How Can You Be Certain There's No God?

A Question of Moral Atheism

from blog.iamanatheist.com

How can you be so certain that God doesn't exist? It's a common question — atheists hear it all the time — and, fortunately, it has an easy answer:

If you propose that something exists, the burden of proof is on you to show that it exists, not on others to prove that it does not.

One way to prove that God exists would be to show that God's existence is the simplest explanation for something. Some theists say that God is the simplest possible explanation because he is so easy to describe — omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, eternal, and benevolent. But ease of description has nothing to do with whether or not an explanation is simple or not. It might be much easier to say "a gorilla teleported in" than to explain the details of how a series of natural coincidences lead to a vase breaking in a closed room, but that does not mean that the gorilla explanation is simplest. In fact, it would be considered the least simple because a sufficient explanation exists that does not include some of its more complex elements (the gorilla and teleportation).

Similarly, some theists argue that one all-powerful God is a simpler explanation for the universe than a pantheon of less-powerful deities because it assumes fewer new things (one vs. many). But ask yourself this: is it more likely that the pyramids were built by hundreds of normal Egyptians over a long period of time, or that they were built by one gigantic Egyptian in an afternoon? The "giant" theory has fewer elements in it (one giant vs. many Egyptians), but that one giant encompasses many new concepts (gigantism, super strength, super speed, etc.) By the same token, an all-powerful God is a more complex explanation than many less-powerful deities, and many deities is a more complex explanation than purely natural forces.

All of this leads the atheist to ask a question: why should I believe God exists if things can be explained without His existence?

But, you might ask, is it true that the simplest sufficient explanation is always the correct explanation? No, the simplest explanation isn't always correct, but the way we find out that it is wrong is that we gather additional evidence until we find that our simple explanation doesn't cover all the facts — it isn't sufficient. Until that additional information is found, the moral atheist prefers to stick with what is simple.

Why choose an explanation that might not be correct? Because refusing to do so would be refusing to make any choices ever. There is no solution to any question or problem so air tight that we can't imaging a more complex (but less likely) explanation. Rain might come from natural processes in clouds, or it might be brought on by the will of God, or it might be the work of undetectable rain fairies. It's impossible to prove that the latter two explanations are false, but we prefer the first explanation because it is simplest and sufficient.

To act on the remote possibility that God exists while remaining philosophically consistent would mean acting on the remote possibility of many, many things, and that would quickly become an unnecessary burden.

Does this mean that the atheist might be wrong and that God might exist? Sure, but that's okay: The moral atheist is always open to new evidence.

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Questions of Moral Atheism: Instructions

We appreciate your interest in helping us spread information about moral atheism! To make copies of this pamphlet for your own use or to share with friends, follow these simple steps:

1. Print pages one and two of this document, one on each side of the same piece of paper (if you don't have access to a duplex printer, print page one, put the page back in the paper tray upside down, and print page two — depending on the type of printer, you may have to experiment a bit).

2. Cut the printout in two, using the thin rules across the middle of the page as a guide.

3. Fold the two pieces of paper in half, making a pair of small pamphlets.

4. Keep one of the pamphlets to read, and give the other away to an interested friend or stranger.

That's it! If you have any questions, suggestions, or comments, we invite you to share them by leaving a comment on blog.iamanatheist.org. Thanks!