

Twenty Arguments for Atheism

by Professor Peter Kreeft from *FAITH AND REASON: THE PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION*

Here are twenty arguments for atheism given by Western philosophers.

1. The strongest and most popular argument for atheism is the problem of evil. When theists say God exists, they don't mean a god like Zeus, who is limited in goodness and in power, but the God of the Bible, who is unlimitedly good and powerful. So if the infinite God existed, there would be no room for his opposite, evil. But evil is real. Therefore such a God does not exist.
2. A second common argument is that God is an unnecessary hypothesis, like UFOs. Even if you can't prove there is no God, you can explain everything without him. Everything in nature can be explained by natural forces, and everything in human life can be explained by human beings and human minds and wills. Maybe you can't prove there is no God, but if you can't prove there is, it's irresponsible and silly to believe in God. Ockham's Razor tells us to use the simplest explanations rather than needlessly multiply hypotheses.
3. All the theists' arguments for the existence of God can be answered. Each of them has a weak point: an ambiguous term, a false assumption, or a logical fallacy.
4. On the assumption that there is no God, the atheist can explain religious belief better than the theist can explain disbelief. If this wonderful God were real, why wouldn't everyone want to believe in him? Why would the atheist give up religion unless he grew up and learned enough facts to refute it? The theist, on the assumption that God is real, can't explain how the illusion of atheism arose in the mind of the atheist as well as the atheist can explain how the illusion of God arose in the mind of the theist. His explanation is usually that the atheist is either very stupid or very wicked. But why would anyone want to deny God, if God is real and such a comfort?
5. The scientific method is by far the most reliable method we have ever found for finding truth. Scientists don't keep arguing forever, like philosophers and politicians and religious people. They have found a method of resolving and ending their disagreements. But religion does not survive the scientific method. If we use the scientific method to test religion, we will not be able to verify it, any more than we will be able to verify Santa Claus. We probably can't prove that the Loch Ness Monster doesn't exist, but we have no good reason for thinking it does. So the reasonable attitude is not to believe. There are two kinds of unbelievers: atheists and agnostics. Atheists say they are sure God does not exist. Agnostics say they don't know, but there is no adequate reason for believing God does exist.
6. Religion can't be verified or falsified, proved or disproved, by any data. No matter what happens, religious believers will interpret it religiously. If terrible things happen, that's God's justice; if they cease, that's God's mercy. No data, no experiment, can in principle disprove a religious faith. That makes this faith logically meaningless.
7. The atheist appeals to the historical fact that science has gradually replaced religion, throughout human history, because science explains more and more of what we used to think was supernatural. We used to think there must be a god like Zeus to explain thunder and lightning; now we know what causes it. The more we know about science, the less we believe in miracles.
8. Another scientific argument focuses on evolution, which shows that the human species evolved gradually by random chance and natural selection; this contradicts the religious belief in creation, which claims that we were created suddenly and miraculously by a superior being out of deliberate, intelligent design. Are we made in the image of King God or King Kong? The two theories contradict each other, and there is massive scientific evidence for evolution and none for creation.
9. If the theist argues for a creator from evidence in the visible world, the atheist replies that most of the evidence in the world counts against theism. The universe is far more full of emptiness, waste, injustice, chance, disorder, and suffering than their opposites. Why the empty eons before man evolved? Why all that space, all those galaxies, all those wasted fish eggs, all the bloody competition for survival, all the animals that had to die for man to evolve? How can you look at the real world and say this is evidence for a loving, benevolent God who created man in his own image?
10. Belief in God usually goes with belief in a spiritual soul that is immortal, so denial of God usually goes together with denial of the soul or spirit. When science believed in spirits, it didn't work; only when science became materialistic did it start to work. Only when we stopped looking for the angels that supposedly moved the planets did we discover celestial

mechanics and gravity. Only when we stopped looking for the soul did we learn how to perform brain surgery. Materialism works.

11. Materialism also works logically. There is no supposedly spiritual event that can't be explained materially. Your brain is a computer. If you remove parts of it, you can't do math; remove other parts and you can't make moral choices. Remove other parts and you can't pray or have religious experiences. Everything that used to be believed to exist in the spiritual column can be explained by something very specific and identifiable in the material column.

12. There are no logical contradictions in science, but there are many logical contradictions within religion. For instance, in Buddhism, the mystic discovers that the self does not exist. The self discovers its own nonexistence! You need a real self to make that real discovery. And in Western religions, God is perfect, and everything he does is perfect, yet he creates an imperfect world. In Christianity, he is one and three at the same time, and Jesus is divine and human at the same time.

13. There are also contradictions between any two religions in the world. And since both of two contradictory beliefs can't be true, there must be falsehoods in every religion, or else only one is totally true and all the rest, which contradict it, have falsehoods.

14. Religion does harm because it is arrogant and fanatical. It does harm to the mind because it closes the mind and deceives you into thinking you have certainty when you don't; and it does harm to others because if you believe you have the absolute truth, you will probably make yourself a preachy pest, if not a terrorist, to try to make other people believe what you believe. Religion narrows the range of human thought and behavior: you must not think heretical thoughts that contradict your religion's claims to truth, and you must not behave in any way not approved by your religion's moral code.

15. Suppose the theist uses the psychological kind of argument and says that you should believe in some religion because it makes you better, not worse. Almost nobody can deny that it's good to be good. So the atheist must reply that religion doesn't make you good, it makes you goody-goody; it doesn't make you righteous, it makes you self-righteous. Religion exists to make saints out of sinners, but saints are rare. If an auto manufacturer produced ninety-nine lemons for every good car, would you buy a car from that company?

16. Religion has produced more harm than good publicly and collectively and historically, as well as privately and individually. Religion has fueled and motivated most of the wars, and the bitterest wars, in our history. The deepest hatreds are religious. If religion produces the most wars, and wars harm people the most, by killing the most people, it logically follows that religion harms people the most.

17. Another bad psychological effect of religion is guilt. The higher the standards I believe I have to come up to, the worse I will believe I am. Religions don't just give us high ideals, they give us impossible laws. Religions all begin by making us feel almost hopeless, then they offer themselves as the only cure. 18. Another effect of having impossibly high ideals is hypocrisy. We can't admit we are as bad as religion tells us we are, so we pretend we are good; we pretend we are fairly successful at being the saints that our religion tells us we have to be, otherwise we would be in despair. So religion makes us lie to ourselves.

19. Another bad psychological effect of religion comes from its belief in life after death. That becomes a diversion, a distraction from this world and all its joys and beauties and possibilities. Religion depresses the value of this life, and this world, for the sake of the next life, and the next world.

20. Similarly, religion ignores or puts down or condemns the body for the sake of the soul. But most of our pleasures are bodily pleasures. Religion tells us to give them up. They all condemn greed and lust (in other words, money and sex). If all religious believers suddenly became convinced that there was no God, no Heaven and no Hell, how would that change their lives? They would probably make all the money they could and have all the sex they could with all the people they could, without guilt or scruple or repression. What stops them? It is their belief in God's frown and wagging finger.

COMMENT: If evil is the best argument against God that assumes that evil is the contradiction of God. If it is not then it is the worst argument against God. If God is the answer to evil then the argument that evil may qualify as an argument is evil! None of this makes any sense.

There is no problem of evil. It is too complicated to be generalised as a problem. Each occurrence of evil is a problem of evil. Its a case by case matter. It is evil to deny this! Religion assumes that evil can fit God. Now that amounts to saying, "Evil may be challenge to God and I need to overcome that but instead I will just redefine evil as that which cannot contradict God's existence." That aspect of the problem of evil means it is evil to believe in God. You cannot trivialise evil like that so you can reach a belief. To say, "Evil is not that bad because I don't want it to be" is gross selfishness.