

Article

Why Atheism Remains Plausible: From Cosmology to Geography

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Abstract: On 17 February 1600, Giordano Bruno, the sixteenth-century pantheist, was executed. Rejecting a transcendent deity and denying a personal God, his pantheistic view was condemned as atheistic heresy. Bruno's philosophy can be recognized as a crucial precursor to the rise of modern atheism—the explicit belief that there is no God. Historically, the Church has vehemently opposed this perspective. However, theism has gradually lost its dominant foothold across much of the Western world as scientific discoveries emerged, philosophical arguments appeared, and evidence-based research popularized. In the United States, for instance, the proportion of individuals identifying with no religious affiliation has rapidly increased from eight percent of the total population in 2000 to twenty-one percent in 2022. This secularizing trend is widely predicted to continue in the coming decades. Ultimately, one of the primary reasons for the growing presence of atheists is that the atheistic perspective remains a philosophically and scientifically plausible framework, supported by arguments ranging from cosmology to geographical distribution.

Keywords: atheism; theism; cosmology; causality; geography

1. The Question of Implausibility

William Tindale provides a framework for evaluating the plausibility of arguments, emphasizing two key criteria that are particularly relevant to this discussion. The first criterion highlights the subjective nature of plausibility, suggesting that an argument is deemed plausible when listeners can relate it to examples or experiences, they already possess. This subjective quality underscores the importance of logical coherence and the ability of an argument to resonate with the audience's existing knowledge or beliefs. For instance, if a listener hears an argument that aligns with their personal experiences or observations, they are more likely to find it plausible. The second criterion focuses on the progression of plausibility, where a conclusion that initially seems less plausible becomes more plausible through logical reasoning based on premises that are themselves highly plausible [1]. This dynamic process illustrates how arguments can shift perceptions and enhance the credibility of a conclusion. For example, consider the statement "John does not like lemons." Initially, this conclusion might have a certain level of plausibility [2]. However, if an argument is presented with premises that are even more plausible, such as "John avoids sour foods" and "John has expressed dislike for citrus fruits," the plausibility of the conclusion "John does not like lemons" increases. This interplay between premises and conclusions is central to constructing arguments that are not only logical but also persuasive to the audience.

This paper aims to demonstrate that atheistic arguments can meet these criteria for plausibility, even when confronted with robust theistic counterarguments. By focusing on two specific arguments—the cosmological argument from theism and the argument from geographical distribution from atheism—it seeks to illustrate the enduring plausibility of atheism [2, 3]. The cosmological argument, often cited as a cornerstone of theistic reasoning, posits that the existence of the universe necessitates a first cause or an uncaused cause, which is typically identified as a divine entity. This argument appeals to the

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principle of causality and the intuitive notion that every effect must have a cause. However, atheistic responses challenge this premise by questioning the necessity of a first cause and exploring alternative explanations, such as the possibility of an eternal universe or the role of quantum mechanics in explaining the origins of existence. The argument from geographical distribution, on the other hand, highlights the correlation between religious beliefs and geographical or cultural factors. This atheistic argument suggests that the prevalence of specific religious beliefs in certain regions is influenced more by historical, social, and environmental factors than by the inherent truth of those beliefs. The prevalence of Christianity in Western countries and Buddhism in East Asia can be explained by historical dissemination, cultural integration, and societal norms. By examining these two arguments, the paper demonstrates that atheism retains plausibility through logical reasoning and empirical observations. While the cosmological argument presents a compelling case for theism, the atheistic critique exposes its limitations and offers alternative perspectives that are equally plausible. Similarly, the argument from geographical distribution underscores the subjective and culturally contingent nature of religious beliefs, reinforcing the plausibility of atheism as a worldview that prioritizes empirical evidence and logical consistency. Although this paper does not claim to address all theistic and atheistic arguments comprehensively, it provides a focused analysis that highlights the resilience and plausibility of atheism in the face of intellectual challenges.

2. The Cosmological Argument

Atheism presents a significant challenge to one of the most prominent arguments for theism: the cosmological argument. This argument, which has been simplified for clarity, seeks to establish the existence of a divine cause for the universe. By examining its premises and conclusions, atheism can provide a plausible counter-narrative that undermines the argument's strength and coherence.

The first premise of the cosmological argument asserts that everything that begins to exist must have a cause [1, 4]. This principle is rooted in our everyday observations, where causality appears to govern the emergence of phenomena. For instance, we observe that objects do not spontaneously appear without a preceding cause, reinforcing the intuitive appeal of this premise. However, this foundational assumption is not without its critics, as it raises questions about its universal applicability, particularly when extended to the origins of the universe itself [5].

The second premise claims that the universe began to exist. This assertion aligns with contemporary scientific theories, such as the Big Bang model, which suggests that the universe had a finite starting point. The idea of a beginning to the universe lends support to the argument's structure, as it implies that the universe is not eternal and therefore requires an explanation for its origin. However, this premise also invites scrutiny, as alternative cosmological models propose scenarios where the universe may not have a definitive beginning, challenging the necessity of this claim [1, 6].

From these premises, the argument draws its first sub-conclusion: that the universe must have a cause [3, 7]. This conclusion follows logically if the premises are accepted as true. The notion of causality applied to the universe as a whole suggests that its existence cannot be self-explanatory and must be attributed to an external cause. However, this step in the argument is not immune to critique, as it assumes that the principles governing causality within the universe can be extrapolated to the universe itself, a point that has been contested by philosophers and scientists alike.

The third premise posits that no scientific explanation based on physical laws can account for the origin of the universe. This claim highlights the limitations of current scientific understanding and suggests that the cause of the universe must lie beyond the scope of naturalistic explanations [8, 9]. While this premise seeks to establish the insufficiency of scientific accounts, it also opens the door to alternative interpretations, including the possibility that future scientific advancements may provide a comprehensive explanation for the universe's origin without invoking a supernatural cause.

Building on the previous premises, the argument's second sub-conclusion asserts that the cause of the universe must be personal. This claim is based on the idea that an impersonal, non-intelligent process cannot adequately account for the intentionality and order observed in the universe. By attributing the cause to a personal agent, the argument seeks to bridge the gap between the abstract concept of a cause and the specific characteristics associated with a divine being. However, this leap from an impersonal to a personal cause is not universally accepted, as it relies on assumptions that are not necessarily substantiated by the premises.

The main conclusion of the cosmological argument is that this personal cause must be God. This conclusion ties together the preceding premises and sub-conclusions, presenting a coherent narrative that aligns with theistic beliefs. However, the argument's reliance on specific interpretations of causality, the nature of the universe, and the characteristics of its cause leaves room for alternative explanations [10]. Critics argue that the conclusion is not the only plausible outcome and that other interpretations, such as an uncaused universe or a non-theistic cause, remain viable.

The cosmological argument is often regarded as one of the strongest theological arguments for the existence of God. Its appeal lies in its alignment with everyday experiences, where causality appears to be a fundamental principle. However, the argument's strength is contingent on the validity of its premises and the absence of compelling counter-arguments. If atheistic perspectives can demonstrate that the premises do not necessarily lead to the conclusion or that alternative explanations are equally plausible, the argument's persuasive power diminishes. This highlights the importance of critically evaluating the assumptions and logical steps underlying the argument [11].

One significant critique of the cosmological argument is its exemption of God from the principle of causality. If everything that begins to exist requires a cause, then exempting God from this requirement appears inconsistent. This exemption raises the question of why the universe itself cannot be the uncaused entity, as this would equally satisfy the principle of causality. Furthermore, the argument's reliance on the principle of causality has been challenged by the fallacy of composition, which suggests that properties of individual components do not necessarily apply to the whole. For example, while every human has a mother, it does not follow that the human race as a whole has a single mother. Similarly, the fact that individual entities within the universe have causes does not necessarily imply that the universe itself must have a cause [12, 13]. These critiques undermine the argument's ability to conclusively establish the existence of God.

Another critique focuses on the argument's claim that the universe cannot be explained by unfree, non-intelligent physical processes, necessitating a personal cause. This reasoning assumes that the absence of a current scientific explanation implies the impossibility of such an explanation. However, history demonstrates that many phenomena once attributed to divine intervention, such as lightning and rainbows, were later explained through scientific inquiry. This historical precedent suggests that the lack of a current explanation for the universe's origin does not preclude the possibility of a future scientific account. By drawing parallels to past discoveries, this critique challenges the argument's assertion that a personal cause is the only plausible explanation for the universe's existence.

In light of these critiques, the cosmological argument's conclusion is subject to significant doubt. The argument's reliance on specific interpretations of causality, the nature of the universe, and the characteristics of its cause leaves room for alternative explanations that do not necessitate the existence of God. By highlighting these loopholes and providing real-world examples of phenomena that were once unexplained but are now understood through science, atheism offers a plausible counter-narrative. This perspective fulfills the criteria of plausibility by demonstrating that the cosmological argument is not the only viable explanation for the universe's origin, thereby reinforcing the defensibility of atheistic viewpoints.

3. Global Distribution and Diversity of Religious Beliefs

Besides engaging in philosophical debates on theological arguments, the study of demography and sociology provides significant insights into the plausibility of atheism. The global distribution and diversity of religious beliefs offer a compelling empirical challenge to the notion of a singular divine entity. These studies reveal patterns that suggest religious beliefs are deeply intertwined with human geography and cultural evolution, rather than being universally derived from divine revelation or reasoning. This perspective highlights the importance of examining religion through the lens of human adaptation to socioecological conditions, which often vary significantly across regions.

Religious beliefs exhibit a strong correlation with geography, underscoring the influence of local environments and cultural contexts on spiritual practices. For instance, individuals born in Saudi Arabia are far more likely to adhere to Islam compared to those born in European countries, where Christianity has historically dominated. Similarly, Hinduism is predominantly practiced by those born in India, reflecting the deep cultural and historical roots of the religion in the region. In contrast, countries such as China and Japan, which lack a dominant religious tradition, often see higher rates of atheism. These patterns suggest that religious adherence is less about universal truths and more about cultural and geographical contingencies [11, 14]. Furthermore, the rapid growth of Islam in certain regions is primarily attributed to demographic factors, such as high fertility rates in Muslim-majority areas like sub-Saharan Africa, rather than widespread conversions based on theological reasoning. Meanwhile, societies that emphasize evidence-based inquiry, such as the United States, have witnessed a decline in Christian adherence over the past two decades, with adult Christians decreasing from 78% of the population in 2007 to 63% in 2024. These trends illustrate how religious beliefs are shaped by local socioecological conditions rather than divine revelations, challenging the notion of a universally applicable religious truth.

The diversity of religious beliefs worldwide further complicates the idea of a singular divine truth. Different religions make mutually exclusive claims about metaphysical realities, creating a landscape of conflicting doctrines. For example, Muslims in sub-Saharan Africa adhere to monotheistic beliefs centered on Allah, while Hindus in India practice polytheism, worshipping Vishnu and numerous other deities [15–17]. Indigenous spiritualities and tribal religions add even more variety, with beliefs in local spirits and supernatural entities. If belief in God were based on universally reliable methods such as reasoning and evidence, one would expect a global convergence toward a single set of doctrines, akin to the way scientific principles are universally recognized. Instead, the geographical divergence of religious beliefs suggests that cultural and historical factors play a more significant role in shaping spiritual practices. Even the apparent similarities among Abrahamic religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—can be attributed to historical interactions facilitated by trade and geographical proximity, rather than a shared foundation of logical reasoning. These religions emerged in closely located regions—Europe, the Middle East, and sub-Saharan Africa—where cultural exchanges influenced their development. This cultural contingency underscores the idea that religious diversity is a product of human history and geography rather than divine intervention or universal reasoning.

Another striking observation is that most religious believers reject all religions except their own, further emphasizing the human-centric nature of spiritual beliefs. For instance, a Muslim who affirms the existence of Allah typically dismisses the Hindu deity Vishnu, while a Christian who accepts Jesus often rejects the concept of ancestral spirits revered in certain indigenous traditions. This selective acceptance of religious doctrines highlights the subjective and culturally contingent nature of belief systems. In essence, believers around the world are atheists concerning thousands of other gods, excluding the one they worship. This widespread rejection of incompatible religious beliefs shaped by geography suggests that it is more plausible to view all religions as human constructions rather than any single one as the uniquely true representation of divine reality. The geographical and

cultural specificity of religious beliefs further supports the argument that they are adaptations to local conditions rather than universal truths.

Consequently, atheism emerges as a compelling and plausible explanation for the global diversity of religious beliefs [18]. While this argument does not conclusively disprove the existence of God, it highlights the plausibility of atheism in the context of widespread variation in spiritual practices. This conclusion is firmly supported by credible premises, including the strong correlation between geography and religion, the mutually exclusive claims of different religions, and the tendency of individuals to reject beliefs that differ from their own. These premises are grounded in observable global data and common social phenomena, fulfilling the criteria of plausibility that a logical conclusion must be inferred from prior statements. By examining the interplay between geography, culture, and religion, it becomes evident that atheism provides a rational framework for understanding the persistence of geographically divergent belief systems. This perspective not only challenges traditional notions of divine revelation but also encourages a deeper exploration of the human factors that shape spiritual practices, reinforcing the idea that atheism remains a plausible and intellectually robust explanation for global religious diversity.

4. Final Thoughts

Based on the current limited amount of substantial evidence, both theism and atheism possess the capacity to present logical arguments and explanations that have been debated for centuries. The philosophy of religion, as a field of inquiry, has endured through thousands of years, reflecting the profound and enduring human quest to understand existence, purpose, and the nature of the universe. Despite the extensive discourse, an exact and definitive conclusion regarding the existence of a deity remains elusive. This lack of resolution, however, does not diminish the significance of the debate itself. The plausibility of atheism does not inherently negate the plausibility of theism, nor does it render religion devoid of value or purpose. Religion, for many, serves as a spiritual pillar, offering solace, guidance, and a framework for navigating life's adversities. In this context, the necessity of proving the existence of a deity may become secondary to the practical and emotional support that belief systems provide to individuals and communities. From my perspective, a healthy and progressive society is one that embraces a diversity of religious and theological perspectives, fostering an environment of mutual respect and understanding. Such inclusivity not only enriches cultural and intellectual discourse but also strengthens the social fabric by encouraging empathy and coexistence among individuals with differing worldviews.

Ultimately, the coexistence of diverse beliefs contributes to a world of intellectual and cultural complexity, where individuals are encouraged to critically evaluate various perspectives and refine their own beliefs. This dynamic interplay of ideas fosters intellectual growth and societal progress. While a definitive conclusion about the existence of a deity remains unattainable, the interplay between empirical evidence and theoretical reasoning continues to sustain the plausibility of various philosophical arguments. Atheism, in particular, demonstrates its capacity to withstand rigorous scrutiny by countering robust theistic arguments and presenting its own logical frameworks supported by empirical data. This resilience underscores the intellectual validity of atheistic perspectives and their ability to contribute meaningfully to philosophical and theological discourse. Furthermore, the ongoing dialogue between theistic and atheistic viewpoints highlights the importance of fostering environments where open and respectful discussions can thrive. Such dialogues not only deepen our understanding of existential questions but also encourage the development of critical thinking and empathy. In light of these considerations, I firmly maintain that atheism is a plausible worldview, one that deserves recognition and respect within the broader spectrum of philosophical thought. Future research in this domain could benefit from interdisciplinary approaches, integrating insights from philosophy, cognitive science, and

sociology to further explore the implications of belief systems on individual and collective human experiences.

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