

How do we know God exists?

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Course web site: www.covingtoninnovations.com/tough (may move to church web site later)

Recommended reading (this list will be expanded):

Donald Williams, [*The Young Christian's Survival Guide*](#)

Paul E. Little, [*Know Why You Believe*](#)

Kreeft and Tacelli, [*Handbook of Christian Apologetics*](#)

C. S. Lewis, [*The Problem of Pain*](#) (on the problem of evil)

Richard Swinburne, [*The Existence of God*](#) (addressed to professional philosophers, thorough but readable)

Is it rational to believe in God?

Romans 1:20: "For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they [unbelievers] are without excuse."

What kind of God are we talking about?

The Omnipotent Creator who reveals himself and offers salvation in Jesus Christ.

Not an impersonal abstraction (First Cause) or "hands-off deity" (Deism).

Not a hidden God who does not reveal himself and is therefore undetectable.

(If God did not reveal himself, He would, in my opinion, be undetectable.)

Not a "God of the gaps" who stands in for some missing piece of scientific knowledge.

Not a tribal deity associated only with our church, nation, or political party.

(If God is real, then the concept of the divine, anywhere it occurs, is from Him.)

Not a goddess who gives birth to the universe through a natural process.

Not one of a pair (God and the devil are not equal and opposite).

How do we know that *anything* exists?

We cannot "prove scientifically" that God exists... or that President Trump exists...

We cannot do a controlled scientific experiment to compare a universe with a God to a universe without a God.

Only one of the two can exist. Our mental picture of the other one is not guaranteed to be accurate!

If you make enough auxiliary assumptions, you can disbelieve anything. I could believe that *you* are a figment of my imagination, if I'm prepared to believe enough other odd things.

Our job is to weigh many kinds of evidence.

Some arguments for the existence of God

(You do not have to accept all these arguments to be a Christian.)

Cosmological argument (St. Thomas Aquinas): Everything in the physical universe is temporary and requires a cause. Either there is an endless chain of temporary things caused by other things, or there is, at the beginning, something that is not temporary and does not require a cause (namely God).

Ontological argument (St. Anselm; I may have misunderstood it): We could not get the idea of God from anywhere except from God. More precisely, it would be inconsistent to have the concept of God (who necessarily exists and is perfect) and at the same time deny that God exists. This applies only to God because He is supreme and perfect ("than whom no greater can be conceived"); it does not apply to our ideas of other things.

Argument from design (Paley): Discovering the orderly universe, especially biological life, we are like someone finding a watch on an uninhabited beach and inferring that a watchmaker exists somewhere. Nothing but intelligent design can explain the order of the universe. (Supposedly demolished by Darwin.)

Fine-tuning argument (Owen Gingerich, etc.): The laws of physics seem to have been designed to suit a universe with complex, intelligent life. If a few things such as the gravitational constant were slightly different, the universe would be a much duller place, either all hot gas or all cold rocks.

Argument from common consent: Virtually all the human societies that have ever existed have had some concept of deity which, when refined (e.g., by Socrates or Aristotle), comes to resemble the God we know. (And why would evolution produce this?)

Argument from changed lives: People who claim to have encountered God have often come out with their personal character greatly improved, with improvements that other life-changing experiences do not produce.

Against the existence of God: The problem of evil

(1) God is all-powerful;

(2) God is all-good;

(3) There is pointless suffering in the world.

Apparently, these lead to a contradiction. What gives?

This is indeed a serious difficulty for belief in God. However, in my opinion, it does not wipe out all the evidence on the other side. Instead, it shows that there's something we don't understand. How much do we actually know about what it's like to be God?

Some suffering is obviously attributable to human sin. Other suffering isn't; the Bible indicates that angelic sin somehow disrupted the moral order of the earth, but details are unclear.

And have we defined "suffering" correctly? Even in a sinless world, if many individuals act independently, some are not going to get what they want. Is that actually evil?

Even if caused by sin, suffering ought to be preventable by God's intervention, right? So why doesn't He?

I think the key has to do with the free will that God allowed us (and angels). If God intervened to keep sin from having any effect, we'd live in a strange world: baseball bats would go limp when you tried to hit people with them, and bullets would deliberate in midair about whether they had a right to proceed to their target.

Others argue that the suffering that we see is not as pointless as it appears, that it's a means to a greater good. In *The Problem of Pain*, C. S. Lewis points out that we know only part of what God knows. There's more to it.

Is belief in God purely psychological?

Point of logic: You must establish that a belief is false before you "explain" it as an illusion.

Yes, we can magnify our concept of earthly parents, authority figures, creative artists, etc., to arrive at a picture of God. Does this mean there is no God? Or does it mean that parents, rulers, artists, etc., are made in God's image?

Psychological factors can also make someone an atheist. Obvious psychological factors working against belief in God include adolescent rejection of parental authority and desire to be exempted from moral principles.

"I maintained that God did not exist. At the same time I was very angry at God for not existing." – C. S. Lewis.