

Does God exist?

David Hitchcock

My goal in this debate is to encourage you to think for yourself about this fundamental question:

Does God exist?

The first thing to do is to consider what the question means.

In standard logical notation, the question becomes: Is there an x that is identical to God?

The logical answer to this question is yes. It is a logical truth that God is identical to God.

Hence there is an x that is identical to God, namely God herself.

But the same reasoning would prove that Santa Claus exists. The problem lies in our easy use of a proper name—"God" or "Santa Claus"—when we have not yet established that something exists that bears this name. The question, "Does God exist?", puts the cart before the horse. It should better be worded, "Does anything exist that would be appropriately called 'God'?"

So we need to specify first what sort of individual it would be appropriate to call "God". If we already believe in God, we can be fairly specific, choosing the features of the being in whom we believe.. If we are open to a negative answer, we must be more general. Otherwise, if we conclude that there is no god, an objector might ask: What if we conceive of God somewhat differently?

Where should we get this more general conception? I propose that we look to the sphere of human activity where use of the word "God" has its primary home—namely, religious observances: prayers, worship services, sacrifices, and other religious rituals. The word "God" and its synonyms are used with an initial capital to label the object of human religious worship and addressee of our prayers. It is used without capitals as a classification term for supposed entities like Zeus and Yamantaka who are worshipped and prayed to.

It would be too simple, however, to define a god as an individual that is worshipped or prayed to. For some religions worship obviously existent physical objects, such as the sun, and it is at least questionable whether these obviously existent entities are divine.

A god, then, is not just an individual that is actually worshipped and prayed to, but an individual that deserves to be worshipped and prayed to—a truly divine individual.

What sort of individual deserves to be worshipped? To worship an individual is to hold that individual before our minds as a kind of ideal or model, someone we would like to emulate.

We humans commonly have such an attitude to a fellow human being. There is such a thing as hero worship. Falling in love often involves an idealization of the beloved, for whom the lover feels nothing but adoration. Children before puberty likewise often look up to their parents as paragons of perfection, thinking that they can do no wrong.

Such intense emotions do not last. The hero turns out to have feet of clay. The excitement of falling in love fades, and the lover begins to notice flaws in the beloved. And children grow up; their parents are transformed from people who can do nothing wrong to people who can do nothing right.

Religious worship, in contrast, is directed at an individual with whom we will never become disillusioned. A goddess does not have feet of clay, is without flaws, and continues to do nothing wrong. She deserves to be worshipped.

Prayer is likewise directed at an individual with whom we will never become disillusioned. The encyclopedia tells us that prayer has been a practice of all religions throughout history (“Prayer”, *Britannica Concise Encyclopedia Online*, visited 16 August 2004). Its characteristic postures—bowing the head, kneeling, or prostration—and its characteristic position

of the hands—raised, outstretched, or clasped—signify an attitude of submission and devotion—in other words, the attitude of a worshipper (*ibid.*). Prayer may involve confessions of sin, requests, thanks, praise, offerings of sacrifice, or promises of future acts of devotion (*ibid.*). But these possible components impose no additional requirements.

Thus what is crucial to being a god is permanent flawlessness. It is tempting, then, to formulate our inquiry in terms of St. Anselm's conception of God as "that than which nothing greater can be conceived" (*Proslogion 2*)—in other words, a being whose characteristics are such that no better entity is conceptually possible.

There are however at least three difficulties with Anselm's conception.

First, insofar as it is intelligible, it is too exalted. What makes a being an inappropriate object of worship is not that it might be better in some respect, but that it has definite flaws—some cruelty, some foolishness, some ugliness.

Second, the conception is not really intelligible. We can make some sense of the concept of a perfect gymnastic performance, or a perfect show dog of a certain breed, or a perfect architectural design for a given site. But what sense can we make of the concept of a perfect being? By what standards could we judge a competition among beings of all sorts, to determine which of them was the best entity?

Third, the perfection that is an appropriate object of worship is relative to the worshipper. If cows were religious, the perfect beings whom it would be appropriate for them to worship would be different than those appropriate for human beings.

To address these deficiencies, we must say something about what sorts of characteristics a being must have in order to deserve human religious worship. It seems reasonable, first of all, to

require some cognitive life. It would be odd, to say the least, to worship a being with no beliefs and no means of adopting a belief. Second, a god should do something, even if it is only contemplation. Doing nothing hardly makes one a fine human being, and so is not a characteristic of an appropriate object of human worship. Third, a god should have something like an emotional life, even if untroubled or affected by what goes on in the universe. Complete inability to love or to be benevolent, for example, is not part of being a fine human being.

Thus we arrive at a conception of a god as an active being with a cognitive and emotional life that is without flaws.

We can look for such a being in three places: in parts of the physical universe, in the whole physical universe, or beyond the physical universe.

Many cultures have treated parts of the physical universe as gods. There are thunder gods, gods of the sea, gods of the forest, gods of the underworld, and so forth. The sky, the earth and the sun are commonly personified and worshipped. The common thread of such worship is the dependence of human beings on favourable treatment by the worshipped being. But such dependency is, according to our previous reflections, neither necessary nor sufficient for being a god. What is required, and what is missing, is some sort of cognitive and emotional life. We can still stand in awe of the power of the sea, the flash of lightning and the rumbling of thunder, the majesty of a forest, the gift of rain to a parched land, the miracle of germination and growth, and other wonders of nature. But we can no longer personify them. Our emotional appreciation of such natural phenomena cannot be worship. Scientific investigation and scientific theorizing have dedivinized the world.

But perhaps a particular human being is a god. Nothing in our definition rules it out.

Indeed, what better model could there be for a human being to worship and seek to emulate than another human being who is without flaws? Religions usually insist on the difference between humans and gods. Almost all the world's contemporary major religions, for example insist that their founder is not divine. Think for example of Abraham, Lao-Tse, Siddartha Gautama, Vardamana Mahavira, Mohammed, Guru Nanak Dev Ji, or Bahá'u'lláh. The only major religion that worships its human founder as a god is Christianity.

We have good reason to believe that Jesus of Nazareth existed. Was he without flaws? The Gospels represent Jesus as demanding a devotion which supersedes all other personal attachments (Matthew 10:37), as describing those who do not follow him as his enemies (Matthew 12:30), as promising to disown in the presence of his Father in heaven those who disown him in the presence of others (Matthew 10:33), and as saying that those who do not eat his flesh and drink his blood will not have (eternal) life (John 6:53). This demand for all-consuming devotion, while not a dominant motif in Jesus' reported preaching, is a flaw. It is the source of the exclusivism in Christianity that has been responsible for enormous suffering by millions of people over the centuries, for example in the Crusades and in the Inquisition. Even though Christian charity inspired by the message and example of Jesus is an admirable virtue, Jesus as portrayed in the Christian Gospels is a flawed human being.

Can we reject out of hand the suggestion that some other human being might be an appropriate object of religious worship? We would have to be certain that this other human being is without cognitive, emotional or moral flaws. That is not impossible. A flawless knower, for example, need not be omniscient, or even infallible. It is enough to proportion one's confidence in one's beliefs to one's accumulated evidence, and to be ready to seek out and consider

dispassionately new evidence that might lead one to change one's mind. Similarly, a flawless emotional life requires only that one's feelings are in accordance with what one reasonably believes the facts to be. And a flawless moral life does not require saintliness. It is enough if one does not violate the moral rules that constrain every human being, even if one fails sometimes to perform a possible morally praiseworthy act of kindness. So a human being might well be without cognitive, emotional or moral flaws. But the rest of us could not be confident of that fact, especially if the person is still alive. A living human being might acquire flaws after being made an object of worship; being treated as a god in one's own lifetime might well induce a certain arrogance.

So there may indeed be some divine human beings, but we cannot be confident enough in the divinity of any particular human being to make that person an object of religious worship.

Perhaps the whole physical universe, or some aspect of it, is a god. We find this sort of pantheism in Plato's *Timaeus*, which postulates a world-soul as the basic deity. We find it also in ancient Stoicism, which identifies god with the cosmos or with the soul of the cosmos. The physical universe as a whole has however turned out not to be animated and intelligent in the way that Plato and the Stoics supposed. Astronomical processes operate according to invariant physical laws, without immanent intelligent direction. The stuff of the physical universe as a whole is neither alive nor intelligent.

Is there a god who transcends the physical universe? Such a being would be an agent with a flawless cognitive and emotional life. The idea of a cognitive agent who transcends the physical universe gets its purchase from psycho-physical dualism about human beings. It is supposed that the animating principle of a human being, or at least the part of it that is responsible for human

thinking, is distinct from the living organism, and capable of continuing to exist even after one has irretrievably lost one's ability to function in the world: to breathe, to be aware of one's surroundings and of one's own bodily processes, to act in the world, and so forth. A transcendent god is a separate mind, whose independence from the physical universe is like the independence of the post mortem human mind detached from its body. The difference is that human minds are flawed, whereas a god is not. The supposition of a separable human mind appears to get its purchase in turn from the fact that human mental activity is private and independent of external circumstances. But it does not follow that the mind can be completely detached from its physical basis. Research on the brain has convincingly established that all mental processes depend on brain processes. Whether we identify them with brain processes in some sort of materialistic fashion or take them to be causally inefficacious epiphenomena, mental processes cannot exist without brain activity. It is a mistake to suppose that one's mind can continue to exist even after one's brain has irreversibly ceased to function.

With the collapse of the notion of a human mind detachable from any body, there follows the collapse of the notion of a divine mind permanently detached from any body. The concept of a thinker with no organ of thinking, or of a doer with no limbs or other organs to do anything with, simply makes no sense.

The same reasoning undercuts the idea of a transcendent god that lies beyond all duality, including the duality of knower and known. We find this idea, inspired by the mystical experience, in such western thinkers as Plotinus and in some schools of Hindu thought. The mystical experience does occur. People do sometimes have the experience of absolute unity, and it moves them deeply. But the experience does not come with its own interpretation. To interpret

it as a union with the ultimate principle of all physical reality, as is commonly done, is to assume that physical reality depends in some way on a source beyond it. This assumption gets its purchase from a human being's experience of agency. Each of us can mentally conceive of some plan to produce something, decide to implement this plan, and carry it out. Thus our unobserved mental activity will be the source of a new physical reality like a cooked meal or a row of vegetables in a garden. But to project the dependence of such an artefact on unobserved mental activity to the dependence of the whole universe on a non-physical creative principle is to violate two essential restrictions on human creation. First, all human creation takes place within a context of physical reality: raw materials are shaped by the movements of parts of one's body. The supposed ultimate creative principle of the physical universe, however, has neither raw materials to work with nor bodily organs to do the working. Second, all human mental activity is indissolubly linked to physical activity of the brain, whereas the supposed ultimate creative principle of the physical universe has no brain, or other analogous organ, with which to think. There is thus no basis for projecting the creative activity of the human mind to some ultimate creative source of the whole physical universe.

Having looked within the physical universe, at the physical universe as a whole, and beyond the physical universe, we have failed to find a divine being in any of the possible places. There might be somewhere, sometime, a human being who is so flawless that he or she could be an appropriate object of religious worship. But we will never be confident enough in the flawlessness of any particular human beings to set them up as gods. For practical purposes, there is no god.