

How Do We Know God Exists?

Natural State

Imagine one evening you receive a call from David, one of your old school friends you used to sit next to during science lessons. You haven't spoken to him for years, however, what passes your mind is the weird questions he used to ask you. Although you found him pleasant, you were not a fan of his ideas. Reluctantly you answer. After a brief exchange of greetings, he invites you to have lunch with him. You half-heartedly accept his invitation.

During lunch, he asks you, "Can I tell you something?" You reply positively, and he begins to express to you something that you haven't heard before, "You know, the past — like what you did yesterday, last year, and all the way back to your birth — it didn't really happen. It's just an illusion in your head. So my question to you is, do you believe the past exists?"

As a rational person, you do not agree with his assertion and you reply, "What evidence do you have to prove that the past does not exist?"

Now rewind the conversation, and imagine you spent the whole meal trying to prove that the past is something that really happened.

Which scenario do you prefer?

The reason you prefer the first scenario is because you — like the rest of the reasonable people out there — regard the reality of the past as a self-evident truth. As with all self-evident truths, if someone challenges them, the burden of proof is on the one who has questioned them.

Now let's apply this to a theist-atheist dialogue.

A theist invites his atheist friend for dinner, and during the meal the atheist asserts, "You know, God does not exist. There's no evidence for his existence." The theist replies with a barrage of different arguments for God's existence. However, has the theist adopted the right strategy?

Before we present a positive case for God's existence, shouldn't we be probing why questioning God's existence is the assumed default question? It shouldn't be, 'does God exist?' Rather, it should be 'what reasons do we have to reject His existence?'

Now, do not get me wrong. I believe we have many good arguments that support a belief in God, but the point I am raising here is that if there are no arguments against God's existence, then the rational default position is the belief in the Divine.

Otherwise, it would be tantamount to questioning the reality of the past without any good reason to do so. From this perspective, atheism is unnatural.

Self-evident truths

We consider many beliefs to be self-evidently true. This means the belief can be described as natural or true by default. Some of them include:

- The uniformity of nature
- The law of causality
- The reality of the past
- The validity of our reasoning
- The existence of other minds
- The existence of an external world

When someone questions these truths, we do not blindly accept their conclusions, and we usually reply, “What evidence do you have to reject them?”.

These truths are self-evident because they are characterised by being:

- Universal: Not a product of a specific culture; they are cross-cultural.
- Untaught: Not based on information transfer. They are not acquired via information external to your introspection and senses. In other words, they are not learnt via acquiring knowledge.
- Natural: Formed due to the natural functioning of the human psyche.
- Intuitive: The easiest and simple interpretation of the world.

God: a self-evident truth

Just like the belief that the past was once the present, the existence of God is also a self-evident truth. What is meant by ‘God’ here is the basic concept of a creator, a non-human personal cause or designer? It does not refer to a particular religious conception of a deity or God. The following discussion explains why the belief in this basic idea of God is universal, untaught, natural and intuitive.

Universal

The basic underlying idea of a creator, or a supernatural cause for the universe, is cross-cultural. It is not contingent on culture but transcends it, like the belief in causality and the existence of other minds. For example, the idea of other people having minds exists in all cultures, a belief held by most rational people. The existence of God or a supernatural cause is a universally held belief and not the product of one specific culture. Different conceptions of God are held in various

cultures, but this does not negate the basic idea of a creator or nonhuman personal cause.

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 people universally believe in God's existence. Evidently, there are many more theists than atheists in the world, and this has been the case from the beginning of recorded history.

Untaught

Self-evident truths do not need to be taught or learnt. For example, for me to know what spaghetti is, I require information about western cuisine and Italian culture. I cannot know what spaghetti is merely by reflecting on it. By contrast, you do not require any information, whether from culture or education, to know a creator for things exists. This may be the reason 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 island. Our understanding of God may differ, but the underlying belief in a cause or creator is based on our own reflections.

Some atheists exclaim, "God is no different than believing in the spaghetti monster". This objection is obviously false. Self-evident truths do not require external information. The idea that monsters exist, or even that spaghetti exists, requires information transfer. No one acquires knowledge of monsters or spaghetti by their own intuitions or introspection. Therefore, the spaghetti monster is not a self-evident truth; thus, the comparison with God cannot be made.

Natural

Belief in some type of supernatural designer or cause is based on the natural functioning of the human psyche. The concept of God's self-evident existence has been a topic of scholarly discussion in the Islamic intellectual tradition. The classical scholar, 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...." As well as the Islamic position, a wealth of research in various fields supports the conclusion that we are meant to see the world as created and designed.

Psychological evidence

The academic, Olivera Petrovich, conducted research concerning the origins of natural things, such as plants and animals, and she found that pre-schoolers were about seven times more likely to say God created them rather than adults. In her

popular interviews, Petrovich concludes that the belief in a non-anthropomorphic God seems to be natural and that atheism is an acquired cognitive position.

Sociological and anthropological evidence

Professor Justin 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 suggest 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...."

Intuitive

The existence of a creator is the most intuitive interpretation of the world. It is easy to understand without explicit instruction. Human beings have an affinity to attribute causes to things all the time, and the entire cosmos is one of those things. Not all intuitions are true, but the evidence is required to make someone depart from their initial intuitions about things. For example, when someone perceives design and order in the universe, the intuitive conclusion is that there is a designer. To make that person change their mind, the valid evidence is required to justify the counter-intuitive view.

The belief in a God, creator, designer or supernatural cause is a self-evident truth. It is universal, untaught, natural and intuitive. In this light, the right question to ask is not: does God exist? The right question should be: why do you reject God's existence? The onus of proof is on someone who challenges a self-evident truth. When someone claims that the past is an illusion or that other people do not have minds, he or she would have to shoulder the burden of proof. Atheists are no different. They have to justify their rejection of a cause or creator of the universe.

The innate disposition: fitrah

God as a self-evident truth relates to the Islamic theological concept concerning, what is referred to in Arabic as, the fitrah. Theologically, the fitrah is the natural state or the innate disposition of the human being that has been created by God with an innate knowledge of Him and with the affinity to worship the Divine. This is based on the authentic statement of the Prophet Muhammad peace be upon him which states, "every child is born in a state of fitrah. Then his parents make him a Jew, a Christian or a Magian...."

This Prophetic tradition teaches that every human being has this innate disposition, but external influences such as parenting – and by extension society — change the human being into something that is not based on the innate knowledge of God.

In spite of the fact that the fitrah is a natural state, it 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. When the natural state is clouded with other influences, the person may require other evidence for God's existence.

From the perspective of Islamic epistemology, it is important to know that conviction in the existence of God is not solely inferred from some type of inductive, deductive, philosophical or scientific evidence. Instead, this evidence awakens and unclouds the fitrah to acknowledge the innate knowledge of God. The truth of God's existence and the fact that He is worthy of our worship is already known by the fitrah. However, the fitrah can be clouded by socialisation and other external influences. Therefore, the role of rational arguments is to 'remind' us of the truth that we already know.

To illustrate this point, imagine I was cleaning my mother's loft. As I move old bags around and throw away unwanted objects, I find my favourite toy that I used to play with when I was 5 years old. What happens to me at this point is that I am reminded of something that I already have knowledge of. In my mind, I think: "Oh yeah. I remember this toy. It was my favourite." The truth of believing in God and the fact that He is worthy of our worship is no different. Rational arguments serve as spiritual and intellectual awakenings to realise the knowledge that is contained in our fitrah.

Other ways the fitrah can be unclouded include introspection, spiritual experiences, reflection and pondering. The Qur'an promotes questioning and thinking deeply about things:

"Thus do We explain in detail the signs for who give thought."
(The Quran, Chapter 10, Verse 24)

“Indeed in that is a sign for a people a people who give thought.”
(The Quran, Chapter 45, Verse 13)

Islamic epistemology views rational arguments as a means and not an ends. This is why it is very important to note that guidance only comes from God, and no amount of rational evidence can convince one’s heart to realise the truth of Islam. God makes this very clear:

“Indeed, you do not guide whom you like, but God guides whom He wills. And He is most knowing of the [rightly] guided.”
(The Quran, Chapter 28, Verse 56)

Guidance is a spiritual matter that is based on God’s mercy, knowledge and wisdom. If God wills that someone is guided by rational arguments, then nothing will stop that person from accepting the truth. However, if God decides that someone does not deserve guidance—based on a Divine wisdom—then regardless of how many cogent arguments that are presented, that person will never accept the truth.

To conclude, the belief in God’s existence is a self-evident truth. As with all self-evident truths, when someone challenges them, the onus of proof is on them. The only way the belief in God can be undermined if there is any positive evidence for the non-existence of the Divine. However, the few arguments that atheists have against the existence of God are weak and philosophically shallow. The self-evident truth of God was addressed in the Qur’an over 1,400 years ago:

“Can there be doubt about God, Creator of the heavens and Earth?”
(The Quran, Chapter 14, Verse 10)

Reasons to Believe

Imagine you woke up one morning and walked to the kitchen to prepare your breakfast. As you approached the kitchen table, you found two pieces of toast with your favourite chocolate spread all over them. However, the spread has been arranged into the words ‘I love you’. You are surprised, but why? Do you think that the pieces of bread somehow managed to toast themselves, and the chocolate spread was able to arrange itself in such a way—all by chance? Or do you assume that your loved one decided to wake up a little early and prepare the toast in advance? Every rational human being on this planet will deny that it happened without any intention or cause; blind chance does not suffice as an explanation.

The universe is no different. It has an orderly and precise cosmic architecture that points towards purposeful design. The universe has the right set of laws to permit the existence of life, and it is ordered in a particular way to allow humans to flourish.

If the laws were different or the universe did not contain a life-sensitive arrangement of stars, planets, and other physical things of varying sizes, you would not be here reading this book. In fact, there would be no human life at all.

Consider another analogy. Imagine you are an astronaut working for NASA. The year is 2070, and you will be the first human being to visit an Earth-like planet in another galaxy. Your mission is to search for life. You finally land, and as you get out of your spaceship, you see nothing but rocks. However, as you continue your travels you eventually find something that looks like a huge greenhouse. Inside it you can see human-like creatures walking around, eating, playing, working and living normal productive lives. You also notice plants, trees, and other vegetation. As you approach the structure, friendly ambassadors receive you and invite you in. During your initial meeting with these friendly 'aliens', they tell you that the structure has the right levels of oxygen. It also has adequate amounts of water and chemical compounds to facilitate the production of food and life-supporting vegetation. Amazed by what you hear, you ask them how they managed to create a fully functioning ecological system that sustains life. One of the ambassadors responds, "It happened by chance".

Immediately your mind starts to comprehend the implications of such a ludicrous statement. The only possible explanation for the structure is that it was designed by an intelligent being, not some random physical process. As these thoughts run through your mind, another ambassador interrupts and says, "He is only joking." Everybody laughs. If a small ecological structure on a rocky planet evokes the conclusion that it must have been designed, then imagine what we should conclude about the whole universe.

The universe and everything within it obey physical laws. If these laws were different there would be no complex conscious life. The universe contains billions of stars and galaxies. Among the countless galaxies occur innumerable planets. One of these planets is our home, Earth. Our planet contains trillions of conscious creatures. Creatures like us that can think, plan and reflect.

The inevitable conclusion from all this is simple, yet profound: There must be a creator of all this design.

Everything around us points to God. Reflecting on all this creation should create an immense sense of awe and gratitude to God.

"Indeed, in the creation of the heavens and the Earth and the alternation of the night and the day are signs for those of understanding."
(The Quran, Chapter 3, Verse 190)

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