Why I am an Agnostic
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Personal Introduction

This paper originated as three emails I wrote in 2016–2017 to a Christian believer who was very kindly trying to help me believe. I was brought up in Presbyterian churches. But I read some books in the atheist Friedrich Nietszche’s collected works in the summer between middle school and high school. I felt he was the only one who had ever talked to me. But it didn’t sink in, and I forgot all about him for a couple of years. I returned to atheist writers in my junior and senior year in high school. I think the main ones were Nietszche, Sigmund Freud, and Bertrand Russell. Nietzsche and Freud basically assume that atheism is true and offer plausible atheistic psychological explanations of why we feel compelled to believe in God. But Russell is famous for arguing for atheism. I agree with most of Russell’s paper, “Why I am Not a Christian,” even today. For most of it is consistent with my agnosticism.

I’ve been a nonbeliever since age 17. I made it official on my graduation from high school at 17. I was a happy atheist for about eight years, from about age 17 to 25. Then I felt spiritually empty, and tried Buddhism for about ten months. There is no god in early Buddhism, as I understand it. Someone called it just spiritual therapy. I felt comfortable with that. I was especially comfortable with the short book of the Buddha’s sayings called the Dhammapada. (I also had some sympathy for jnana yoga as an approach to an impersonal divine in Hinduism.) But I felt even emptier at the end. It wasn’t Buddhism’s fault. Buddhism is half compassion and half understanding, and I was only pursuing the understanding. I was spiritually empty because I wasn’t pursuing the love or compassion. But even though it was my fault, I was revolted by the emptiness and abandoned Buddhism. Then around 1980, I sort of crash landed back in Christianity for my values, though still as a nonbeliever, and not agreeing with all of the values. I think here of Ramakrishna’s saying that all (major) religions are equally valid paths to the divine, but most people will feel comfortable only in the religion they were born into. Eventually, I became an agnostic, which I consider an intellectually more temperate position than atheism. I’m not quite sure when that happened, as the evolution was gradual. In one of the emails, I guessed it was around 2000.

By “agnostic,” I mean one who finds no reliable evidence either that God exists or that He does not, or at any rate not enough to justify belief either way. It’s the rational suspension of belief either way. The term has some other fairly similar uses, but that is what I mean.

Someone once asked Russell what he would say if he found himself at the pearly gates after death, with God asking him why he hadn’t believed. Russell said he would say, “You should have provided me with more evidence.” That is really the reply of a doubting Thomas.

I would have liked to write a 50 page publishable paper, but I don’t have the time, the ideas are clear enough, and more people will read a short paper. Also, emails are conversational, and that adds variety to my site. I’ve only added section headings and a few words here and there. I was working fairly quickly, but I managed to put all or nearly all the new words in square brackets.
The first email (December 22, 2016)

What is the nature of belief? Can we choose to believe?

As to your suggestions, I’ve done just such decisional acts, scores if not hundreds of times, with no result that I know of. Yes, sometimes the lights seemed brighter or the room more peaceful, or even some sort of presence, but I think that was really just my own projection of my own feeling more purified or more at peace or submitting to and welcoming Jesus into my life. I don’t think anyone else was really there. I’ve done it so many times that it now seems a “long wait for a train that ain’t comin’. “ (Compare Waiting for Godot.) I don’t think I did anything wrong or did it in a wrong way. In fact, I think that blaming the supplicant is just a way to sweep the negative evidence under the rug. At this point I’m so skeptical that I don’t think I could do it again very sincerely or wholeheartedly. That’s in fact been the case for the last several dozen times, or scores of times, I’m sure. Of course, it’s possible I was accepted the first time, and all the rest were a needless duplication due to my being a doubting Thomas. But I don’t know that.

I disagree with you on one point. We cannot choose to believe anything. Belief is not the sort of thing you can choose. It is not an act that can be performed at will. You can put this to the test as follows. Try choosing to believe anything you don’t believe, or to disbelieve anything you do believe. Try walking down the street and choosing to believe that the people and stores you see are not really there, or that the men are women and the women are men, or that the restaurant is really a clothing store. The next time you write an email, try believing that your computer is not there and you are only dreaming you are writing an email. Not everything mental is an act we can choose. Aristotle distinguishes actions from passions. Actions are what we do. Passions are what happen to us. We are their passive (passional) recipient. Passions include not only emotions but beliefs and pains and pleasures. We cannot simply, directly choose to have any passions, but only actions. We can choose to submit to God, to receive God, to request to be saved, to let Jesus into our hearts and lives if it pleases him to do so. But we cannot choose to believe that God exists or to love him— not unless you change the ordinary meanings of those words into categorically different meanings, from passion terms to action terms. You can even choose to act “as if” you believe in or love God, but that’s not at all believing or loving. Far from it, it’s false acting. It’s pretense. Perhaps it’s well-meaning pretense that can lead to real belief or love later, but it’s still pretense.

This is not to mention Paul’s point that believing in God is not receiving God into your life. He says even the devils believe that God exists. I had never used the word “receive,” but I see no real difference between that and words like “accept,” “invite,” “submit to.” If this turns on mere semantics and niceties of word use, it seems more like needing a magic formula than a willing heart. It seems like God would then be playing a game of “Simon says” with me. (“You didn’t say ‘receive’, so I won’t be saving you today.”) But I don’t think you were doing this.

[But even if we could choose our beliefs as easily as we can choose to wave our hand to a friend, this would do nothing for the problem of lack of evidence that God exists.]
If it helps, in the physical world actions are causes, and passions are effects. The same event can be both a cause of something and an effect of something else. But cause and effect themselves are categorically different. No cause qua cause is an effect. No effect qua effect is a cause. No passion is an action. No action is a passion. Love and belief are just two instances of these general points. [All beliefs are passions. We cannot choose the people we love. Nor can we choose the things we believe. These are simply not the kind of things that can be chosen.]

**The Bible is not evidence for God, but itself stands in need of evidence**

I don’t think the Bible is evidence for anything, much less being authoritative. Instead, it itself stands in need of evidence. That’s because too much of it strikes me as mythological and unscientific. To me, “revelation” is not evidence, but stands in need of evidence. Faith is not evidence or reason.

Was the world really created 28 generations (or whatever it was) before Jesus, including all the fossils and ruins buried under the earth? Were the fossils and ruins put there to [trick] the scientists and [deceive] them? [See Philip Henry Gosse, *Omphalos* (1857).] It’s logically possible, but the scientific evidence is against it. (I’m stating [Gosse’s] point in my own way.)

Psalm 104 looks plagiarized from the Hymn to the Aton about a century earlier. There’s a line by line comparison in *The Ancient Near East: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures.* Stanley Noah Kramer’s *History Begins at Sumer* shows that the earliest Garden of Eden and Flood myths, among others, are from Sumeria. “Adam” is from adama, which is Sumerian for clay or earth. That’s where the ancient Hebrews started from. The sky goddess Inanna descends to the lowest level of the underworld, is divested of all her powers, and is nailed to a stake for three days. The sky father-god then sends two messenger beings down with the bread and water of life to restore her to life and to her rightful place in the heavens. Is that myth so terribly different from the Jesus myth? Could it be the historical origin? There are lots of gods who die and are reborn, perhaps especially in the Mideast and around the Mediterranean. What does this mean?

While they are not in the Bible as holidays by name, and started centuries after the death of Jesus as holidays, Christmas as a holiday is basically the Saturnalia, when Romans gave each other gifts [in] December [to] celebrate the coming new year[, plus the Roman Kalends. See Clement A. Miles, *Christmas Customs and Traditions.*] It was started as a [Christian] holiday to make Romans feel more comfortable with accepting Christianity. Easter is named after the goddess Eostre and celebrates the rebirth of the world in spring. [See Gale R. Owen, *Rites and Religions of the Anglo-Saxons*, citing the Venerable Bede.] It was started as a holiday to make the northern pagans feel more comfortable with moving over to Christianity. There is no evidence that Jesus died on December 25 (in the Roman calendar). I’m less sure about Easter, but still the alleged testimony that the miraculous resurrection happened on the Sunday after a Friday Passover death (if I have it right) is just an allegation of testimony some forty years after the alleged event.
We don’t know who wrote the Gospels some forty years after Jesus died. We only know who the writers said they were. There is not much evidence independent of the Bible that Jesus even existed as a human being. I think the earliest written record that’s independent of Christian claims is a brief Roman note. And who knows what that note was based on? Possibly only [on] Christian claims. But based on that note, it seems far more likely than not that he existed as a human being. [For the note was by a very reliable historian, Tacitus. See Tacitus, Annals, book 15, ch. 44, ca. 116 A.D. See also Pliny the Younger, Lucian, and the Jewish historian Josephus.]

This is not in the Bible, but late in the last century, the Roman Catholic church admitted that many of the saints on its calendar of saints’ days were totally fictitious. Some of their saints had their skeletons or bodies claimed as holy relics in several European cities at the same time. They even had three Popes at the same time as God’s chosen (through human election) successor to Peter at one point. This was in medieval times, but it suggests how little religious claims are based on or even concerned with truth.

Many have said that the existence of Christ is based on eyewitness accounts by people of holy and honest nature. My question is what evidence is there that these eyewitnesses are not fictitious inventions of the Gospel writers many years later. Compare the book of amazing travels and adventures of Baron Munchausen. The book begins with a testimony to the veracity and honesty of the Baron. It’s signed at the bottom by Gulliver, Aladdin, and Sinbad. The testimony and book are humorous because everyone knows it’s all false in advance, but that’s the only difference, for all I can see. If, for example, a Gospel were basically to say, “This is the Gospel of John. ‘I, John, testify that I saw these events’. Signed, John,” I for one see no evidence here that John ever existed as an eyewitness, or as any more than ‘the person wrote those words and called himself John’, especially when the Gospel of John is also full of miracles that fly in the face of science.

None of this goes against God, but only against the Bible as reliable evidence. The Bible might be a really bad account of a God that really exists. I once read that the Bible might be like a dirty window stained and distorted by human writers, but there still might be a God we are seeing on the other side of the window, whom we might just barely make out without being very sure of it. There are some words along these lines about seeing dimly in Paul.

I have little doubt that Paul existed, but he came much later, and actually says somewhere that his own knowledge of God is purely of the spirit and has nothing to do with any human witnesses who came before him.

It’s really great when someone makes an archaeological discovery of an ancient battle from the Old Testament. I can accept such evidence as confirming that, say, the battle of Jericho really took place, if not that trumpet calls miraculously brought down the walls. But I feel it’s not quite the same thing when someone pronounces that a certain ancient house is where Jesus or someone else must have lived, because (1) the Bible seems to place the house there, and (2) there happens to be a house there, as opposed to a house down the street or a few blocks away. Also, surely the places in Jerusalem had not changed that much in forty years. (“Look, there’s an old hill with old
olive trees. Let’s say that this is where Jesus prayed and was captured.” I understand you could debate the details endlessly, and that pastors take their flocks to the Holy Land every year, and they are overwhelmed to see what they believe are the places certain things actually happened. As it happens, I was in Corinth on Navy liberty in 1982, and our tour group of sailors was shown a certain stone platform by the archaeological excavations, and was told that this is where Paul stood when he spoke to the Corinthians. And I can accept that, because I accept Paul as a historical human being. I can also accept that he had all the visions he said he did. But I’m not sure I could accept any miracles in his life; these would appear to be embellishments.

There’s a lot of very deep, very great religious / spiritual thinking in the Gospels. That almost goes against its historical veracity. It sounds like nothing a simple fisherman or tax collector could come up with. I do find some likelihood that Jesus existed in that there is a single unique and consistently deep style or personality in the sayings said to be said by Jesus. But there is also a more or less progressive “religio-political” transition from the Christians being Jews to sharply distancing themselves from the Jews as killers of Christ, which has been argued by scholars to be a mythologizing of an actual historical distancing into a new religion.

The above is a very loose and carefree, off-the-cuff sketch of where I am now on such questions. About three years ago, I wrote the following more considered words to sort out my views.

From the introduction to my 2013 book, Two Sermons

I do find it legitimate for an agnostic to pray, based on an analogy to leaving a telephone message for a person who some say exists, but for whose existence there is no reliable evidence for or against. In the nature of the case, it is hard to find fundamental evidence for or against our most fundamental views, such as that there is an external world or that mathematics is true. And the existence of God is arguably the most fundamental issue of all. The “Five Ways” of Thomas Aquinas to prove God’s existence are all problematic, and limited in what they prove at best. Similarly, more or less, for all such arguments. The miracles seem mythological and unscientific. Hans Küng says there is at least a brief Roman record that Jesus existed. St. Thomas held that we barely even understand who or what God is. Perhaps this is what we mean or ought to mean by “the mystical body of Christ.” Perhaps this is a special or even unique use of “mystical,” though it seems within the penumbra of the general use of the term. Curiously enough, mysticism is often called the “perennial philosophy.” It too is hard to reason about, and its relationship to religion is hard to understand. To sum up, as Fritz Buri says, it is hard to speak responsibly about God. As I write in a poem, “Pure faith is more rational than rational faith. For rational faith does not measure up to rational skepticism, but pure faith is incommensurable with pure reason.” This is a brief statement of my current thinking. My progress has been slow, largely due to the nature of the subject.

I do find great value in all of the major religions of the world. All of them have versions of the Golden Rule; but the rule is purely ethical and not religious in itself. Beyond that, I am not
sure what they all might have in common. I would like to say that Christianity is the best, but I find it hard to say how much that is only because I was brought up as a Christian. Other religions are arguably better in some ways. Jainism is the most peaceful and nonviolent. Early Buddhism is the most empirical. Hinduism is the most ecumenical. Islam is the least likely to revise scripture to say whatever people today want it to say. The strict monotheisms of Judaism and Islam are simpler and easier to understand than the Trinity. Within Christianity, Orthodox Christianity might have the most plausible view on the Trinity. None of this implies which one is true or even best.

Paul felt comfortable enough talking with the philosophers of Athens to identify God with their Unknown God. That was very ecumenical of him, and perhaps even true. It also speaks well for the idea that we know almost nothing about God.

On the subjective side, I am not sure if I have weak faith or no faith, weak hope or no hope. I think this fluctuates with my thinking and mood. I feel I ought to be rational, but I feel reason is not leading me far.

[END OF 2013 WRITING]

Closing remarks

Someone once called me a “closet Christian,” LOL! But I’m not. I haven’t believed since age 17 or earlier. At least I made a major change from atheism to agnosticism, which is intellectually far more balanced and temperate concerning the evidence, possibly around the year 2000. I really don’t remember when. I think it was a gradual drift. I think of believers and atheists as partisans, and of myself as an independent, by analogy to politics. Curiously enough, I really am an independent in politics. I belonged to each of the two major parties for at least eight years each, and left each because I eventually found it too partisan. This is really funny, but I think I became a political independent around 2000 too! But the two decisions or happenings were independent of each other, at least in my conscious mind. I’m only thinking of the parallel timing now for the first time.

Maybe I am philosophizing you a little. But on further thought, it’s actually hard to avoid in the course of presenting my views. How can you understand why I’m a skeptic if I don’t explain why I’m a skeptic?

Suggested reading: Bertrand Russell, “Why I am not a Christian” (popular, i.e. nontechnical, essay). For lack of a better suggestion at the moment. You should at least know some of the ideas that helped lead me to agnosticism. I’ve already read the Bible, minus the genealogies.

The second email (January 8, 2017)

I want to clarify that I think you’re right that we should just keep on praying and doing good things as acts of will (choice), regardless of our feelings and doubts, if only for the practical
reason that otherwise we’d hardly be doing anything good. But you don’t need to posit a third realm, the spiritual, in addition to the mental realm and the physical realm, in order to accept that point. You could make the spiritual realm a sub-realm of the mental realm, and the point would still be fine. In fact, you don’t even really need to do that. All you have to do is distinguish acts of will from our feelings and doubts.

[Also, are emotions like joy or despair spiritual but not mental? Is there anything spiritual that is not mental? On the face of it, is not the spiritual a sub-realm of the mental? One might wonder about spiritual bodies, though. What would a spiritual body be like?]

I’m not sure I would do it, but it’s very handy to distinguish all reality into the mental and the physical, just as René Descartes does. If we define mental items as anything that is not physical, then the spiritual would be mental— at least, if you don’t think the spiritual is physical. If we always have to have some kind of body, so that we can perceive and communicate with others without using mental (or spiritual) telepathy, and if our Heavenly body is going to last forever, then we logically could even make all that is our mental life (including all that is our spiritual life) an aspect of our body. And our new minds (all unhappiness wiped away), new bodies (eternal and not subject to corruption or decay), and new (fully transformed) souls, would all be in Heaven together forever, as intimately linked as they were in earthly life.

This also avoids pesky questions like am I only my spirit? Am I not also my mind, and perhaps am even also my body in some sense? Is it just a verbal convenience for me to say I am six feet tall, weigh 212 pounds, and have poor eyesight— or is it true? Surely those things are not true either of my mind or of my spirit. My mind is not six feet tall, and my spirit does not weigh 212 pounds. The deeper questions are, am I a mind or do I have a mind? Am I a spirit or do I have a spirit? Am I a body or do I have a body? If I am not any of them, could I do without any of them? Could my (transformed) body, mind, and spirit all go to Heaven and I myself be left behind.

My concerns are philosophical. Specifically, they are simplifying concerns, at least in part. But even if it’s a *simpler, more elegant* theory to have only a physical world with some mental, including spiritual, aspects, or to admit two realms (the term is really categories), the mental and the physical, instead of three, for all that it could still be *true* that there are three distinct categories. And if your concerns are primarily Biblical, you are right that there’s a lot to be said for interpreting the authors as distinguishing three realms, just as you say. Also, I imagine that from the Biblical point of view, it might be best to say that I *am* a spirit, and at least currently *have* a mind and a body.

I hope this clarifies my views. Once again, your interpretation of the Bible looks good. As you say, many texts suggest that the authors believe there are three realms. If so, then I would be pointing out to them that there are at least two simpler, more elegant ways to classify the same points. Actually there are three. The third one would be to reduce physical appearances to aspects of the mental, so that there is only the category of mental items, which would include both spiritual items and appearances that seem physical, as its two main sub-categories.
If nothing else, I hope to be clarifying my stock in trade as a metaphysician who seeks to
categorize all things to the extent possible. :) But as Gustav Bergman once said, the history of
philosophy is a graveyard of (old) ontologies (that turned out to be problematic on further
thought). :) :) (He used the words “metaphysics” and “ontology” synonymously, which is a bit
unusual. :) :) :) And as a Shakespeare character says, “There are more things between Heaven and
Earth than are dreamt of in y/our philosophy.” But if we want to understand the world and our
place in it, we need to do our best.

I hope I’m not merely making things more confusing. :) These are hard questions, and it might be
fair to say that no one really knows the answers in science or philosophy. [And this is precisely
my agnosticism.]

The third email (January 15, 2017)

Thank you for the Watchman Nee. I read several chapters. He’s very helpful on clarifying the
Biblical point of view [on what belief and receiving Jesus amount to]. You targeted me very
well. [But this does not address the problem of evidence at all. Also, Nee, né Ni Tuosheng, is
controversial, at least on other matters of Bible interpretation.]

Beyond the emails: more reasons for skepticism

There are plenty of reasons. As someone recently put it on TV, the miracles “contradict the basic
laws of physics.” I’m only going to note reasons that naturally came to my mind over the years.
They are all fairly standard reasons that have been widely discussed.

Was Jesus really tempted by anything? As fully God, how could he have been?

Was Jesus tempted by a specific actual woman? Or did he simply “happen” to find no one
sexually attractive? So the whole idea that he was fully human, yet (perhaps “miraculously”)sexually uninterested seems a fake. Probably the best interpretation for a believer would be that
yes, he was tempted in all the ways ordinary people are, and felt all the desires we do. For
otherwise, he was not fully human like the rest of us. Curiously, the last believer I read on point,
just this month, agreed with me on this, and I think he cited Paul.

God is full of joy, and wants or needs nothing outside Himself. He is totally self-sufficient. As a
purely logical point, surely He could not be tempted by anything. He already has everything
worth having. Whether He was here on earth in a human body should have nothing to do with it.

Is God so powerful He could create a rock too heavy for Him to lift? Is He so powerful that He
could choose to ignore His own omniscience while He was here in a human body?
Given the Gospel accounts, how could Jesus have been fully God while he was here?

If Jesus was given power over all things after the resurrection, then did he not have that power over all things before that time? In what sense, then, was he fully God, if he was not omnipotent, while he was here with us on earth? And how could he have been omniscient if he “marveled” at the faith of the centurion who told him just to give the order and his servant would be healed? (Jesus: “I didn’t see that coming.”) Note the paradox, not to say contradiction, involved in saying that one and the same person both knew, qua fully God, and did not know, qua fully human, one and the same thing. Either he knew or he didn’t. Or maybe he was two really distinct persons, one who knew and one who did not. I’m arguing here against the mainstream view that Jesus was a single person, both fully human and fully God, while he was here on earth.

If Jesus was both fully human and fully God, even that makes him basically unlike us

Even if every ordinary human is fully human, no ordinary human is or can also be fully God. Indeed, I suggest that being fully human entails being only human. You cannot be fully human, fully Everyman, fully (essentially, totally stuck) in the human condition, if you are fully God too. If I am right, then if Jesus (or anyone else) is fully God, then he (or that person) is logically precluded from being fully human. If I may spell it out, to be fully human is to be completely human, that is, human through and through. If I am fully an apple, I cannot also be a stone, much less fully a stone. As Lewis Carroll would say, if I give you my only cake, I give you all the cake I have, and vice versa. If I am a fully red color patch in a visual field, I cannot also be a fully green color patch. No ordinary human, no fully human being, could have died to save us from our sins, then rise to sit at the right side of the Father through eternity. Compare Nietzsche’s “human, all too human” (menschliches, allzu menschliches). That’s nothing like Jesus as depicted in the Bible. If I am right, then even if Jesus actually felt every human temptation, he was still not completely human, because he was also God.

I am not arguing here that God does not exist, but only that the mainstream Christian theological account of Jesus as both fully God and fully human is intellectually incoherent. The problem vanishes if we reject the Trinity. We can still admit God, exactly as Judaism and Islam do. Or we can offer another theological account of Jesus. The two obvious alternative options are to hold either that he was only human (thereby rejecting the Trinity) or only God. Those options were deemed heretical by the early church, but either of them logically might be true. The fourth alternative in our mix-and-match matrix would be to hold that he was neither human nor God, that is, did not exist. Within the matrix, quintum non datur. Within the matrix, he was either both fully God and fully human, or neither, or one, or the other. Or we can hold that he was partly each, with some sort of hybrid composition. For example, some hold that Jesus progressively became more and more aware that he was God, and eventually attained full God-consciousness, or full conscious identity with God, only near the end of his life. That would make him somewhat like a Hindu guru. (Some claim that he even visited India.) Or we can suspend theology on the point, which would be an agnosticism only about the nature of Jesus. That might be wisest, since we understand so little even about what God is supposed to be, or is like.
Is there a spiritual world beyond what we perceive in this life?

Where is the evidence? Do we just take the existence of the spiritual world on faith?

Are we spirits or do we have spirits? If we are spirits, then do we neither think nor feel? Are we three persons rolled into one, that is, little trinities of body, mind, and spirit? Compare Aristotle’s theory that a human being consists of vegetative, animal, and rational souls.

Don’t bad spirits want or desire (to do) bad things, and most deeply keep us from God? Don’t good spirits want to do good things? Doesn’t God wish or desire that all humans shall be saved? Why then can’t spirits have sexual desire? If we have spiritual bodies, can’t they be sexually attractive? Can there be spiritual sex between spiritual bodies? If not, why not? In what sense are spiritual bodies really bodies, if they can’t be more or less attractive? Compare the skeleton bodies of the dead, all of which are equally unattractive, in the Roman humorous essayist Lucian. What about the evil spirits? Do they feel sexual attractions? Are they the only spirits who do?

My main point is a logical one. It’s a non sequitur to infer x is a spirit (or has a spiritual body), therefore x is unable to have sexual feelings. Note that it would be a pretty poor heaven if we could not recognize each other or identify each other or communicate with each other, or in some sense perceive or see each other, or God, who is spirit too. It’s really hard to know, of course, what to take literally or metaphorically in Revelations. Would we really be walking about in a city paved with gold and full of jewels? Would this be spiritual gold and spiritual jewels (or, I am tempted to ask, not real gold and real jewels)? Would there be spiritual apples or meadows? Could we spirits spiritually eat spiritual apples? Wasn’t there supposed to be a banquet where we sit down and dine with the Father and Son as two separate and distinct spiritual persons in two perceivably separate and distinct spiritual bodies? Why not also the Holy Spirit? Does the Holy Spirit have a spiritual body too? Aren’t the Father and Son holy spirits too, and equally so with the Holy Spirit? Then why is it only one of them called the Holy Spirit? Of course, that’s just nomenclature. But the main point is, why should one of the Trinity be conceptually distinguished as the Holy Spirit when all three are equally holy spirits? Perhaps the Holy Spirit is less of a holy spirit than the other two, since he “proceeds from” the other two. Of course Orthodox Christians don’t have this problem with the Trinity. And Judaism and Islam have no Trinity at all, which greatly simplifies their account. But I imagine they must admit a world of the spirit.

Is the reason that we are not supposed to ask such questions that there are no answers? No doubt to a believer who believes that faith and belief are all-important, there is a valid reason for not asking such questions, namely, that it can lead to a weakening of faith and even to eventual non-belief. But as a skeptic, it seems to me that it ought to lead to that because there are no good answers, and this makes the Biblical account implausible when you do question the details. Perhaps “the Devil is in the details,” but the skeptic is too. There are many non-religious areas of life, from business companies to governments, where great-sounding ideas founder on the details. I’m sorry to ask such questions, in light of my innocent childhood belief, but I think I have to, in light of my rational adult pursuit of truth.
Brief and carefree confidence ratings

Based on my understanding of the historical evidence, here are my casual ratings of probability of existence for various alleged religious persons. Since these matters are empirical but non-scientific, i.e., not as I would rate the laws of physics, my theoretical maximum will be 99.99%, and my minimum 1%, with one exception. My chief aim is simply to get the reader thinking:

Abraham 5% (sounds too mythological to me, but could be a mythologized spiritual leader)
Moses 50% (sounds half mythological, half historical; could be a mythologized leader)
Jesus 90–99% (no contemporary records, but some later Roman notes; the sayings show unity)
Muhammad 99.99% (contemporary accounts and well-known events; claimed only to be a man)
Buddha 99.99% (specific prince in a specific royal dynasty that was recorded)
Lao Tzu 50% (the writings could be a composite collection over the centuries, but show unity)
Krishna 1% (sounds too mythological; only “incarnations” are even claimed to be earthly beings)
Sri C(h)aitanya 99.99% (1486–1534, believed by his followers to be an incarnation of Krishna)
Dalai Lama 100% (I actually heard him talk in person at the University of Michigan!)

The Bible versus science on fossils and rocks

*Genesis* says God created the world in six days and rested on the seventh day. Based on a literal reading of the word “day,” some “young earth” Creationists estimate the world was created 6,000 to 10,000 years ago. If we read the Bible figuratively (“old earth” Creationism), the dating of the Creation could be anybody’s guess. (On a general figurative reading of the Bible, what the Bible means about anything could be anybody’s guess.) And it seems intellectually dishonest to shift to a figurative reading merely to avoid falsification of the Bible. I imagine everyone understood the text as literal until the scientists came along, and then the believers pulled out the “A thousand years are as a day in Thy sight” text like a rabbit out of a hat. And that only adds up to 7,000 years for the Creation. The scientific evidence is that some fossils are over three billion years old, and that some rocks are over four billion years old. Ironically, we do not even count remains as fossils unless they are over 10,000 years old, though this is arbitrary. And I cannot imagine why an all-knowing, all powerful God would need six whole days, or any rest. Why not an instant? And while some suggest the Creation was the Big Bang, that was scarcely creation from nothing.

Which account do you believe? Just as following the path of faith is a testing ground of the spirit (spiritual soul), so following the path of reason is a testing ground of the reason (rational soul). Which path do you think is best?

I am arguing only that the Bible does not provide reliable evidence that God exists, since we have reliable scientific evidence that much of what the Bible says is literally false. I mean the miracles, including the Creation. God still might or might not exist. But in the absence of reliable evidence either way, my confidence rating in God is 50%, per Bayes’ Theorem on (lack of) evidence. And if “Krishna,” for example, is just another name for God, then Krishna’s rating is the same 50%.
Logic and ethics are logically independent of God

The rest of this paper is basically notes to myself, but it might still help beginners.

Bayes’ Theorem belongs to the uninterpreted probability calculus, which belongs to mathematics. To that extent, there is nothing wrong with it. In fact, it is provable. But so long as it remains uninterpreted, it really says nothing either. It is just an empty tautology of mathematics.

Interpreting it is a problem. As long as there is no evidence, then it is equally 50% probable whether there is one god, ten gods, or a hundred gods. It is just as probable that the Christian God exists as that the Christian God and Zeus both exist. And that is because Bayes’ Theorem is not about what we may call real probabilities, but only about mathematical probabilities. And when we offer interpretations or applications of pure logic or mathematics, it is always good stuff in, good stuff out, or garbage in, garbage out.

My “objective seeming” theory of probability is a theory of real probability. It is an interpretation of the probability calculus. It is beyond the scope of this paper. The best published discussion is in a note in the second edition of my book, *Bertrand Russell on Modality and Logical Relevance* (2015). It has origins in Roderick M. Chisholm and the ancient Carneades.

Even if the existence of God is in some sense necessary (could it be contingent on anything?), it is logically independent of the existence of logical necessity. That is because the converse is true, that the nature of logical necessity is logically independent of the existence of God. So to speak, God is not so powerful that he can change the laws of logic. If God were greater than logic, then He could create a rock so heavy that He could not lift it. He could square the circle. He could make $1 + 1 = 3$. But this is not really a limitation on God’s power. The truths of logic are just empty tautologies. They do not really say anything, except perhaps about what might be called logical form, in the case of formal truths. Thus when we say that anything is possible to God, we mean that He can do anything that is logically possible. He cannot do anything that is logically impossible, but there logically cannot be any logical impossibilities anyway. I think this is more or less the mainstream view of God versus logic.

The existence of God is also logically independent of the existence of ethics or morality. So to speak, God is not so powerful that He can change goodness into evil, or what is good into what is evil, or vice versa. The traditional argument for this view is circular. It is that otherwise He could make good into evil or evil into good by a mere act of His will, and anything could be good, and anything could be evil. Nothing would be really good or evil except insofar as He simply wills it to be so. My own argument is different. It is that the logical independence of goodness from God is an instance of the logical independence of logic from God. For the basic principles of ethics are, broadly speaking, logical truths. We ought to do good. We ought not to do evil. These look like empty tautologies on their face. They give no real guidance in life, any more than Bayes’ Theorem gives any real guidance on probability, or any more than $1 + 1 = 2$ tells you how many oranges are in the bag.
The plain consequence is that we have the same moral obligations whether God exists or not. It is therefore wrong to say that if God does not exist, then anything goes. Quite the opposite, no moral obligation changes in the least. It is not even logically possible for a moral principle to change, any more that it is logically possible that \( 1 + 1 = 3 \).

If we hypothetically assume for the sake of the argument, or merely posit without evidence, that God exists, and that He is omnipotent, omniscient, and infinitely good, I think it logically follows that we morally ought to do whatever He says. In fact, we can leave out the omnipotence out of it and base this simply on his being omniscient and infinitely good. (I credit C. S. Lewis with this point.) This is simply because He would know what is good, and being good, would tell us to do what is good. This too is just an empty tautology. Its truth is logically independent of whether God exists, and of whether some so-called “holy book” written by humans is really His word.

Therefore, I hold that giving ourselves to God is the logical thing to do, if He exists, or even if He logically might exist. Note how far we are from Pascal’s Wager. The Wager is based on probabilities. My view is based on logical necessities. This too is just an empty tautology.

My line of reasoning applies to synthetic a priori truths as well as to analytic (formal) a priori truths in logic and in ethics. In my view, synthetic a priori truths are empty tautologies too, but just not analytically so. For example, “Red is a color” and “Red is not green” do not tell us what the real world is like any more than “5 is an odd number” or “Odd is not even” do. God cannot change a single synthetic a priori truth, either in logic or in ethics, any more than He can change a single analytic a priori truth. This is intuitively satisfying because by definition, a synthetic a priori truth is just an a priori truth that is not analytic, that is, that cannot be reduced to a formal a priori truth by applying definitions (replacing defined terms with defining terms or vice versa), or by replacing synonyms with synonyms.

Where we really want help, and would want to look to God for help, would be with the real applications. This would be a good point for the reader to start reading my practical ethics paper, “Personal Relationships: Emotions and Responsibilities,” for ethical guidance that is independent of whether God exists. However, the guidance on offer there is still very general, and is aimed more at the understanding than the doing. Notably, if my theory of emotions and my theory of continuums of ethical values and of moral obligations are correct, they would be true a priori.

The ontological argument

There are many versions of the ontological argument. The basic idea is that it is God’s very nature to exist; His existence is part of, or essential to, who He is. Thus He exists simply by definition of who He is. A main version is that by definition, God has all perfections, or is supremely perfect, but would be less perfect if He did not exist; therefore He exists. I agree with Kant’s, Frege’s, and Russell’s criticism that existence is not a property things can have, much less a property of perfection. When we define or describe a thing, we are saying what it is, not
whether it is. When we say it exists, we are not saying what it is, but that it is. Also, when we make a thing’s existence part of its definition, not only is our definition categorically ill-formed as just described, but it also begs the question of whether the thing exists. Thus the ontological argument is both ill-formed and question-begging. It cannot prove that God exists.

The core intuitive idea behind the ontological argument seems plausible enough. It is that God’s existence cannot depend, or be contingent on, anything other than God Himself. God must be in some sense self-sustaining, or be in some sense His own reason for existing. We would never admit anything as God whose existence depends on anything outside itself. To use an analogy for purposes of illumination as opposed to argument, God is more like a rock, which can exist even if nothing else exists in the physical world, than He is like the flame of a lighted candle, whose existence causally depends on many things external to it, such as there being oxygen in the air, there not being too much wind, the candle’s not being dropped in a pail of water, and so on. But I think the core intuitive idea suffers the same two defects as does its articulation in a definition or a statement of the nature of God. The core idea would be more fully expressed as, if God exists, then if He is to be truly God, His existence could not depend on anything other than Himself. The formalization of the core insight into the ontological argument merely illustrates the principle of all formalizations: garbage in, garbage out.

Not every idea that seems intrinsically plausible is going to work out. Logic has been said to be the business of convicting most of our logical intuitions of being wrong, based on our best logical intuitions. The ontological argument does not appear to survive examination. But it does not follow from that this that God does not exist, nor even that He is in some sense the cause of His own being, and not dependent on the existence of anything else. It follows only that we cannot prove or even state or understand that. Is everything necessarily statable or understandable in (human) language or thought? These last considerations favor agnosticism.

The argument from personal experience

We come now to the opposite extreme in arguing that God exists. The ontological argument was a purely logical, purely a priori argument based on a certain definition of God’s nature. The argument from personal experience is based solely on logically contingent human experiences. The argument is simply: I see (cognize, experience) God, therefore (I know) that He exists. The form of the argument is no different from: I see an apple on the tree, therefore there is an apple on the tree.

The standard objection is that this begs the question of whether the experience is veridical, illusory, or delusory. I may see an apple in a dream or in a hallucination. Another main objection is that only those who have the experience are personally entitled to infer the conclusion. The rest of us have to rely on the testimony of those who claim to have had the experience. Very few claim to have had the experience. I add a third objection. Some claim to have seen the Christian God. Others claim to have seen Krishna, or any of dozens of other gods. Ramakrishna claims to
have experienced several main gods as equally valid personalizations of the divine, and also to have experienced the deeper impersonal divine being of which they are personalizations. His analogy seems easy to understand. He compares divinity to the ocean, or if you like, to water. All the main versions of God are like various different sculptures of ice, all of which are the same water at bottom. And he claims to have experienced just that. Not only do I see no reason why his testimony would be less reliable than that of those who claim only to have experienced one version of God, but if his experience is veridical, it would in effect be confirming and making sense of all the many different experiences of God claimed in all the major religions, and also of many non-religious mystical experiences.

There are two reasons why I like Hinduism as the most ecumenical of religions. First, there is its most popular scripture, the *Bhagavad Gita*, which affirms many approaches to God as equally veridical. Second, there is the testimony of personal experience of Ramakrishna.

I remain an agnostic because I still see no reliable evidence for or against the existence of God. If we take the “Ramakrishna approach,” it seems to me that there are too many experiences across too many religions and too many times for them all to be dismissed as dishonest testimony. The question remains whether they are veridical. It seems to me that there is no objective reason to prefer either of three explanations. Either the experiences are veridical, or illusory, or delusory, where the illusion or delusion is rooted in the human condition, perhaps even in neuroscience. There are the atheistic psychological explanations of Nietzsche and Freud which I mentioned at the beginning of this paper. Their particular explanations might be too negative or morbid, but psychological explanations in general need not be. Also, we are after truth regardless of whether it may turn out to be negative or morbid. But at bottom, the truth, whether it is God Himself or His being a myth that never existed, lies behind the veil or curtain of appearances, where the appearances include our personal experiences as well as our best logical reasoning.

Atheists may apply Ockham’s razor at this point, and conclude that the “delusion” explanation is best because it assumes the least. Ockham says that entities ought not be multiplied beyond necessity. That means that if we have two (or here, three) equally plausible explanations, then we ought to prefer the one that assumed or posits the fewest entities. But I do not think that we are best described as seeking the simplest or most elegant explanation here. That may be appropriate for science, or convenience. But here we are seeking the truth, or what corresponds to reality.

**Logical arguments for God based on experience**

Perhaps the most convincing arguments for God are those that are based on general features of experience, but rely on logical reasoning to infer that there is some sort of primary entity. The most famous three are in Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas was well aware that the arguments prove at most only that there is *some* sort of primary entity, not that it is God. All three are vicious infinite regress arguments. I find the same technical flaw in all three in my paper, “Zeno’s Paradoxes and the Cosmological Argument.” The flaw remains even if we admit infinitesimals, if there is no
smallest infinitesimal, which I think is correct, basically due to Cantor. And even if there were no such flaw, I think it would remain an intuitive judgment call whether these regresses are vicious or benign.

I think some regress arguments are clearly sound, that is, clearly vicious. Following Aristotle, there must be something we know to be true without proof (argument), on pain of otherwise having a vicious infinite regress of proofs. If all knowledge is by proof, then if we prove conclusion A from premiss B, then we must also prove B as a conclusion from premiss C, and so on ad infinitum. But then we would never prove A. This is not just a matter of finite time. The problem would exist even if we had infinite time to do infinitely many proofs. We need a starting point, a premiss P which we know to be true without a proof based on a prior premiss P1.

I think that other infinite series are clearly benign, meaning that they involve no paradox or other problem. This includes the series of natural numbers, the series of even integers, and so on.

But what about the regress arguments for some sort of primary being? Take the First Cause argument. It is a commonly observed feature of the world, let us say, that events have causes. Let us say we observe that event 1 is caused by event 2. But if all events have causes, then event 2 is caused by some event 3, and so on. Here the First Cause argument claims that there must be some “first event” that has no cause other than itself, on pain of otherwise having a vicious regress of causes, so that event 1 would not have been caused in the first place. But event 1 was caused, therefore there must have been a First Cause. That is the argument. Now, I ask the reader, would an infinite regress of causes of event 1 be vicious or benign? Why couldn’t (or wouldn’t) event 1 exist even if its series of causal antecedents is infinite and recedes infinitely into the past?

Intuitively, would an infinite series of causes going back into the past be more like Aristotle’s vicious infinite regress of proofs? Or would it be more like a benign infinite series of numbers? If we can’t even tell that much, meaning if we can’t even tell whether it is more like a clearly (or paradigmatically) vicious regress, or more like a clearly (or paradigmatically) benign regress, then the First Cause argument is not reliable. And different philosophers have different logical intuitions about this. Obviously, Aquinas considers the regress vicious, and the argument sound. But others, including me, are not so sure. The most positive thing I can say is that even if I am wrong about the flaw I detected in the argument, the argument needs more work.

I conclude with a hilarious send-up of agnostic views by Lucian in Philosophies for Sale: “9th Buyer. What are you doing with that pair of scales? Pyrrho. I use it to weigh arguments. I get them to balance and, when I see they’re exactly equal, then I’m once and for all sure I don’t know which is right.” I hope that’s not what I did! Nor is it what Lucian did. His essay, Hermotimus, or the Rival Philosophies, beautifully argues for the deeply skeptical view that we’ll never be able to tell the truth about anything in philosophy. Last, from Gibbon: “The various modes of worship which prevailed in the Roman world were all considered by the people as equally true; by the philosopher as equally false; and by the magistrate as equally useful.” Of course, Gibbon’s philosopher is an atheist, not agnostic.
Prayers of an agnostic

Dear Lord,
I give myself totally to you.
You have everything, I have nothing.
Nothing happened when I did that.
I have no evidence for or against you.
How could I? You, who are beyond everything.
I cannot be angry with you.
If you exist, you are infinitely good and wise.
If you don’t, you are not even there.
“I am a wind: of the sea.”
Amen.

Submission. Receiving you without reservation. Whatever.
A Philosopher Surrenders

I just want to do the right thing.
This is not a bet or wager.
This is logic. Evidence or not,
If it’s even logically possible that you exist,
and are infinitely good, wise, and powerful,
then it’s the logically right thing
to give myself to you.
Call it a logical intuition if you will.
No belief is involved. How could it be?
There is no evidence. The world would look
the same to me whether you exist or not.
I will try to follow your path the best I can
under the circumstances.
I know that’s not saying much.
Maybe it’s saying nothing.
Well, not nothing. It’s a dubious promise.
And I want to do the right thing regardless.
If there is a conflict, I choose doing the right thing
over doing your will. How could I not?

I think just infinitely good would do it.
How could I not receive you into my life
If you were just infinitely good?

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