THE CASE AGAINST THEISM

Reginald Williams

Many people claim that you can't prove or disprove God's existence. But why would anybody think you could? What's such a proof or disproof supposed to look like?

Should we follow the criminal courts and demand that twelve people agree that God's existence is or is not beyond a reasonable doubt? Should we expect a valid deductive argument with true premises and the conclusion 'God exists' or 'God does not exist'? Does proof require direct physical evidence: a sense modality or a broader, mystical form of experience by which God is perceptible? Might God's existence be necessary to explain and predict natural phenomena as subatomic particles are?

I consider the whole enterprise of proving and disproving God's existence a red herring. Debates over God's existence take us out of the realm of proof and disproof, as do debates about souls, angels, and demons. Attempts to debunk belief in such entities, however, merit serious attention.

Feuerbach, Nietzsche, Freud, and others have offered a different reason to deny God's existence. The basic idea is that people's tendency to believe in God is not best explained by God's actually existing. Rather, debunkers contend, most people are likely to believe that God exists even if God doesn't; and this is because people have a deep-seated need to believe that good things exist when in fact they don't. This need is empirically verifiable. Psychologists have long known that children, for instance, will invent a friend or parent when they lack one, believing wholeheartedly, but falsely, that their friend or parent exists.

Given this fact of human nature, debunkers ask, what's more likely: that those who first came to believe in God

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ascertained an eternal cosmic truth – that God exists – or that they needed to believe that God exists when in fact God doesn't?

Nietzsche's analysis of the historical and psycho-social roots of religion bolsters the latter claim, for early theists were destitute, were enslaved, and had generally horrible lives, with strong needs to believe that something good exists beyond their experience. Atheism, however, is not subject to such a debunking.

To debunk atheism, we would need psycho-social evidence that humans have a tendency to deny the existence of something good and helpful to them when the item exists. We would need to identify a real boon to humanity whose existence humans consistently deny. But humans don't seem to operate this way.

Humans *are* prone to *denial*. That is, we are inclined to deny the existence of real threats to us – murderers, snakes, viruses, failure, etc. In addition, some people believe in harms to them that don't exist. But the latter is pathological, not a healthy coping mechanism like humans' need to believe that someone loves them.

We don't see people consistently denying the existence of something that is real and good and helps them cope with their lives, as we'd need to see in order to debunk atheism. We don't see people needing to believe that a boon to them doesn't exist when in fact it does, as we see people needing to believe that a boon exists when in fact it doesn't. There is thus good reason to endorse atheism over theism – not a proof, of course, but the best reason anyone should expect.

Reginald Williams, Ph.D., is Professor and Chair of Philosophy at Bakersfield College. rwilliam@bakersfield college.edu

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