

Whether God Exists By Paul Harrison

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Introduction

The question whether God exists is not settled by saying that all philosophers reject the supernatural or that biblical statements function as proof for everyone. Philosophers include theists, atheists, agnostics, and thinkers who suspend judgment, while religions differ in their concepts of God. Paul Harrison's discussion raises several familiar considerations: the origin and order of the universe, human spiritual desire, moral life, suffering, religious violence, and personal experience. These considerations are important, but they must be expressed as arguments whose assumptions and limits can be examined. No single observation forces every rational person to accept or reject God. A balanced analysis therefore asks what each argument tries to establish, how critics respond, and whether the evidence supports certainty, probability, faith, or continued uncertainty (Harrison; Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy).

Clarifying the Concept of God

Before evaluating evidence, the word "God" must be clarified. Classical monotheism commonly understands God as a necessary, eternal, nonphysical, perfectly powerful, knowledgeable, and good reality who creates or sustains everything else. Other traditions describe the divine differently, and an argument for a first cause does not automatically prove every attribute of the biblical God. Likewise, evidence against one concept of divine action may not disprove all religious conceptions.

Philosophical debate often proceeds in stages: whether there is an ultimate explanation, whether it is personal or intelligent, whether it is morally perfect, and whether a particular revelation is credible. Keeping these stages distinct prevents a common error in which a limited conclusion is presented as proof of an entire theology (Swinburne; Oppy).

The Cosmological Argument

Cosmological arguments begin from contingency, causation, change, or the existence of the universe. One version asks why anything exists rather than nothing and argues that contingent beings require an explanation in a necessary reality. Another reasons that a chain of dependent causes cannot explain itself and must ultimately rest on a first cause. The argument can make belief in an ultimate ground intellectually serious, especially if the universe appears unable to provide a complete explanation of its own existence. Critics reply that causal principles learned within the universe may not apply to the universe as a whole, that an infinite explanatory structure may be possible, or that reality may simply contain a brute fact. Even if a necessary cause is established, further reasoning is

needed to identify it with God (Aquinas; Pruss; Oppy).

Does Everything Need a Cause?

The popular statement that “everything has a cause” creates an immediate objection: what caused God? More careful cosmological arguments do not claim that every reality has a cause. They claim that things which begin, change, or exist contingently require explanation, whereas a necessary being would exist without dependence. The dispute then concerns whether necessary existence is coherent and whether it belongs to a divine mind rather than to laws, mathematical structure, a multiverse, or reality itself. Calling God necessary cannot function merely as a definition designed to end questioning. The concept must explain more than competing accounts and avoid contradictions. The argument therefore shifts the debate from a simple first event to the deeper issue of explanatory dependence (Leibniz; Rowe).

Order, Fine-Tuning, and Design

Design arguments point to order, intelligibility, biological complexity, or physical constants compatible with life. Modern fine-tuning arguments do not normally claim that every biological feature could not evolve. They ask why fundamental conditions fall within ranges that permit complex structures and conscious life. Theism offers one possible explanation: an intelligent creator intended a life-permitting universe. Critics propose selection effects, deeper physical necessity, multiple universes, or caution about probability when only one universe is observed. They also note that most of the cosmos is hostile to human life. Fine-tuning may increase the plausibility of design for some reasoners, but it is not a direct observation of a designer and depends on contested comparisons among explanations (Collins; Manson).

Science and the God Question

Scientific explanations of cosmic and biological development do not by themselves prove atheism, because a believer can regard natural laws as the means through which creation operates. Conversely, gaps in present scientific knowledge should not be treated as positive proof of divine intervention. A “God of the gaps” argument becomes weaker when the gap closes and confuses unexplained processes with evidence for a particular agent. Science investigates testable patterns in nature; philosophical and theological questions ask what those patterns ultimately mean and whether they require a transcendent explanation. Conflict arises when religious claims make empirical assertions that contradict strong evidence or when naturalism is presented as a scientific finding rather than a philosophical interpretation of science (Plantinga; Draper).

Moral Arguments

Moral arguments claim that objective duties, human dignity, or the authority of conscience are better explained by God than by impersonal nature. If some actions are truly wrong regardless of opinion, a theist may argue that moral reality reflects a perfectly good source. Critics answer that morality can arise from rational consistency, flourishing, empathy, social cooperation, or objective normative truths that do not depend on a divine commander. The Euthyphro problem asks whether actions are good because God commands them or God commands them because they are independently good. Contemporary theists often reply that goodness is grounded in God's nature rather than arbitrary commands. The debate remains about explanation, not whether atheists can behave morally; clearly they can (Adams; Rachels).

Religious Experience

People report experiences of divine presence, answered prayer, unity, forgiveness, awe, or transformation. For the person who has such an experience, it may provide strong personal justification for belief, just as ordinary perception normally justifies beliefs about the world. The diversity of religious experiences complicates the inference because different traditions interpret similar experiences in incompatible ways. Psychology and neuroscience can describe conditions associated with mystical states, but identifying a mechanism does not automatically show that the experience is false; ordinary perception also has neural mechanisms. Critics emphasize suggestion, culture, coincidence, and confirmation bias. Religious experience is therefore significant evidence for some individuals while remaining difficult to use as publicly decisive proof (Alston; James).

Scripture, Prophecy, and Revelation

Harrison appeals to biblical knowledge and fulfilled prophecy. Such arguments depend on textual interpretation, dating, genre, transmission, and the specificity of the alleged prediction. A poetic passage that resembles a later event may be interpreted retrospectively, whereas a clear prediction documented before an unlikely event would carry greater evidential weight. Claims about ancient descriptions of the earth or nature must also be read in their historical literary context rather than converted into modern scientific statements. Scripture can be authoritative within a faith tradition and can provide testimony about communities' experiences of God. For outsiders, however, its divine authority cannot be assumed in the premise when that authority is the conclusion being argued (Harrison; Ehrman).

The Problem of Evil

The existence of intense suffering is the most influential argument against a perfectly powerful, knowledgeable, and good God. Human cruelty, disease, disasters, animal suffering, and apparently pointless deaths raise the question why such a God would permit the world to contain so much harm. The logical problem claims that God and evil are incompatible, while evidential versions argue that the quantity and distribution of suffering make God less probable. Theists respond through free-will defenses, soul-making, stable natural laws, limited human understanding, and hope for ultimate justice. These responses may explain some suffering, but critics question whether they account for extreme, involuntary, or nonhuman pain. The problem does not simply show that people dislike religion; it challenges the coherence and probability of classical theism (Mackie; Rowe).

Divine Hiddenness

If a loving God seeks relationship with persons, why do sincere and capable people remain unconvinced despite openness to belief? The hiddenness argument focuses not on hostile rejection but on nonresistant nonbelief. A perfectly loving God, the argument states, would make relationship possible by ensuring that such people could reasonably believe. Theists respond that unmistakable awareness might interfere with freedom, that spiritual growth requires epistemic distance, or that God may be present in ways not recognized. Critics answer that knowing God exists would not force love or obedience, just as knowing another person exists does not determine the relationship. Hiddenness therefore places pressure on claims that God both desires universal relationship and remains difficult to detect (Schellenberg).

Religion's Harms and Benefits

Wars, coercion, abuse, forced marriage, discrimination, and terrorism have been justified in religious language. These facts challenge claims that religion reliably produces moral improvement, but they do not logically disprove God. Human beings also use nationalism, race, empire, and secular ideology to authorize violence. Religious communities have supported hospitals, abolition, education, charity, reconciliation, art, and resistance to oppression, while also participating in injustice. The relevant lesson is that belief does not guarantee virtue and that institutions require accountability. An argument about God's existence should not confuse the behavior of believers with direct evidence about metaphysical reality, although widespread religious harm may affect the credibility of claims that a tradition uniquely transforms character (Hitchens; Taylor).

Pragmatic Reasons for Belief

Some arguments defend belief because it gives hope, meaning, community, or motivation rather than because it proves that God exists. Pascal's wager reasons that belief may have overwhelming expected benefit if eternal stakes are possible. Critics object that genuine belief cannot simply be chosen for reward, that many religions present competing possibilities, and that self-interested faith may lack integrity. Social usefulness is also not the same as truth; a comforting belief can be false, and an uncomfortable belief can be true. Practical consequences still matter when a person chooses how to live under uncertainty, but they should be identified honestly as pragmatic reasons rather than conclusive evidence (Pascal; Jordan).

Naturalism and Atheism

Atheists often argue that natural explanations are sufficient and that adding God does not improve prediction or understanding. The success of science, religious disagreement, evil, and hiddenness can support a naturalistic worldview in which minds and values emerge within the universe. Yet naturalism also faces philosophical questions about why laws exist, why the universe is intelligible, how consciousness arises, and whether objective reasons or values fit a purely physical account. These are research and philosophical problems, not automatic evidence for God. Atheism is strongest when it offers a coherent total explanation rather than merely pointing to the failures of particular religious claims. Theism is strongest when it explains evidence without relying on gaps, circular authority, or immunity from criticism (Oppy; Draper).

Faith, Evidence, and Intellectual Humility

Faith can mean trust based on experience and testimony, commitment beyond what evidence compels, or belief without sufficient evidence. These meanings should not be collapsed. Many religious philosophers regard faith and reason as partners: arguments may make belief reasonable without producing certainty, while practices and communities shape interpretation. Critics insist that extraordinary claims require proportionate evidence and that inherited belief should remain revisable. Intellectual humility is appropriate on both sides because the question concerns ultimate reality, evidence is interpreted through broader worldviews, and confident people disagree. Humility does not require treating every claim as equally credible. It requires stating what an argument actually establishes, acknowledging objections, and avoiding stereotypes about philosophers, believers, or atheists.

Conclusion

The existence of God remains a live philosophical question because several kinds of evidence point in different directions. Cosmological, fine-tuning, moral, experiential, and revelatory arguments can make theism reasonable, but none moves from its premises to the full God of a particular religion without further debate. Evil, hiddenness, religious diversity, and successful natural explanations create substantial challenges, though they do not deductively prove that no divine reality exists. Paul Harrison's preference for belief can be preserved as a personal conclusion, but it should not be supported by claiming that all philosophers are naturalists or that scripture proves itself. The most responsible conclusion is that theism, atheism, and agnosticism must be evaluated through cumulative reasoning, personal experience, and honest engagement with unresolved objections.

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