

Answering the New Atheists Concerning the Burden of Proof

This session will present an analysis of the argument that theists have the burden of proof while atheists are rational in being atheists until and unless God's existence is proven. Building upon Bertrand Russell and Antony Flew, the New Atheist movement has developed the argument rhetorically, and it seems to play a rather important role in their intellectual defense of atheism. In this session the speaker will try to show that the New Atheists' reasons for shifting the whole burden of proof to the theist are unjustified, and he will suggest a better way of looking at how the burden of proof should be distributed.

Mats Selander is a teacher at the CredoAcademy, an apologetic study center in Stockholm, Sweden. He has an M.A in Philosophy of Religion and Ethics from Talbot School of Theology, Los Angeles, and the equivalence of a B.A in Theology from the Nordic Bible Institute, Säfte Sweden. Mats is currently working on his PhD in virtue ethics and abortion at the University of Stavanger, Norway. His philosophical interest is Philosophy of Religion, Ethics and Philosophy of Science. He is the editor and contributor to a soon to come book in Swedish about the New Atheist movement. Mats is married to Sophia, and they have a one year-old-son, Samuel.

I. Introduction

a. The argument from the burden of proof is an important argument for the New Atheists.

b. Quotes:

i. "Thus the burden of proof falls squarely on the believer. If the believer is unable to provide positive proof of God's existence, the skeptic is justified in his atheism."

From: <http://www.rejectionofpascalswager.net/godburden.html>

ii. "So who has the burden of proof, and why? The burden of proof rests on the side making an assertion about the world. In the religious debate, one side is saying that there is some kind of god. The other side is arguing that the assertion of a god is not justified. The burden rests on the religious because they are making a statement they claim is a valid identification of reality. The atheist does not need to prove that a god is impossible. He only needs to show that the religious assertion is not justified."

From:

http://rebirthofreason.com/Articles/Rowlands/Burdens_of_Proof.shtm

1

- iii. “Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence. This is the way the real world and science work. When you say God exists, you are making an extraordinary claim; therefore, the burden of proof is on you to back up your claim. A position that God doesn't exist is not a "belief," it's the standard position we all start out with until we're indoctrinated into religious schools of thought. People aren't born believing in Jesus. They start out atheist: lacking belief. There is no counter-claim necessary. Nobody has to prove the tooth fairy doesn't exist either. Furthermore, it's technically impossible to prove a negative of this nature. I can no easier prove God doesn't exist than you can disprove my claim that I have an invisible, ethereal unicorn in the trunk of my car. I say I do. It's not my fault he disappears when you look there. Prove he isn't there. You can't.”

From:

http://freethoughtpedia.com/wiki/Top_ten_arguments_for_the_existence_of_God

II. Antony Flew: The Presumption of Atheism

- a. Distinction between positive and negative atheism:
 - i. Positive atheism: the positive belief that there is no God.
 - ii. Negative atheism: lack of belief in God's existence.
 - iii. The theist has the burden of proof in the same way as the attorney has the burden of proof in a court.
- b. Critique of the distinction between positive and negative atheism:
 - i. Harsh critique: intellectually dishonest to try to hide your positive atheism behind negative atheism.

- ii. Soft critique: see this distinction as a pedagogical device to point out that the theist has the burden of proof.

III. Who has the burden of proof in the discussion of the burden of proof?

- a. Starting point: an equally divided burden of proof.
- b. Arguments are needed to prove that one side has the whole burden of proof.
- c. The one who claims an asymmetric burden of proof has the whole second-degree burden of proof to show that.
- d. What then are the atheists proofs for putting the whole burden of proof on the theist?

IV. Atheistic arguments for the asymmetric division of the burden of proof:

- a. Flew's argument:
 - i. Knowledge-requirement: In the question of God's existence we must demand knowledge, or we should not believe in God.
 - ii. Answering Flew:
 - 1. Flew presupposes a certain (and questionable) view of 'knowledge' and 'proof'. But why not let that be part of the discussion about God's existence, instead of trying to rig the discussion by putting the burden of proof on the theist?
 - 2. Flew seems to presuppose a narrow empiristic view of knowledge and proof, which would exclude knowledge in everything that cannot be proven in that way (which is a lot!)

3. Wainright: True belief (with good reasons, but not enough reasons to call it 'knowledge') will have the same result as knowing the same belief. Such probable belief should not be dismissed out of hand.
4. Even if we accept Flew's narrow empiristic demand on knowledge and proof, it does not put the whole burden of proof on the theist when the opponent is the positive atheist.
 - a. Illustration: discussion about the existence of objectively valid moral obligations and values.
 - b. It's a trivial statement to say that the whole burden of proof falls on the part that speaks and not on the part that is silent.
5. Conclusion: Flew would probably agree that the burden of proof is evenly divided between the theist and the positive atheist.

b. New Atheist's argument

i. Three arguments:

1. The burden of proof on the one who claims that something exists and no burden of proof on the one who claims that something does not exist.
2. Extraordinary claims demand extraordinary evidence.
3. Burden of proof on the one who claims 'the world plus something', and no burden of proof on the one who only claims 'the world'.

- ii. The burden of proof on the one who makes positive existential claims:
 1. Popular analogies to illustrate the argument: the Loch Ness monster, the Abominable snowman, the Spaghetti monster, the heavenly tea-pot, etc.

 2. Arguments against:
 - a. Counter examples where (the whole of part of) the burden of proof falls on negative existential claims:
 - i. “There is no fish in Loch Ness.”

 - ii. “There are no bacteria in this room.”

 - iii. “There is no perpetual motion machine.”

 - iv. “There are no married bachelors.”

 - v. “There are no objective moral values.”

 - vi. “There is no ‘built-in-rationality’ in nature.”

- iii. Extraordinary claims demand extraordinary evidence:
 1. Crucial question: What is extraordinary? That God exists or that God does not exist?

2. Certain religious claims are obviously extraordinary e.g. “Jesus rose from the dead” and they demand extraordinary evidence. We claim that there *are* extraordinary evidence for this extraordinary claim.
 3. What is meant by “evidence”? Sufficient evidence for the believer (that could include religious experience)? Or such evidence that will force an atheist to start believing in God?
 4. “Extraordinary” is a relative word. It is in relation to my background knowledge and world-view that certain claims appear “extraordinary”.
 5. From a naturalist perspective not only God is extraordinary but also objective morality, consciousness, the validity of rationality, free will, the soul and objective aesthetic judgments. To the degree that such things appear non-extraordinary to us, naturalism itself seems extraordinary and requires extraordinary evidence!
- iv. The burden of proof on the one who claims something ‘extra’ besides the visible world.
1. What are the scope of the discussion? Theism should be treated in relation to other world-view claims about ultimate reality.
 2. If the atheist excludes positive atheism from the discussion, we are not allowed to compare the explanatory power of theism with that of positive atheism. But that seems to be an irrational narrowing of the discussion.
 3. Does the theist and the positive atheist start off with the same “world”? It seems not. Our worldviews influence how we see the world. The burden of proof is not only on the additional claim (that

God exists) but on both parties to show that their world-view makes more sense than their opponents.

V. Russells teapot

a. Two observations:

- i. God is not a material object. The way we get knowledge about material objects cannot, without argument, be used as the paradigm for how we get knowledge about God.
- ii. Russells teapot illustrates how our background knowledge determines the burden of proof.

VI. The burden of proof determined by our background knowledge and phenomenology:

a. Background knowledge

- i. What is our background information for the existence of God?
- ii. Theists and atheists will disagree on what counts as relevant background knowledge.

b. Phenomenology: how things appear to us; what seems to be the case.

- i. Phenomenology can help us determine what theists and atheists have in common, which in turn can help us decide who has the burden of proof.
- ii. The phenomenology behind some of common arguments for and against God's existence.

VII. The Design argument and the burden of proof:

a. Phenomenology supports design (and Dawkins agrees!).

- b. Crucial question: has Dawkins proved that evolution excludes intelligent input? If not, design seems to be the default position.

VIII. The Kosmological argument and the burden of proof:

- a. Phenomenology: things that start to exist are caused.

- b. Background knowledge: the Big Bang theory.

- c. The atheist has a lot to explain.

- d. The Christian theist must explain why the cause of the universe is the God of the Bible.

IX. The Moral argument and the burden of proof:

- a. Phenomenology supports objective morality.

- b. Difficult to see how phenomenology and background knowledge determines whether God is necessary for objective morality.

X. The problem of evil and the burden of proof:

- a. Phenomenology seems to put a heavier burden of proof on the theist.

- b. But the atheist still has things to explain.

XI. Conclusion

- a. The burden of proof falls out differently depending on the argument.
- b. There is no simple rule that gives us reason to put the burden of proof on one side only.
- c. It is more rational to let the issue of the burden of proof be part of the God-discussion itself, argument for argument, instead of bringing it to a meta-level.