

God

God

The Fundamental Question

“If, instead of the ‘glad tidings’ that there exists a Being in whom all the excellences which the highest human mind can conceive, exist in a degree inconceivable to us, I am informed that this world is governed by a being whose attributes are infinite, but what they are we cannot learn, nor what are the principles of his government, except that ‘the highest human morality which we are capable of conceiving’ does not sanction them; convince me of it and I will bear my fate as I may. But when I am told that I must believe this, and at the same time call this being by the names which express and affirm the highest human morality, I say in plain terms that I will not. Whatever power such a being may hold over me, there is one thing he shall not do: he shall not compel me to worship him. I will call no being good, who is not what I mean when I apply that epithet to my fellow-creatures; and if such a being can sentence me to hell for not so calling him, to hell I will go.” — John Stuart Mill, “The Philosophy of the Conditioned, As Applied by Mr. Mansel to the Limits of Religious Thought”, quoted in *The Philosophy of John Stuart Mill*, ed. Marshall Cohen, The Modern Library, N.Y., 1961, p. 438.

A: “We must realize that the question, ‘Do you believe in God?’, is actually two questions: (1) ‘Do you believe that God exists?’ and (2) ‘Are you able to bring yourself to worship him?’. I am quite able to believe that God exists, but I cannot get down on my knees before a being who would create a world like this.”

B: “I’d say you’d *better* get down on your knees before a being who could create a world like this.”

It is not possible to prove the existence or non-existence of God, because God is not a mathematical concept. But why are we so concerned about such a proof in the first place? Because the existence of God has major implications for how we should conduct our lives, and what we can expect after death. But what is the nature of this God whose existence man has expended so much time and energy in attempting to prove? He is fundamentally the God described in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Among his assumed characteristics are:

- an intelligence beyond the comprehension of man;
- omnipotence; hence, the power to stop some or all of the world’s suffering if he chose to;
- a refusal to reveal to man the reason why he does not choose to do so;
- an insistence on our worshipping him without questioning, with the threat of eternal suffering if we refuse to do so.

But from these characteristics, it is clear that the most important question is not, Does such a Being exist?, but, If he does, can we bring ourselves to worship him? If our answer is no, as it is for many of us, then the question of the existence of God is irrelevant insofar as our lives are concerned, our task then being no more, and no less, than to find a way to live that we can respect in a world in which the existence of such a God is conceivable.

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Nothing reveals the utter baseness of man so much as his willingness, indeed his eagerness, to worship a being that allows as much suffering as this world has known, to continue. Indeed, as history shows, those who are capable of such worship are also capable of inflicting unlimited cruelties on their fellow human beings.

When we first read the above-quoted passage of Mill, we may think, “These are the words of one who believes that God will not really punish anyone of such integrity.” But there is no justification whatever for such a belief. It is perfectly conceivable that, after Mill died, God said to him, “You had the same chance as anyone else in your country at your time. I told you and everyone else explicitly in the Bible what the rules and penalties were. If you chose to ignore my words, or to consider them merely as a kind of poetry, that was your choice. But now into the fire you go.”

No one can simultaneously believe in God and consider himself to be compassionate toward his fellow human beings.

The probability that God does not exist is greater than the probability that a being could exist who is capable of creating, or at least tolerating, such evil as exists in the world.

The ultimate argument against the existence of God is the fact that we can conceive his not existing. In a universe in which God existed, no one would know it, because his Being would be present everywhere, and hence it would be impossible to stand outside that Being, even enough to say, “I know he exists”.

Additional Thoughts

“I am against prayer in the schools for the same reason I am against arithmetic in church: I don’t believe it is good to teach kids that they can always get what they want by asking God for it.” — Andy Rooney, *60 Minutes*, Nov. 15, 1987.

“When I was a kid, I believed that certain objects had magical power *provided I didn't try to use them*. The winder from an old alarm clock was a cigarette lighter *provided I never tried to light a cigarette or anything else with it*. A plastic dog from a Cracker Jack box guaranteed me the ability to beat up any kid on the block *provided I never tried to do that* — in other words, in fights I had to use only my own strength and ingenuity, never the power of the dog, because to do so would be to show lack of respect for that power. It would also show weakness.

“A few years later, in trying to come to terms with the idea of God, I tried to imagine what it was like to be in God’s position and have to listen to that vast chorus of moans and groans and pleas for mercy and help that arose from humanity each day through its prayers. I thought, surely it would please God to know that at least one member of humanity had some compassion for *him*.

I decided never to pray to God for help unless I truly believed that I could not live another minute on my own. The only things that God would hear from me would be prayers of thanks when something good happened to me. I kept this resolution until I was in my forties. Then, on a cold, rainy fall afternoon, having, the night before, been rejected again by a woman, stifled by a dead-end job, with no prospects, no friends, living alone, it suddenly became impossible to live one more hour without some other coming to help me. Suicide wasn't the alternative, because for all I knew — for all any of us know — there is a next life and it is exactly like this one. I built a fire in the fireplace, got down on my knees and, for the first time in my life, prayed for God's help.

“Nothing happened. I became furious at God's callous treatment of such a compassionate believer. Somehow I got through the next day and the many days since then. People I've told this story to have had a variety of responses. Some say that God did, in fact, answer my prayers, as proved by the fact that I have survived to this day, and, furthermore that I don't feel as bad as I did then, which, much of the time, is true. He simply wanted to show me that I could do it on my own, despite my feelings of helplessness.

“Others have said that the experience only goes to prove that God doesn't exist at all. Still others say that he exists but is a torturer of surpassing cruelty in that he on the one hand made my life so miserable as to bring *even me* to my knees, and then didn't send the help I so clearly deserved. Others again have said that my prayer that afternoon should have been, “Dear God, even though I desperately need your help, I am not going to ask for it,” or, “Dear God, since you know everything that happens, you know what I need now, so there's no need for me even to mention it.”

“The question is, had I not prayed, would he have helped me more, or would he have helped me less, than I did? And how would I have known?” — S.f.

In the late 19th century, the English scientist Francis Galton wrote a paper titled “On the Efficacy of Prayer”, in which he reported the results of a comparison between the medical records and average longevity of a group of church-goers, and of a group of randomly selected non-church-goers. He assumed that the members of the first group would, on the whole, tend to pray to God for help in times of accident and illness significantly more than the second. The comparison revealed no significant difference in the health or average longevity between the two groups, and on this basis Galton concluded that prayer was not effective in overcoming the physical effects of accident or illness.

A friend of mine, on hearing this story, immediately replied that, if God exists, then he would be certain to make Galton's test yield precisely the results reported, since otherwise people would start believing in God purely for the sake of their health.

Consider the poor, wretched creature man who believes that through prayer he can influence God, and that man can never know or understand the reasons that God does what he does. What is the source of such a belief? Ask instead, What was the nature of the world in the time when the religion that promotes this belief was formed? What did people of that time learn from childhood on? That if there is to be any hope for you, you had better learn to get down on bended knee and plead (to king, emporer) and not ask why. Is it surprising that man would assume that the Being he imagined to be the creator and ruler of the world, would expect any different behavior? And yet, what human being — perhaps I should say, what person living in the West — with even a

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modicum of intelligence and self-respect, can respect, much less worship, a Being who requires such abject humiliation from those he created? And why does the Being require it? If he is omniscient then he already knows about the suffering the person is enduring. In any case, no loving, caring parent — at least none in the West — wants to raise his or her children to become unquestioning pleaders for the parent's favor.

Someone knocks on your door to get you to join their religion. You decline, saying that you cannot worship the God who created this world. Sooner or later, in the ensuing discussion, they tell you it is not our business to judge God. You then ask if they have children. They say yes. You ask what they would do if, that night, you broke into their house, grabbed one of their children, put a knife to his or her throat and said that God had sent you to kill the child as a test of their faith. Inevitably they reply, "God would never do such a thing!"

A person who never thinks about God is not an atheist. Eric Hoffer once remarked that his father was "a small-town atheist", a man who would have been miserable if it were proven tomorrow that God does not exist. His father needed a Being to shake his fist at: "You don't exist!"

The question is, Are self-conscious beings merely a stage in the evolution of the universe? Is the universe in our hands, in the sense that there is no Being that knows the whole story — knows more than we do? Are we something that has never existed before, so that it is up to us to decide what to do with life, with no Being overseeing our efforts, no Being who has the answer and observes whether we come up with the right answer?

"The Israel political scientist Shlomo Avineri has observed that a Jewish atheist and a Christian atheist are not the same thing: they disbelieve in a different God." — Ash, Timothy Garton, "Goodbye to Bonn", *The New York Review of Books*, Nov. 5, 1998, p. 42.

The world's first democracy was established by a people who had many gods, and whose greatest thinker thought it only proper to pay obeisance to the gods of whatever city one happens to find oneself in. On the other hand, some of the worst totalitarianisms have occurred among monotheistic peoples. The belief that one's God is the only God, and that his word applies to all peoples everywhere has a strong tendency to justify not only the most barbarous cruelties towards one's fellow believers who disagree on various points of the faith, but also towards other peoples, as exemplified by the Spanish treatment of the natives of Latin America, and by the Europeans' treatment of the American Indian. (Observation by a friend.)

"Everything absolute belongs in the realm of pathology." — Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Beyond Good and Evil*, tr. by Marianne Cowan, Henry Regnery Co., Chicago, 1955, paragr. 154.

"When anthropologists survey the thousands of distinct cultures and ethnicities that comprise the human family, they are struck by how few features there are that are givens, always present no

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matter how exotic the society...But almost all [societies] believe in a supernatural world of gods and spirits — often connected with the natural environment they inhabit and the well-being of the plants and animals they eat. (The ones with a supreme god who lives in the sky tend to be the most ferocious — torturing their enemies, for example. But this is a statistical correlation only; the causal link has not been established, although speculations naturally present themselves.)” — Sagan, Carl, *The Demon-Haunted World*, Random House, N.Y., 1995, pp. 296-297.

Best definition of evil I know of: the willingness to do absolutely anything to achieve one's goals. This definition makes all too clear the close relationship between evil and most of the world's religions, in which the real or imagined dictates of a god are sufficient justification for anything.

No person is worth listening to on the subject of God who doesn't know what it means to be broken by loneliness and fear — brought to one's knees so that one is willing to say anything, do anything, renounce anything, if only this unbearable anguish will be lifted. *This* is the reason why the vast majority of modern scientists are not worth listening to on this subject.

Prayer to a Possibly Non-Existent God — Father, have you granted me this long life because you want me to learn how to overcome my suffering, or because you want me to stop trying to overcome it? Without some sign from you that the second is your will for me, I cannot help but continue trying to do the first, especially since it is conceivable that the next life, if there is one, is just a repetition of this one. I pursue this course with the promise to you and to all mankind that whatever means I find to help myself, I will share with others. Amen.

Before any parent gives himself up to a belief in a deity, be it God or the Higher Power of a 12-Step Program or any other, he must be able to contemplate the death of one or more of his children, and then imagine being able to say to that deity, “I accept this.” Otherwise, he is living in self-delusion.

The important question is not whether one believes in God but whether one has a religious temperament. A man may, in his teens, cast aside his belief in God and, with a whoop and a holler, proclaim to himself, “I will accomplish great things, and find my immortality in mankind!” But his is still a religious temperament, as are the temperaments of those who replace their belief in God with a belief in History, or this or that lifestyle or social movement or great leader. What distinguishes the non-religious temperament from the religious is a constitutional reluctance in the former to endure prolonged discomfort or misery in exchange for a promised future reward, whether on earth or in heaven.

The reason some people weep over the last movement of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*, though they may not know it, is that the words and music overwhelm them with sorrow and compassion

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for suffering *mankind*, which can do nothing but hope that this beloved figure that now lies dead in the tomb will nevertheless come back and one day bring an end to their terrible misery. Like a little girl whose love for her pet bird enables her to survive an appalling family life. The bird dies. She cannot bear to think that it is really gone from her life. So she gently places the body in the leaves in a secluded place in her back yard, saying to it, “I know you are just asleep. I will leave you here, under these nice warm leaves, and come to see you every day. I know you are not dead. I know that someday you will fly to me again. Until then, little friend, sleep, sleep in peace.”

God is the price we pay for having parents.

The ultimate proof that God is a creation of man is the belief that he demands, above all, *obedience*. This is an all-too-obvious assumption among people who have known nothing but life under tyrants, as was the case for the first generations of Christians.

“Hating God is a form of loving God.” We will never free ourselves from God and anti-God until we treat such remarks with the contempt which they deserve.

The lifetime effort of trying to understand why God has caused — or permitted — so much suffering as this world has known, of trying to force ourselves to imagine the goodness that lies behind such misery, of trying to love what we hate, of trying to understand all things as being caused, or permitted to happen, by a being who resembles us — these efforts only poison our souls and cripple our minds. Who are we that are so willing to be bought off by *reasons*? Given a choice between making a supreme intellectual effort that would result in understanding God’s reason for making our child die of cancer, and making a supreme intellectual effort that would result in our finding a cure for the disease, who among us would be so barbaric as to choose the first?

If you argue that the existence of great beauty or great pleasure is proof that God is good, then you must also argue that the existence of great human suffering is proof that God is evil.

“I had gradually come...to see that the Old Testament from its manifestly false history of the world and from its attributing to God the feelings of a revengeful tyrant, was no more to be trusted than the sacred books of the Hindoos, or the beliefs of any barbarian....

“My further reading that the clearest evidence would be requisite to make any sane man believe in the miracles by which Christianity is supported, — that the more we know of the fixed laws of nature the more incredible do miracles become, — that the men at that time were ignorant and credulous to a degree almost incomprehensible to us, — that the Gospels cannot be proved to have been written simultaneously with the events, — that they differ in many important details, far too important as it seemed to me to be admitted as the usual inaccuracies of eye-witnesses; — by such reflections as these, which I give not as having the least novelty or value, but as they

influenced me, I gradually came to disbelieve in Christianity as a divine revelation...” — Darwin, Charles, quoted in Garraty, John A., and Gay, Peter, eds., *The Columbia History of the World*, Harper & Row, Publishers, N.Y., 1988, p. 57.

Mathematicians and physicists sometimes remark on the grandeur of God that is revealed in mathematics and physics. That a grandeur is revealed, no one who understands even a little of these subjects can doubt. But that the Christian God created these subjects grows more and more incredible the more one knows about Christianity *and* these subjects.

Why do creationists not accept the argument that evolution is God’s way of creating the living creatures of the earth, including man? To deny this is to presume to know God’s will in matters outside scripture, which as far as I know is a sin.

Strange as it may seem, I sometimes think that the single most damning argument against Christianity — or at least against those entrusted with its most sacred writings — is that it is virtually impossible to find a side-by-side edition of the Gospels — in other words, an edition that makes it very easy to observe the differences in the four narratives¹. What possible reason can there be for this other than a deliberate attempt to prevent the average reader from seeing how many glaring differences there are, how many questionable omissions (or questionable inclusions)? And what possible justification can there be for such a deliberate attempt to keep this truth from those one is trying to convince that they are reading the truth?

The history of Western religion is a history of man’s boundless ingenuity at finding ways of giving the benefit of the doubt to a tyrant. But now it is time for us to grow up and refuse any longer to be God’s co-dependents.

The *real* challenge for one who is tormented by the question of God’s existence is to make the experiment of living with neither hatred nor love of God but instead to remove him as much as possible from one’s thoughts and being — to live without the thought that one is being watched, that one day one’s life will be judged, that suffering has a higher purpose — in short, to make the experiment of advancing beyond God and anti-God, to live like a person who has never been troubled by the question in the first place.

Only those who are able to do this can look back and truly comprehend the grotesque twisting of the nervous system, the *sickness of mind and soul* which results from having to force oneself, day after day, year after year, to willingly accept the appalling misery of this world, in particular, the torture of innocents, as part of some “higher” good, much less to *love* the being that would create such a world and allow it to continue. In believing in God, we create a monster, and make monsters out of ourselves.

1. After years of searching, the only edition I have been able to find is *Synopsis of the Four Gospels*, ed. Aland, Kurt, American Bible Society, N.Y., 1985.

I am fully aware of how difficult it is for the overwhelming majority of mankind to emerge from the idea that a being created the universe, and that this being is in charge of it, and that we will be judged after our death. Given all the sufferings in the world, and our constantly being subject to the possibility of failure, illness, accident, physical attack, we cannot imagine ourselves as somehow being on top; that our self-awareness is as new in the universe as any cosmic event, that no being created this self-awareness or is observing it, that there is no judgement, there is only what we do and its consequences.

“Epicurus...who contemned life without encouragement of immortality, and making nothing after death, yet made nothing of the King of terrors.” — Browne, Sir Thomas, *Hydriotaphia (Urn-Burial)*, in *Sir Thomas Browne: Selected Writings*, ed. Sir Geoffrey Keynes, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, Ill., 1970, p. 146.

“Death does not concern us, because as long as we exist, death is not here. And when it does come, we no longer exist.” — Epicurus (342 - 270 bc)

“Either God wants to abolish evil, and cannot; or he can, but does not want to. If he wants to, but cannot, he is impotent. If he can, but does not want to, he is wicked. If God can abolish evil, and God really wants to do it, why is there evil in the world?” — *ibid.*

Anyone watching documentaries on the bloody history of the 20th century cannot help but ask himself, over and over: How do such monsters gain such power? What creates tyrants? And the answer seems to be: Our willingness to pay a very great price — in fact any price at all, regardless how high — for what we want. Thus, desperate people are willing to give the benefit of the doubt to any suffering that comes with a promise. Just as those people do who spend a lifetime putting up with a cruel and selfish parent because of the inheritance they might, with enough suffering, eventually get. We are mesmerized by those who promise us relief from our misery, and, ironically enough, we are willing to undergo boundless misery on the promise that this will, eventually, and then, perhaps, forever, eliminate our misery.

Even when we know that something is an optical illusion — that the curved-looking lines are really straight, that the larger-looking square is really the same size as the smaller-looking one — the *appearance* of the thing does not change: the lines continue to look curved, the square continues to look larger. An “act of intellect” — the laying of a ruler alongside the line, the measurement of the sides of the squares —, or the recollection of such an act, is necessary in order for us to know *the truth*. Similarly with what might be called “psychological illusions”, e.g., the existence of a being that “makes” things turn out the way they do, that distributes fortune and disaster according to his own “higher plan” which we can never know but must always accept as working toward some ultimate good: no one who has been tormented by the question of God ever frees himself of the habit of at least occasionally seeing *this* as the way the world really works, all scientific laws, all logic, all the person’s bitterly-won wisdom notwithstanding. He can only remind

himself, in these moments, that, as with the case of an optical illusion, how things seem is not necessarily an argument for how things are.

...the collective work of art known as a religion...

Religion is a good thing for people who are not smart enough to understand why it is a bad thing. The one exception is Marxism, which is not a good thing even for those who are not smart enough to understand why it is a bad thing.

I have no trouble believing that God might exist, although I could not respect, much less worship, the Being who created a world like this. On the other hand, I have a great deal of trouble believing in the existence of Christianity.

“Christianity as antiquity. When we hear the old bells ringing out on a Sunday morning, we ask ourselves: can it be possible? This is for a Jew, crucified two thousand years ago, who said he was the son of God. The proof for such a claim is wanting.

“Within our times the Christian religion is surely an antiquity jutting out from a far-distant olden time; and the fact that people believe such a claim (while they are otherwise so strict in testing assertions) is perhaps the oldest part of this heritage. A god who conceives children with a mortal woman; a wise man who calls upon us to work no more, to judge no more, but to heed the signs of the imminent apocalypse; a justice that accepts the innocent man as a proxy sacrifice; someone who has his disciples drink his blood; prayers for miraculous interventions; sins against a god, atoned for by a god; fear of the afterlife, to which death is the gate; the figure of the cross as a symbol, in a time that no longer knows the purpose and shame of the cross — how horridly all this wafts over us, as from the grave of the ancient past! Are we to believe that such things are still believed?” — Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Human, All Too Human*, section 113, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, Nebraska, 1984, pp. 84-85.

Of all the world’s religions, Buddhism is the only one that I can respect, not the least reason being that it has done far less harm to mankind than any of the other religions. But we must always remember that its founder was a compassionate man living in a time and place that knew nothing of science, and so there was no concept of finding external solutions to disease and hunger and the other afflictions of mankind. Under those circumstances, it was natural, and laudable, to seek release from those afflictions by changing the mind itself, and I believe there have been individuals over the centuries who have been able to achieve, through tireless effort (or non-effort), the blissful state called Nirvana. However, to a thinking person in the modern world, that effort seems anachronistic. Such a person asks him- or herself, “Is there anything in the state of Nirvana that could not be achieved by a pill?”

These thoughts, written in my mid-fifties and after, marked the end of a lifetime of torment over the question of the nature and existence of God. Other torments persist, but this one is now a thing of the past.

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