

# GOD AND THE BURDEN OF PROOF

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## The Question: On the Issue of God's Existence, Who Bears the Burden of Proof?

### 1. Clarifying the question

Theist = a person who believes (that is, has a credence of .9 or higher) that a theistic God (that is, a personal creator of the physical world who is worthy of worship and unconditional allegiance) exists.

Atheist = a person who believes (that is, has a credence of .9 or higher) that no theistic God exists.

Agnostic = a person who has considered the question of whether or not a theistic God exists but is neither a theist nor an atheist.

Proof = evidence or support (factors extrinsic to a hypothesis that raise or lower the probability of that hypothesis being true)

Who has a burden of proof? = Who needs evidence in order for their defining belief to be rational?

### 2. Four possible answers

A. Both the theist and the atheist. (A possible attempt to justify this answer: No belief that is not self-evident is rational unless it is supported by evidence).

B. Neither the theist nor the atheist. (A possible attempt to justify this answer: Probabilities independent of all evidence are purely subjective.)

C. The atheist but not the theist. (A possible attempt to justify this answer: the vast majority of people in the world are theists).

D. The theist but not the atheist.

To determine which of these answers is correct, one must determine what rationality would require one's credence in God's existence to be if one had no evidence at all either for God's existence or against God's existence. In other words, one must determine what the intrinsic epistemic probability of God's existence is. I will argue that the correct answer is . . . . . D!

### 3. Criteria for assessing intrinsic probability

a. Modesty: The modesty of a hypothesis is inversely proportional to its "content"—to how much it says. Hypotheses that say less—for example, because

they make fewer claims or less specific claims or claims that are narrower in scope—are, other things being equal, more likely to be true than hypotheses that say more.

b. Coherence: The coherence of a hypothesis depends on how well its components fit together.

c. If we abstract from all factors extrinsic to a hypothesis, then the only thing that could affect the epistemic probability of that hypothesis is how much it says and how well what it says fits together. No other factors affecting probability could be intrinsic to the hypothesis.

d. What about simplicity? All facets of simplicity are either reducible to modesty and coherence or are irrelevant to the probability of a theory.

#### **4. The intrinsic probabilities of naturalism and supernaturalism**

a. Naturalism is the statement that the physical world existed prior to any mental world and caused any mental world to come into existence.

b. Supernaturalism is the statement that the mental world existed prior to any physical world and caused any physical world to come into existence.

c. Otherism is the statement that both naturalism and supernaturalism are false.

d. Naturalism and supernaturalism are equally probable intrinsically because they are equally modest and coherent. Since the intrinsic epistemic probability of otherism is greater than zero, naturalism and supernaturalism are each less probable intrinsically than their denials. (So both naturalists and supernaturalists bear a burden of proof and that burden is equal.)

#### **5. The intrinsic probabilities of theism and atheism**

a. Theism is a very specific version of supernaturalism and so is many times (i.e. at least 10 times) less probable intrinsically than supernaturalism.

b. Naturalism is a specific version of atheism and so is many times less probable than atheism.

c. Thus, since naturalism and supernaturalism are equally probable intrinsically, it follows that atheism is many times more probable intrinsically than theism, which entails that atheism has a high intrinsic probability (certainly higher than .9) while theism has a very low intrinsic probability (certainly lower than .1).

d. Therefore, **theists but not atheists bear the burden of proof.**