

WHY WOULD ANYONE BELIEVE IN GOD? 1

Lesson I | Ways of knowing and the issue of Reductionism

Scope and purpose of this Course:

This class seeks to present the case for why belief in God is plausible and reasonable from a non-religious perspective. *If you are already a believer*, this class will give you some reasons why that is the case. *If you are not a believer*, we would like to provide a taste of intellectual tradition that supports belief in God, and show that people of faith are not irrational foolish.

Objectives for this lesson:

- We will be able give an answer to why the question of God matters
- We will be able define 'reductionism'
- We will be able to identify different forms of reductionism in atheistic arguments

Key Vocabulary:

Science: the study of the physical universe especially through the scientific method.

Scientism: the philosophical view that scientific knowledge is the only reliable source of truth.

Philosophy: the study of human experience through the use of reason; usually with the classic branches of Metaphysics, Ethics, Epistemology, and Logic

Reductionism: the philosophical tendency to simplify a complex phenomenon down to just one of its elements.

Why does the topic of God's existence matter to you?

The existence of God matters because, depending on how you answer it, it sets up a host of answers to other very interesting and potentially life-changing questions. For example some other questions may be: *Is there an afterlife? How should I live my life today? Is there meaning to suffering? Is there a human soul? If God does exist, can I know him? Can I communicate with him? Has he tried to communicate with us? Is there any meaning at all to this life beyond what I think and perceive? Why am I here at all?* All these questions are profoundly human and deserve to be asked. People have the right to hear all the possible answers to them.

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How do we know things:

We come to know truth in three basic ways. The first way is through *logic*: we can use our natural human reason to deduce other truths from the things that we already know. For example, we can know that if Socrates was a man, and if all men are mortal, then Socrates was a mortal. We can know that without having ever met Socrates or doing any forensic investigation. This is where *philosophy* as a branch of human knowledge lives.

The second way we can know things is through our *experience and observations*. We can use our five senses of sight, touch, smell, taste, and sound to observe the world around us. But we can also use observe our own psychological observations of ourselves and our feelings. In its purest form, the *scientific method* and *modern science* are beautiful representations of the power of our observation on the natural world.

Lastly, we can learn things through *the testimony of others*. We be told things by other people we trust. After all, it would be difficult to experience everything in the world. At some point, I have to rely on the words of others to report what they know. As an example, the study of History lives here.

Now here's an important fact about God's existence: The Church teaches that we can use all three of these ways of knowing to come to know God. We can know him through logic and reason. We can arrive and a certain knowledge of the creator without having to experience him. It will not be exhaustive of everything that God is, but it can be done with training. We can also experience him directly through prayer, sacraments, and even mystical experiences. Saint Augustine said beautifully that it was when he began to look inward that he found that God had been waiting for him there all along. Lastly, we can be told about God by the testimony of others. In fact, this is what the whole Jewish faith uses. By looking at what God has done in history and reading the accounts of others, we can come to know God. This is why the apostles are so important in our faith. The fact that they died, poor, miserable, tortuous deaths that did not win them fame or comfort is a powerful testimony of what they experienced. So it is with the people who tell us about God as well.

Reductionism is the philosophical tendency to simplify a complex phenomenon down to just one of its elements. Anytime somebody claim that "'x' is nothing more than 'y'", then you've got an example of reductionism on your hands. Often the thing they're pointing to is indeed part of the reality. But the weakness is that it is too narrow to account for everything.

For example, our culture loves to boil down all knowledge just to that of our sense experience, and only ever accepts people's testimony if they are backed up by science. The point is that this is a *reduction in our sources of knowledge*. There is nothing wrong with scientific knowledge. But the problem becomes when we fall into **scientism**: thinking that only science can give me reliable knowledge. Again, it is not that there is anything wrong with science. Rather, science alone is too narrow to account for all our human experience.

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Practice recognizing reductionism:

In the space below each quote try to identify the kind of reductionism that is being used.

“I don’t believe in God because science hasn’t yet come up with an experiment to prove his existence.”

“I’ll believe it when I see it.”

“Right and wrong are really just the product of where you grew up and who taught you.”

“If God existed he should show himself once and for all”

“We are here because one odd group of fishes had a particular fin anatomy that could transform into legs for terrestrial creatures; because the earth never froze entirely during the Ice Age; because a small and tenuous species, arising in Africa a quarter of a million years ago, has managed, so far, to survive by hook and by crook. We may yearn for a higher answer—but none exists.”

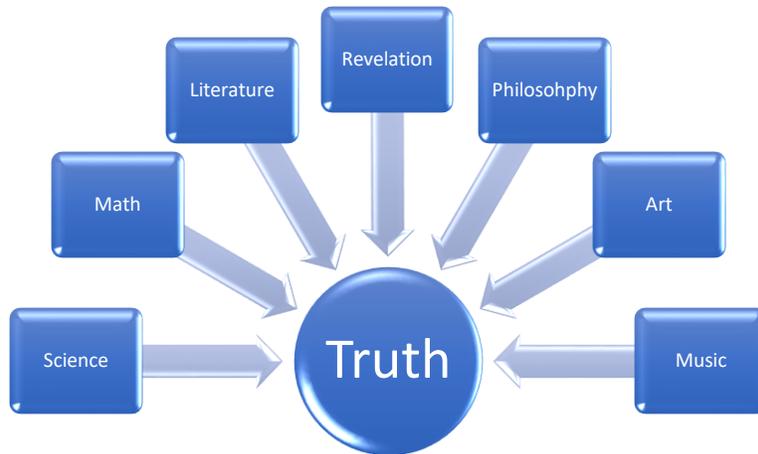
- Atheist Stephen J. Gould

“Man is the product of causes which had no provision for the end they were achieving; his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collisions of atoms; no fire, no intensity of thought and feeling can preserve the individual life beyond the grave; all the labor of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noontday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system.”

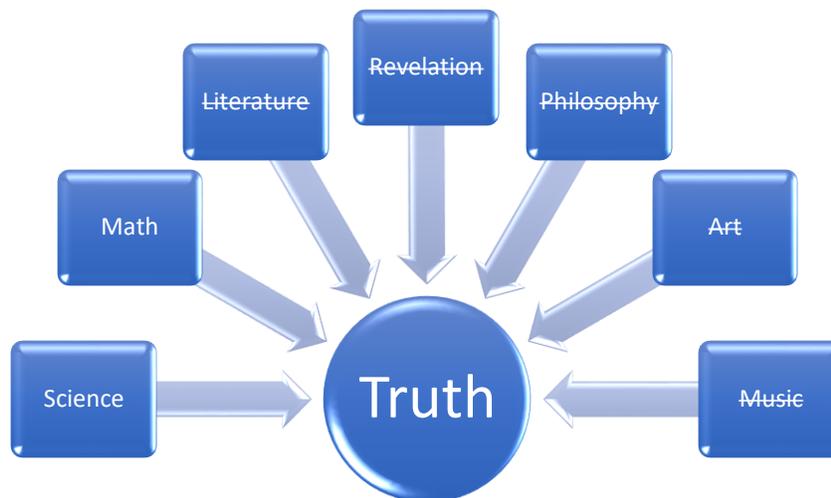
– Bertrand Russell

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The Christian Worldview: Since God is the Truth, whenever we learn something that is true we are encountering God in some way.



Scientism: the *philosophical assumption* that the only kind of knowledge we can have with certainty is that which we get from the scientific method.



****Many times a skeptic doesn't actually live this but sometimes they don't realize how inconsistent they are being when they say "Well religion is silly b/c it's not scientific"*

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Some points on Scientism to be aware of:

1. We are NOT saying science is bad. We are saying that if we become too fixated on science to the exclusion of the other forms of knowledge something is not right.
2. Scientism refutes itself: the principle, “*the only kind of knowledge that give us certainty is scientific knowledge*” is not something you run scientific tests on because it’s not a material thing. It’s a philosophical assertion.
3. Don’t get sucked into the name calling that some people fall into. It’s not that atheists are the rational ones and people of faith are the irrational ones. The human mind is capable of discerning truth in a number of ways. *The real debate should be about whether or not our human minds grasp things beyond the physical world.* The question is who is the more open minded: the person who says “all there is science” or the person who says “there is science and then there’s more on top of that”?

Some questions and phrases that might be helpful when dialoguing:

- “Let me make sure I understand. Are you saying that only things we can know for certain are things that can be verified scientifically?”
- “Tell me, how did you come to the conclusion that the only things that could be trusted were things that could be verified scientifically? Was there an experiment that you ran?”
- “Are you saying that we can’t find truth in Shakespeare’s plays or Plato’s dialogues? They didn’t use the scientific method to write.”
- “Is the fact that an author of a story doesn’t appear as a character in the story grounds for thinking that no author existed?”

What does this prove? Does this demonstrate God's existence or the truth of Christianity?

Absolutely not. We have not even come close to proving God’s existence. But we are clearing the obstacles to start the conversation. There is more to the world than what fits in a test tube. Just because it doesn’t get demonstrated by a scientific experiment doesn’t mean that it isn’t true. When we widen the scope of our search for truth beyond the scientific we are now equipped to seek God with all of our tools at our disposal.