argument will promote atheism reaching the level of respect it should command.
- b) Atheists can, and should, be more strident in justifying their own stance rather than purely toiling with the fallacies of belief. There are several strong arguments *for* atheism and they should be advocated.

Forgive too the slightly borderline abecedarian introductory questions that are answered in the opening stages of The Atheist Stance section. Sometimes it is necessary to lay the basic foundations of knowledge before we can present those aspects in more depth. The opening four chapters are the building blocks for the final, and most important, chapter which will form the basis for what I advocate above all else in point *b* above. The foundation chapters will satisfy the first book aim above (*a*). It is structured in the untraditional flow of headed questions and corresponding answers as I wanted to emphasize a structure where atheists have compartmentalized how to reply to each of the most common theist questions of atheism, morality, science and justifications of their own religion. You may be well read on atheistic literature; this may be the first book you've read, or you may be a theist. No matter. As the conversation of atheism grows even louder, a guide to navigating this discourse from the atheist viewpoint is justified.

If by the final page, I achieve nothing more than promoting the juvenile "but why?" in the face of religion, I will be satisfied.

I

THE ATHEIST STANCE

HOW TO PROVE GOD DOES NOT EXIST

Before we start on our journey through various atheist misconceptions and approaches, it is prudent to highlight what we mean by an atheist. Not because I doubt most readers would know, but because we need a contemporary understanding if we are to successfully frame the discussion today. Carl Sagan suggested:

Atheism is more than just the knowledge that gods do not exist, and that religion is either a mistake or a fraud. Atheism is an attitude, a frame of mind that looks at the world objectively, fearlessly, always trying to understand all things as a part of nature.

I will take this opportunity to highlight the most contemporary designation of atheism I have encountered – one that provided a tougher challenge for the theist, and more liberal offering from the atheist.

Atheism is the acceptance that there is no credible scientific or factually reliable evidence for the existence of a god, gods or the supernatural.

The Atheist Foundation of Australia provides this rejuvenated definition of a disbelief in gods, which seems to correctly stress the evidential factors behind atheism. Many theists still favor an argument from ignorance, claiming that (and more focus will be applied to these in due course) “nothing cannot come from nothing” and “how do you explain the origins of the universe?” as these are front-foot questions from a theist who should be back-footed by the requirement to verify their god. As George H. Smith explained:

Atheism has become so enshrouded with myths and misconceptions that many supposed critiques of atheism are notable for their complete irrelevancy. Some religious critics prefer to attack the unpopular ideas associated with atheism rather than face the challenge of

atheism directly. Indeed, it is not uncommon to find entire books with the expressed intent of demolishing atheism, but which fail to discuss such basic issues as why one should believe in a god at all.¹

Our original definition offers the theist no escape route and allows us to focus on the more commendable arguments and evidence. You may accuse this of a diluted attempt to fall short of a more Positive Atheism which asserts “there is no God”, but I would suggest this is a satisfactory demonstration of being intellectually honest towards both the possibility of god and the current lack of evidence for gods. I might not be an atheist forever. I will be based on the current evidence though.

For centuries atheists have been pressed to elucidate their denunciation of god. As we do not have the answers ourselves, should we even be asking questions? Diminutive justification is needed to not believe in god. Atheism is the extension of an overarching philosophy and approach to life from which a disbelief in gods naturally flows. While not dogmatic, atheists are too like-minded in a broad spectrum of topics to ignore. For example, how many actively homophobic atheists are there? In actively, I suggest extending beyond finding the topic “uncomfortable” and actually vigorously protesting against gay marriage. Unless you have a scripture which suggests you should be doing so, not many. How many atheists are against the morning after pill? Unless scripture informs you that life begins at the exact moment of conception, you would have no reason to enforce such a rigid view. A respect for science, equality and rationality are not traits of atheism. They are the traits of individuals who find themselves as resulting atheists.

Sam Harris, the neuroscientist with superbly cutting logic, suggests in *The End of Faith*:

In fact, “atheism” is a term that should not even exist. No one ever needs to identify himself as a “non-astrologer” or a “non-chemist.” We do not have words for people who doubt that Elvis is still alive or

that aliens have traversed the galaxy only to molest ranchers and their cattle. Atheism is nothing more than the noises reasonable people make in the presence of unjustified religious beliefs.²

Much discussion fetters on the tag nonbelievers should adopt. Atheist remains my preferred term despite its perceived negative connotations. ‘Brights’, while not an unjustified attempted relabeling, falls into the unwarranted intellectual supremacy category (while I take the point that the term ‘gay’ does not suggest all heterosexual people are unhappy). Labels such as ‘rationalist’ and ‘freethinker’ are fine, while ‘skeptic’ (though valid in relation to religion) does create the problem of associating you with a delusional category of people who are skeptical of anything, including climate change, the moon landing, and if the US government or Jews were behind 9/11. To momentarily digress, most conspiracy theories are half-baked conjectures based on a series of speculative ‘but answer me this’ points and deficient hard evidence. Moon landing hoax accusations follow suit. Take one enduring argument, “but they haven’t gone back have they?” Yes, they did actually – a further five times before 1972, including Apollo 17 which captured the simply amazing Blue Marble picture of earth. Even if they had not returned, I visited Russia once, but have never returned. Does that prove I did not visit Russia the first time? Details of the thousands of people who worked on the moon landing, but have never come forward to verify any crack-pot conspiracy theory, and the established moon rock samples, are all ignored. To return to topic, if you submerge yourself exclusively in your deeply-held convictions and fail to research the counter-arguments, then you are destined to live a life of mistaken direction. Reading a conspiracy theory book is the perfect way for a total cretin to gather enough mildly intellectually-sounding information to bore their dinner party guests for 10 minutes. As Carl Sagan said: “It pays to keep an open mind, but not so open your brains fall out.” The more contemporary understanding of atheism I have cited seems far more satisfac-

tory than any attempted relabeling – the term atheist is fine, perhaps the definition, and people’s attitude towards it, needed modernizing.

Isn’t atheism a religion too?

Calling atheism a religion is like calling bald a hair color.

Don Hirschberg

Clarke Adams felt that if atheism is a religion, then health is a disease. A.C. Grayling suggests that atheism is to religion what not collecting stamps is to stamp collecting. Comedian Ricky Gervais goes down a similar route, comparing atheism to having your main hobby as not going on skiing holidays. I’d add that the Emperor in Hans Christian Andersen’s delightful 1837 short story was dressed head-to-toe in the latest atheist burqa.

There is no middle ground or debate. As two plus two isn’t five, atheism isn’t a religion. The notion of atheism as a religion is a lazy rebuff and one devoid of an understanding of the definitions of both religion and atheism. Let’s start with the basic dictionary descriptions:

Religion: A set of beliefs concerning the cause, nature, and purpose of the universe, especially when considered as the creation of a superhuman agency or agencies, usually involving devotional and ritual observances, and often containing a moral code governing the conduct of human affairs.

Atheism: Belief that there is no God.

The former seemingly has a plethora of vaguely vacillating definitions, many of which are unsatisfactory for the array of guises that religions worldwide assume. The key word is “superhuman”, or supernatural. As for a “cause, nature, and purpose of the universe”, a creator, and the worship of them, is a condensed equal. As touched on in the definition of an atheist, I am far more satisfied by the acceptance of insufficient evi-