

The Presumption of Atheism

We've been looking at epistemological objections to belief in God. Last time we looked at the first objection – the objection of verificationism – which held that the question of God's existence is meaningless. It is neither true nor false to say that God exists because the question of God's existence is simply a meaningless question. We saw that that verificationist viewpoint was based upon a principle of meaning that was in the first place completely implausible and then, to make matters worse, self-refuting.

We now want to turn to a second objection – what I call the presumption of atheism – that atheism is a sort of default position that doesn't require any evidence in favor of that position.

First would be the attempt of many contemporary atheists to claim that atheism requires no justification. Atheism traditionally is the view that God does not exist. Atheism is the position that there is no God. But atheists today (at least on a popular level) will sometimes say something like this: no one can prove a universal negative like "There is no God." So they think that because atheism is a universal negative that somehow excuses them from needing any evidence for God's non-existence. Since it is a universal negative that there is no God and universal negatives cannot be proved, it is impossible to prove that God does not exist. Therefore, as atheists, they don't need to prove such a thing.

Now it's obviously false that you can't prove a universal negative – all you have to do is show a self-contradiction in some idea to prove that it has no instances. For example, the idea that there is a married bachelor. It is easy to prove that there are no married bachelors because that is a self-contradictory concept. Therefore a

married bachelor cannot exist. So, in fact, you can prove universal negatives.

But the more important point here is that the atheist's claim that it is impossible to prove atheism is really an admission on his part! Atheism involves a universal negative. He says you can't prove a universal negative. Therefore, atheism is unprovable. So it turns out to be the atheist who is holding a belief for which there is and can be no evidence. This argument, far from being some sort of defense for atheism, ought to be a part of the Christian's apologetic arsenal. It would show that if the atheist is right that you can't prove a universal negative, then atheism is simply unjustifiable and therefore cannot be reasonably held.

What many atheists try to do at this point is to revise the definition of "atheism," so that it is no longer the view that God does not exist. Instead they say atheism is just the absence of belief in God. Anyone who lacks belief in God counts as an atheist. This is not only contrary to the traditional meaning of the word, but when you think about it, it is really quite hopeless as a definition. For on this new definition, atheism is no longer a position, as it is traditionally thought to be. Traditionally, atheism is the position "There is no God." But on this new redefinition atheism is no longer a position or a truth claim. It is just a description of somebody's psychological state. It is the psychological state of lacking a belief in God. As such, atheism is therefore neither true nor false. It is just a psychological state. Even babies, on this definition, turn out to be atheists because they don't have the psychological state of believing in God. But that is surely absurd. Can you imagine the following conversation between two young mothers:

Mother 1: Julie, I just heard that you had twins!
Congratulations!

Mother 2: Yes, thank you. But, you know, it is so sad.

Mother 1: What's sad?

Mother 2: Well, they're both atheists.

On this definition, even our cat Angel turns out to be an atheist because Angel lacks belief in God. I am sure Angel has never even thought about the question of whether or not God exists!

All of this would still leave us wondering whether or not there is a God – whether or not God exists. You can call the view that God does not exist atheism or schmatheism. It doesn't matter what you call it. The question is: does God exist? Is there a God? Anyone who says that God does not exist--call that schmatheism rather than atheism--still we can call upon him to give us some arguments or some evidence for the truth of schmatheism.

This attempt to get off the hook of giving arguments for atheism merely by redefining it, I think, is utterly unavailing.

Let's now move on to the next argument for the presumption of atheism. This is the view that atheism (that is to say, the belief that God does not exist) is the default position. You should assume that something does not exist unless and until you have evidence that it does exist. In the absence of evidence you should believe that God does not exist. You should hold that something doesn't exist unless and until you have evidence for it. This is an attempt to place a differential burden of proof on the theist and atheist. The atheist on this view has no burden of proof. His is the default position. It is

the theist who carries the whole burden of proof because he asserts that God does exist.

I think there are two very significant problems with this position.

The first problem is one that was pointed out to me by an Australian criminologist. He says there is a saying that is beloved among criminologists: "Absence of evidence does not equal evidence of absence." As a criminologist he knew that just because you didn't have any positive evidence, say, that the butler was the murderer, that doesn't imply he wasn't the murderer. The absence of evidence isn't necessarily evidence of absence. I think that that is very evident. Take, for example, the claim that there is a flea in this room. We don't have any evidence that there is a flea in this room. Does that therefore imply that there is no flea in the room? I think obviously not. There could very well be a flea in this room even though we don't have any evidence of it. So the absence of evidence is not necessarily evidence of absence.

On the other hand, suppose somebody were to say there is an elephant in this room. In that case the absence of evidence would be, I think, evidence of absence. If we have no evidence that there is an elephant in this room, that is pretty good evidence that there is no elephant in the room. So what is the difference between the case of the flea and the case of the elephant? Why, in the one case, is the absence of evidence not evidence of absence, but in the other case the absence of evidence is evidence for absence?

Philosophers have identified two conditions under which absence of evidence is evidence of absence.

First of all would be that we have fully canvassed the area where the evidence should be found. If you haven't even looked into the

room, there might be an elephant in there because you've never looked at the evidence. Or if you examined the evidence very superficially you might simply not have discovered the evidence for the thing in question. So the first condition under which the absence of evidence will count as evidence of absence is that you have fully canvassed the area where the evidence should be found. Now translate that to the case of God. That will mean that you have done a thorough and in-depth investigation of the arguments of natural theology for God's existence. That will be necessary in order for the absence of evidence to count as evidence of absence of God. You must fully canvass all of the arguments for natural theology in-depth before you can judge that there is no evidence for God's existence.

The second condition would be: if the entity did exist, then we should expect to have more evidence of its existence than that which we have. If there were a flea in this room, should we expect to have more evidence of its existence than that which we have? Obviously not. We don't have any sort of flea detector that would let us know that he is here. On the other hand, if there were an elephant in this room, then we would expect to have more evidence – visual and olfactory evidence (the smell of the elephant and so forth) that he exists. So the absence of evidence in that case is good evidence that there is no elephant. Again, translate this into the question of God's existence. What this would mean is that if God did exist, then we should have more evidence of his existence than that which we do have. Is that true? If there were a God, should we expect to have more evidence of his existence than the existence of a contingent universe, the beginning of the universe at some point in the finite past before which it did not exist, the unreasonable

applicability of mathematics to the physical phenomena, the fine-tuning of the universe to an incomprehensible precision for the existence of intelligent life, the existence of a realm of objective moral values and duties, and the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth from the dead? If God exists, should we expect to have more evidence than that? Well, that is far from obvious. It seems to me that what the atheist is saying is that he can predict the sort of evidence that God would give if God existed. That's a matter of divine psychology, about which I think we can have a little confidence. In any case we are thrown back onto the arguments of natural theology. I would say that we have very good evidence for God's existence and that there is no reason to think that if God existed, we should have more evidence of his existence than that which we do have.

Sometimes atheists will say, "What about the hypothesis that there is a teapot in orbit around the Earth? We don't have any evidence of a teapot orbiting the Earth. So isn't that good evidence that it does not exist?" In this case the absence of evidence, they would say, is evidence of absence. I think this is a bad illustration. I think we have boatloads of evidence that there is no such teapot orbiting the Earth. We know that no Soviet or American cosmonauts have carried teapots into space and discharged them out of their space capsules. Moreover, no extraterrestrial would bring teapots to the Earth because in space you can't pour tea out of a tea pot. You might suck it out of a tube, but in a non-gravity situation it is pointless to have a teapot. So I think we have every reason to think that there is not a teapot orbiting the Earth, and it is not just the absence of evidence for it. We have good *reasons* to think that there is no teapot orbiting the Earth.

Under what conditions, then, does the absence of evidence count as evidence for the non-existence of something? Two conditions.

First, you have fully canvassed the area where the evidence should be found, and then, second, if the entity did exist, then you should expect to have more evidence of its existence than what you do, in fact, have. I don't think that those conditions are met in the case of theism. Therefore I am unpersuaded by this argument. I don't think that the theist and the atheist have differential burdens of proof at all. Both are making knowledge claims and both have to support them.