

SHOULD WE ASSUME GOD EXISTS?

Some people argue that it is reasonable to just assume that God exists for the assumption that agnosticism or atheism is correct are less rational.

GOD HAS THE FATAL FLEW

Professor Antony Flew wrote in his book *The God of Philosophy* that there are two kinds of atheist. The positive atheist uses evidence to prove within reason that there is no God and that is why he does not believe. The negative atheist does not do this but refuses to believe there is a God because there is no decent evidence for God.

Positive atheism is: the belief that there is no God because the evidence makes his existence impossible or at least unlikely

Negative atheism: the perception - not the belief! - that there is no good reason to believe in God so we can simply lack belief in God

Negative atheism easily but not necessarily leads to the notion that if there was a God there would be evidence and so there is no evidence and so there is no God

Flew's book is a defence of negative atheism. It argues that since there is no proof or reason to believe in God that makes sense we can assume there is no God and we should. It is up to the theist to prove there is a God and not up to the atheist to prove there is no God. If you believe in fairies, you don't need to when there is no evidence. Then it is up to you to prove they exist and you cannot complain that those who laugh at you should be trying to prove you wrong for you are the one that is making things complicated when they don't need to be and it is up to you to find the proof.

CAN BE BOTH

So there are positive atheists and negative atheists and there must be people who are both. There must then be positive theists who say there is evidence for God and negative theists who say that there is a God for there is no evidence against him and those who have both positions.

You cannot be a positive atheist without being a negative atheist. But you can be a negative atheist without being a positive one.

You cannot be a positive theist without being a negative theist. But you can be a negative theist without being a positive one.

PROBLEMS?

Some say there is a terrible problem with negative atheism. "The problem with negative atheism is that its reasoning would justify you assuming that your employee is a thief for there is no evidence that he is not." But with negative theism you would have a similar problem. You could assume that the employee is God incarnate because there is no evidence that he is not. Negative atheism then leads to ideas that are not as bad as what negative theism would lead to. Thus it is clear which one is preferable. That is enough to make it reasonable to be a negative atheist and not a negative theist. A positive theist is always based on being a negative theist so that is out too.

A case can be made for saying that negative atheism is different from saying that you lack belief that your wife is a non-prostitute for you have no evidence that she is really not a prostitute.

What is the difference? Though religious experience arguments for God are dubious, you would expect to experience something of God if he were real for he is everywhere and lives in people's hearts. A God who won't give you an experience is not a God at all for God by definition is that which is all-good and all-love.

They say, "Negative theism argues that God exists for there is no reason to think he does not exist. It leaves itself open to the problem of verifying Santa Claus or the seventh wife of Henry VIII because there is no evidence against them." In fact saying God exists for there is no evidence against him is worse than saying there is no seventh wife for we know there was a Henry and that he was into marrying a lot.

Also, negative atheism is still better than negative theism which does something more serious when it posits an unnecessary God who makes hard demands on us that we could do without. God by definition is that which merits total commitment.

KENNY AND FLEW AND THE BURDEN OF PROOF

This is how Anthony Kenny deals with Antony Flew's argument that there is no burden of proof on the negative atheist (not the positive atheist - once you say there is no God definitely you have to take on the work to prove it) but on the person who says there is a God. The atheist is entitled to assume there is no God and the believer should assume it too if there is insufficient evidence. And if the believer will not assume the believer is obligated to explain the grounds why he thinks there is a God.

The kind of atheism these two men have in mind is negative atheism. A negative atheist is somebody who is not a believer in God - he is not rejecting God belief in God. He just does not believe. Negative atheism is the absence of belief in God. It is not rejection of God as in belief but it is rejection of God on the personal level which is why it is entitled to be called atheism. Or you could word this point as, "It is rejection of God as a person that is there to be related to" and it is not rejection of God as in rejecting the reasons and evidences for believing.

Kenny says Flew is wrong to think that the burden of proof is on the believer and not on the negative atheist. Of Flew he writes, "Negative atheism, in his view, differs from agnosticism because agnosticism involves thinking it makes sense to say that God exists, and that someone might not be a theist because he thought it did not make sense to say this. Flew then says there is a defensible presumption in favour of negative atheism" - page 58, What is Faith?

The error here is that agnosticism does not require that you think God makes sense. It is inconsistent with agnosticism to say that the idea of God makes sense for if you don't know if there is a God or not then you cannot decide if God makes sense or not. Plus God could make sense and still not exist. Flew then is vindicated.

Kenny points out that for Flew if a believer cannot prove God sufficiently then the negative atheist is right to assume there is no reason to believe. He says that Flew is wrong to go that far. Why? Flew thinks that the theist and the agnostic hold that God can make sense while the person who is neither of these (the atheist in all her forms) does not take that for granted. Atheism is the best assumption in case God is just magical incoherent nonsense. Kenny's argument is that the atheism here is not atheism but agnosticism. He says Flew is confusing ignorance of God with atheism. The problem is how Flew assumes that agnosticism assumes that God makes sense. It should not assume that he does or he does not. That is why Kenny thinks Flew is redefining the ignorance that is agnosticism as negative atheism. Kenny says there is no reason for saying that not knowing if God makes sense is the same as negative atheism.

Flew should not assume agnosticism suggests God makes sense. I would suggest that ignorance of a God who is all-powerful and who wants a relationship with us justifies a presumption of atheism. If you have a friend in the back of the house they will not keep you in total ignorance.

The problem for Kenny is how Flew forgets that if you have to assume or presume, you must assume that something is not known instead of assuming that it is known. This is because it is easier to know you don't know something than to know you do. So it is better to presume that you don't know something than that you do for it is easier to prove you don't know something than that you know it (page 58, What is Faith?) which means that it is better to presume agnosticism. He is saying that you must prefer it to theism or atheism. He has a problem with anybody who says they know there is a God or that there is not one. If you have to assume, then assume ignorance over knowledge. Kenny didn't mention that belief in God is often down to miracle stories and thus it is wiser to say you don't know if an event is a miracle in reality than that you do. If there were no putatively supernatural scriptures and visions and healings there would be no interest in God. So to assume ignorance of God means assuming ignorance of these too.

If negative atheism is the absence of belief in God and negative theism is just the absence of atheism what then? Therefore you can simply assume there is a God just as well as you can assume that there is not. Either way you can have the absence of belief for there is insufficient evidence either way. So take your pick. So it seems Flew's argument fails to direct you to negative atheism only. It directs you to either negative atheism and negative theism. Or does it?

No. It turns theism into something you can drop at whim - it does not matter if you are a negative atheist at 10 am and a negative theist at 10.30 am and back to negative atheism a half an hour later. That is not real theism - it is not about having a relationship with God or being open to knowing him. It is just a confused form of atheism. So for that reason, Flew was right about the presumption of negative atheism. Consistent negative atheism would be better.

A CHOICE - WHICH ONE IS THE WORST?

If you believe in God because there is an absence of evidence against him is that really better than arguing, "I think there is no God for there is no evidence against atheism"? No - it is like thinking the stranger you marry will make a good wife for you have not seen evidence that she will make a terrible one.

"I believe in God because there is no relevant or sufficient evidence against him" is far more irrational than arguing, "I do not believe in God because there is an absence of good and sufficient evidence." Why? One has to be worse than the other. Faith in God will not help you reason or study and learn and is not needed. Not believing in God

Some argue that it is easier and more reasonable to assume God exists in the way negative theism does it than to assume that he does not like Flew wants us to. If there is no evidence for God, don't think that it is easier to assume there is one for it explains things. Do not think that it is better to presume God exists in case he does. A good God would accept an unbeliever for sincerity and God is boss anyway so let him take care of the world and the blunders that are made through not believing in him. So it is not better. Kenny who thinks it is is wrong - so Flew is right.

Some say that if you pretend agnosticism is not an option and only negative atheism or negative theism are then choose negative theism. Perhaps it is a mistake to think that it is reasonable to choose negative theism over negative atheism only that it is more reasonable than the alternative. It is true that some errors are more reasonable than others. Not all think that negative atheism if it is an error is worse than negative theism if it is an error too.

We conclude that if we are forced to presume and there is no positive evidence for atheism or agnosticism or theism then theism is the last thing we should presume. And as for agnosticism, when it says there could be a God and there is no need to believe in God it makes sense to make things simpler and just be an atheist. Reason bids us to go for simplicity. Agnosticism falls with theism for it is half-theism.

THE REVEALED GOD

It could only be permissible to assume God exists if you won't let that assumption be grounds for dotty doctrines and harmful ethics. There is the problem of how God has more information than us and could command say that x needs to be put to death for a mysterious purpose.

Revelation would be superfluous if God is an assumption. If God is an assumption then accepting any revelation from him means you are only assuming the revelation is his. Anything you "believe" because of an assumption is an assumption itself. When you take a revelation as true because you assume there is a God to give it, it follows that you are assuming the revelation as well. When the main idea is an assumption so are all the ideas that are based on it. You cannot take a revelation as true in this case unless you assume that God exists first. God would just have to understand that we are not sure enough of him. We could give him all the reverence we can but we won't make him the reason we do everything we do or put him first. We won't for we cannot. If he is good he will understand. When God is good and understanding he will not hurt or punish us or be hurt - he is almighty - if we don't believe in him so we don't need to presume theism at all.

If an assumption for negative theism or negative atheism has to be made then a presumption of negative atheism should be made.

If you are going to presume theism, then it is not theism as in a revelatory or self-revealing God!

When you see matter but don't see God, logically you should presume atheism.

Some say that you need to believe in a creator who does not deceive in order to trust what you sense and learn. Some say that this proves that you can believe in this being without evidence and still be rational for you cannot trust reason or your thinking if there is no such being.

A force could do that so it does not need to be a personal God.

It could be that nature works mechanically and does not deceive because it is not a person and thus cannot concoct lies.

The argument defends our thinking and reasoning but any notion of a God or being who communicates with us should not be brought in. Let the argument defend reason and the senses and how we trust what we learn but we don't need it for anything else. And if God communicates why is it always man who tells us what he said and that he said it? The argument is used to defend divine revelation but it in fact refutes it.

WE ASSUME OTHERS ARE REAL SO WHY NOT GOD?

Assuming God exists is irrational. If there were a God he would want more than to be an assumption for us! Needing to believe in God doesn't make the belief true or credible or coherent. Christians say you can believe in other persons without evidential support so you should believe in God without it too. But is that true? To believe a person I meet is a real person and not a machine or illusion is not the same as believing in God. I am not harming God or myself if I do not believe but I need to believe in people or I risk damaging them or myself. And I see them and I don't see God. It is entirely different and its harmful and disrespectful to people to say the two are the same.

Finally:

1 Suppose you have no evidence that there is a God. Do you assume there is not? Do you assume that there is? It is more logical to assume there is none on the basis that if there was there would be some indication that there was.

2 Suppose that you have no evidence that there is not a God. Do you assume there is not? Do you assume that there is?

3 Suppose you have no evidence that there is evidence either way (ignorance). Do you assume there is?

4 Suppose you have no evidence that there can be evidence either way (this is not ignorance in the sense that you know it cannot be known).

Which one does it make sense to go for?