

# The Existence of God



# Where Does the Evidence Point?

Omtyckt föreläsare, knivskarp debattör och en av världens ledande kristna filosofer. Doktorsgrad i filosofi under John Hick vid University of Birmingham och i teologi under Wolfhart Pannenberg vid Universitat Munchen. Forfattare till ett tiotal bocker och ett hundratal artiklar som publicerats i de ledande filosofiska tidskrifterna. Undervisar vid Talbot School of Theology vid Biola University i Kalifornien.

Debatt mellan

## William Lane Craig och Ingvar Johansson

(In English)

1999

**Tisdag 9 mars 19.00**  
**Horsal G, Humanisthuset**

**Eftersits med fika**

Docent i teoretisk filosofi och vetenskapsteori. Universitetslektor vid Institutionen for filosofi och lingvistik har i Umea. Har skrivit bade fackfilosofiska bocker och artiklar kring en mangd olika filosofiska problem i bade svenska och internationella fack-tidskrifter. Medforfattare till tva larobocker i filosofi (bl a "Positivism och Marxism").

Arrangorer: **credo**

**Filosofiska Foreningen**

Sveriges Kyrkliga Studieforbund (SKS), Folkuniversitetet (Kursverksamheten vid Umea universitet)

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## **Where Does the Evidence point?**

March 9, 1999, Hörsal G, Humanisthuset

### **Organizers**

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### **Schedule**

#### **Introduction** (3 min)

*Torkel and Peter* (very short on Credo/FF, short on Craig and Johansson)  
*Ibrahim Baylan* (short on the rules and timing).

#### **Debate** (90 min)

(time keeper will hold time cards from 20 down to 0)

20 min: Craig's opening arguments  
20 min: Johansson's opening arguments  
12 min: Craig's first rebuttal  
12 min: Johansson's first rebuttal  
8 min: Craig's second rebuttal  
8 min: Johansson's second rebuttal  
5 min: Craig's closing statement  
5 min: Johansson's closing statement

#### **Question and answer time** (-60 min)

Ibrahim makes sure both get their share of questions, answers no longer than 2 minutes + 1 min comment from opponent.  
Someone passes a wireless microphone around to those who want to ask questions.

#### **'Eftersits'** (-60 min)

Peter and Torkel says welcome.

## The Craig-Johansson Debate

### First contribution

I am here to debate the existence of the Christian God. And I take myself to be here both as a philosopher and as an atheist. I will use this opportunity to try to show both what philosophical reasoning can be like and what atheism can mean.

*As a philosopher*, I want to say at once that I regard philosophy as a discipline which overlaps with - and can interact with - both science and theology. In spite of all the differences - often huge differences - there is neither a complete gulf between philosophy and science nor a complete gulf between philosophy and theology. The overlapping area is part of what might be called rational metaphysics.

*As an atheist*, I want to make another thing clear from the start. Just as there are different kinds of religions, there are different kinds of atheisms. In particular, there is a divide between atheists who claim that because there is no God there are no moral rules either, and atheists who think that the non-existence of God by no means implies the non-existence of morals and ethics. I belong to the latter group.

I regard myself as *a humanist atheist*, and as such I regard part of the Christian morality as a bad morality. Now, the Christian morality is *not* the topic for tonight's debate, but for me it lurks in the background and makes this debate much more serious than it may seem. Part of this debate about God's existence may look like a mere intellectual game, but it is a game with consequences.

O.K. Let's get started. In order to have a meaningful discussion of the question whether there are any good *intellectual* reasons to believe in the Christian God, we have to know something about him. What are his essential characteristics? I have listed ten of them - you can see them on my overhead picture (with some synonyms and explanatory words).

The Christian God is assumed to be:

1. person-like (God is not like a thing; he has a will, he can forgive, etc.)
2. pure spirit (God contains no matter; he has no corporeal body)
3. beyond space and time (God is transcendent in relation to our world)
4. all-knowing (omniscient, no limits to his knowledge)
5. all-powerful (omnipotent, almighty, infinitely powerful)
6. morally perfect (all-good, omnibenevolent, infinitely good)
7. the creator of the universe (the creator of space-time-matter)
8. the creator or mediator of all valid basic ethical principles  
(the ten commandments and the sermon of the mount)
9. concerned with mankind (God bothers about our behaviour)
10. the one and only of this kind.

I will devote the whole of my first contribution of our debate to the so-called cosmological argument for the existence of God. The reason is that there is a widespread belief that the Big Bang theory of modern scientific cosmology implies the existence of a creator like the Christian God (look at the attributes number 3 and 7). Later on in the debate, however, I will take time to show that there cannot possibly exist a God which has all the ten attributes which I have listed.

The cosmological argument says that we need to postulate God in order to get an intellectually satisfactory explanation of the existence of our universe. Now, from a philosophical point of view, there are four different *kinds* of hypotheses about the origin of the universe, and I will argue that the hypothesis that some transcendent God created the universe belongs to the *intellectually weakest* kind of explanation. You can see the four options I am thinking of on my overhead. They are:

4. The universe has had a beginning - it was created by something beyond the universe (e.g. the Christian God made the Big Bang).
3. The universe has had a beginning - it came into existence from nothing (e.g. the Big Bang has no external cause).
2. The universe has had no beginning - its past is infinitely long.
1. The universe has had no beginning - its past is nonetheless finite in length.

To start with. I will compare *only* the alternatives number 4 and number 3. Craig thinks there is a metaphysical principle which clearly refutes alternative number 3, and that, therefore, we are forced to choose the view that something beyond the universe created it. The principle Craig leans on is on my overhead:

Metaphysical principle A: *Out of nothing, nothing (spatiotemporal) can come.*

I don't believe that this principle is *necessarily* true, but I do find it a very reasonable principle. Furthermore, since I think that science, like religion, can be criticized philosophically, I fully accept that Craig tries to use this principle in order to contest what a lot of scientists say about the origin of the universe. In this sense, I am on speaking terms with Craig. However, let us now try to see what actually follows logically from this old principle.

Firstly, of course, it follows that *if* the principle is true and *if* the universe had a beginning, and *if* the principle can be used in isolation, then the beginning of the universe must be caused by something beyond space and time. But before we draw any definite conclusions we have to look at another principle, too. These principles are not like simple mathematical truths which are beyond doubt. Therefore, one can never be sure that a principle can be used independently of other proposed metaphysical principles. Look at the next principle, B:

Metaphysical principle B: *Out of something non-spatiotemporal, nothing spatiotemporal can come.*

This principle is to me just as reasonable as the first one. I have read quite a lot of philosophy, but I have never seen a philosopher who has produced even a sketch of what kind of *mechanism* it is that can connect something situated outside space and time with space, time, and the matter within. From principle B - if used alone - it follows of course that God *cannot possibly* have created the universe. What does Craig then think about this principle? I have read some of his debates and papers, but I have never seen him discuss this very principle. Craig owe me and other atheists an explanation of why principle A should be regarded as true but principle B be as false.

What does *my* situation look like then? I seem to be stuck with two principles, one of which implies that the universe cannot come from nothing, and another one which implies that the universe cannot come from God either. So, what am I going to choose? Now, if a dilemma like this cannot be settled by empirical observations or rational principles - or a combination of both - then one has to take recourse to pragmatic principles. Here is an old such philosophical principle (called Ockham's razor after a medieval philosopher and theologian):

Pragmatic principle: *Entities are not to be multiplied beyond necessity.*

In the case at hand, this principle speaks clearly in favour of the view that the Big Bang came out of nothing. To assume a God here is to multiply entities beyond necessity.

This far I have been saying only that *if* I have to choose between *only* the options 3 and 4, I would opt for alternative 3. I find it more reasonable to believe that the universe came into existence from nothing, than that it was created by a God. However, there are other and better intellectual options, and that is to accept *both* principle A and principle B, and then *deny both* the alternatives 4 and 3. In my opinion, the universe has probably had no beginning in time; as is claimed in the remaining alternatives, i.e. 2 and 1. Both these alternatives flatly contradicts the Christian view that God at some time in the past created our world. Also, of course, the answers imply that a theory like that of Big Bang can only be *partially true*. But I don't see such a revision as any great problem for modern science.

Craig is - that I know - familiar with both these alternatives, too. Normally, when he tries to debunk number two, i.e. the view that the past of the universe is *infinite*, he relies on still another metaphysical principle:

Metaphysical principle C: *The (spatiotemporal) world cannot contain actual infinities.*

This principle, you should note, says nothing at all about *potential* or *possible* infinities. That is, the principle does not, for instance, deny that we can in thought forever go on dividing a spatial distance into smaller and smaller pieces. It only says that there is never an *actual* infinity of such pieces. Nor does the principle deny that the *future* may be infinite, since the future is a mere potential infinity. What the principle is taken to deny is that the *past* cannot be infinite, since in that case the universe would be an *actual* and *completed* infinity of temporal bits.

As far as I have checked Craig's writings, he seems to regard the concepts of *actual infinity* and *completed infinity* as synonymous concepts. But for me they are not. An actual infinity is an infinity which exists at a certain moment of time, and all such infinities are of course also completed infinities. The past - which I now assume is infinitely long - is *completed* in the present moment but it is not *actual* in the present moment. The past doesn't fit the usual simple division between actual and potential infinities. Past time is completed time, but it is not actual time. Therefore, we have to look at still another principle:

Metaphysical principle D: *The spatiotemporal world can contain completed infinities.*

I think this principle is true in at least one case, that of time past. Therefore, in my view, number 2 of the alternative explanations of the origin of the universe is better than both 3 and 4. However, I admit that there is something curious about completed infinities, too. Intellectually, we would be even better off if we could do without them. That remark takes me to the lowest alternative, i.e. number 1.

1. The universe has no beginning - its past is nonetheless finite in length.

This alternative needs some extra words of explanation. The question where we can find the edge or the spatial boundary of the universe is a little odd. Why? Because *if* we reach the boundary we have to ask ourselves what is on the other side of the boundary. It seems as if it has to be another spatial extension, but if that is the case we have of course not reached the utmost boundary of space itself. It is hard to make real sense of the idea of a spatial end of the universe, but a meaningful such idea is necessary if one wants to claim that the universe is finite.

Happily for me, however, this century has witnessed a whole new approach to this old perplexity. Einstein's theory of general relativity makes it possible to think the boundaries of space in a new way. It allows us to think of space as in itself curved. According to the general theory of relativity, it is possible that space is curved in such a way that - listen now - it is *finite* but it does *not* have a boundary. What this means in outline can be understood in the following way. Assume that our universe is such that in whatever direction we fly away, we will sooner or later come back to the point we started from without having met any boundary - and, also, without having been affected by any external forces which have drawn us back to the starting point. In that case the universe is finite but it has no boundary.

(In order to better understand this line of thought you may think of two-dimensional beings living in a spherical surface, like the surface of a ball, then they can move around in this finite surface without ever meeting any boundary. And it is the same with us, but in three-dimensional space and with no further dimension outside this three-dimensional space.)

What about time then? Even if space can be curved in such a way that it becomes both finite and without any boundary, this need not be possible for time. If we think of time as curved in such a way that we can travel and come back to the point we started from, we seem to think of time as running both forwards and backwards at the same time. That, surely, seems strange. However, Stephen Hawking, the world's most famous living cosmologist, has interesting ideas about this. He thinks that it is really possible - mathematically and physically - to regard even time as finite but without any boundary or edge. If his views are correct, then the whole problem of when and from where the universe came into existence can be forgotten. The problem of the birth of the universe does not simply arise, and, consequently, we need no hypothesis of a God to explain why it came into existence.

Hawking's solution, you should note, satisfies both the metaphysical principles which Craig accepts, i.e. A and C. Hawking's solution is in no need of the two extra principles, B and D, which I have so far used in order to reject the hypothesis of God.

Now I can summarize my views on the four different kinds of possible explanations of the origin of the universe. If some philosophical problems with the lowest alternative in my list, explanation number 1, can be solved, this alternative will be by far the most intellectually satisfactory one. However, if this alternative is neglected, still number 2 is better than number 3, and number 3 is better than the highest one, number 4. The hypothesis of God is not the best explanation of the origin of the universe. On the contrary, it is the intellectually weakest kind of explanation.

I am very convinced that I am right in this my evaluation of the cosmological argument for the existence of God. But in order to make a certain fact visible, I will just for a moment assume that, really, I am wrong and that the alternative number 4 is the best explanation. What has then been proved? Have we proved that the Christian God exists? No, by no means! *All* that has been proved is that *something* non-spatiotemporal has created the universe. Of the ten attributes of God which I have listed, only the attributes number 3 and number 7 play any role in the cosmological argument. In the argument it is not even proved that this *something* which created the universe is all-powerful. It is merely proved that it - or he or she - is powerful enough to create the universe.

Therefore, *even if* I have been wrong in my evaluation of what is to count as the best intellectual explanation of the origin of the universe, Craig has yet before him the task to prove the existence of all the other 8 attributes of God. And that - I will show in my next contribution - he cannot possibly do.

## Second contribution

I will now display the logical structure of the so-called Theodicy problem, i.e. the problem of evil: If God is good, how come that so many awful things happen even to nice people? The essence of this argument against the existence of God is often grasped *intuitively* even by very small children, but I will explain it from the point of view of modern philosophy of science.

The ten attributes of God which I have listed can very well be called ten assumed *laws* or *axioms* in the theory of God. The law (or attribute) number 9 in the list can be called a "bridge principle". It connects the hypothesis of a non-observable transcendent God with the observable world in which we live. This "bridge principle" makes the hypothesis of God empirically criticizable. From the laws 4, 5, 6, and 9 together, we can derive the testable consequence that this world is quite a happy world. From the list of laws in the theory of God, we can see (9) that he is concerned with human beings, (4) that he is all-knowing, i.e. he knows what is happening to human beings, and (5) that he is all-powerful, which implies that he can help every human being if only he wants to. Furthermore, we can see (6) that he is morally perfect, which must imply that he does not want evil actions to take place. From these four hypotheses it follows logically that this world is a good world to live in *for everyone*.

However, as we all know, there is in our world murder, torture, rape and an almost infinite number of other and lesser evils. An immense lot of observations simply *falsify* the hypothesis that there is a God which has the four attributes 4, 5, 6, and 9. Now, according to modern philosophy of science, such a *falsification* of a grand theory does not imply that one has to *reject all* the four laws under scrutiny. But one has to modify at least *one* of them. As far as I am concerned, Craig is free to put forward any modification he likes, but a classical modification is the following.

It is often said that for some reasons God wanted man to be free, and that to allow freedom is necessarily to allow the possibility of evil actions. Therefore, it is continued, the non-disputable fact that there are evil actions in the world is quite consistent with the fact that God is both morally perfect and all-knowing. This answer, however, means, if you think a little, that God is *not* all-powerful. Hypothesis (or attribute) number 5 is rejected. God is *not* powerful enough to create a combination of freedom and necessary goodness in human beings.

Now, I guess, some of you will retort: "Well, well, but that's *logically* impossible! Not even God can of course break the laws of logic!". My counter-response is this:

But then say so! If you are Christians, and you don't want to lie, then tell everybody that you regard the Christian God as a very powerful God, but that you do not regard him as powerful enough to create human beings which are both free and necessarily morally good. Also, replace all your talk about "God almighty" with other phrases. Do stress the fact which the famous theist philosopher Leibniz stressed: This world is the best of all possible worlds. God is not powerful enough to make anything better than this.



From a purely *intellectual* point of view, such a Leibnizian modification of the Christian teachings is of course possible. But from an *emotional* point of view, I am pretty sure it would mean disaster. For many Christians, religion satisfies very basic human needs; like feeling secure and having trust in other people and in the world. Now, I think that if the old but false phrase "God almighty" is replaced by intellectually more adequate phrases, then the Christian religion could no longer give the emotional comfort it now gives to a lot of people.

(As a matter of fact more follows from the falsification spoken of. The existence of freedom - as interpreted above - also implies that God cannot be all-knowing. He cannot know what we as human beings are going to do in the next moment. God does not know the future.)

Addition to the cosmological argument. I would also like to point out that Craig is not consistent when he discusses the Big Bang theory. You cannot both accept principle C, which Craig does, and claim that the Big Bang theory conforms to the Christian view that the universe has had a beginning. Why? The answer is simple. The solutions to Einstein's theory of general relativity which imply that the universe has had a beginning in time, they also imply that at this point in time, called a *singularity*, there are at least two actual (and completed) infinities. Both the density of matter (i.e. mass per cubic centimetre) and the curvature of space are in this particular "birth point" *infinitely* great. I want to repeat this: If you want to be logically consistent, you cannot possibly regard both the principle C and the theory of Big Bang as true. But Craig does. He contradicts himself.

About transfinite numbers. My argument that there may be an infinite past time is not sensitive to any serious paradox of the infinite. I am only relying on the fact that we can in a meaningful way speak about an infinite series of natural numbers: 1, 2, 3, ... in all infinity. Neither Bertrand Russell's paradox about the set of all sets, nor Burali-Forti's paradox about the set of all transfinite numbers makes the concept of an infinite series of natural numbers inconsistent. Georg Cantor, the thinker and mathematician who a hundred years ago created transfinite mathematics, looked upon it this way. He thought that *above* the transfinite numbers there are "absolute infinities" which are "inconsistent totalities", but that does not make the infinity of the natural numbers into something which cannot be handled scientifically. This being so, I think that Craig's comment on infinite numbers is beside the point of my argument.

## The End

I would like to end this debate with some words about the concept of an *infinite regress*. Listen to the following dialogue:

- Why is this pen not falling downwards?
- Because it lies on the table.
- Yes, but why isn't the table falling downwards?
- It stands on the floor.
- Yes, yes, but why isn't the floor falling downwards?
- Because it's on the ground of the earth.
- O.K. I see, but why isn't the whole earth falling downwards?

End of the dialogue.

Here we have a regress of questions and answers. And it seems as if we would not like this regress to go on forever and be infinitely long. We want an answer which ends it once and for all. A very old Indian religion ended this regress by saying that the earth is placed on an elephant which, in turn, is standing on a turtle - and that's it. If one had truly understood the essence of the Big Turtle there should be no need for further questioning. Today, we can laugh a little about the way this religion tried to end the regress. *We* can without problem think of the earth as just being somewhere in empty space without any tendency to fall.

However, as this debate testifies, there are other regresses left which threaten to become infinite in an intellectually unsatisfactory way. And I have told you a little about how I think that we can end or accept the regresses which arise in relation to space, time, and the universe.

Our discussion has also touched upon the threat of the infinite regress which arises in relation to moral rules and ethical principles. Here is another dialogue:

- Why am I not allowed to kill the persons I hate?
- We don't do that in our tribe.
- Yes, I know, but we can change habits. Can't we?
- No, we cannot. We have a law which prohibits it.
- O.K., but let's change the law then.
- No, another law would be in conflict with basic ethical principles.
- Can't we disregard ethics then?

End of that dialogue.

Just as easily, similar regresses can be construed in relation to the meaning of life and other classical philosophical questions. What are the utmost answers to these regresses?

For Craig, God ends *all* such regresses; be it the-origin-of-the universe regress, the-basic-moral-principle regress, or the-meaning-of-life regress. For me, different regresses can end in different ways, but no regress has to end in God.

I have shown tonight, at least to my own satisfaction, three different things. Firstly, I have shown that there cannot possibly exist a God like the classical Christian God; secondly, I have shown that there are a lot of good counter-arguments to Craig's views; and, thirdly, I have shown that we need no transcendent God in order to explain the existence of the universe.

However, I would like to end with a further critical comment on the cosmological argument for the existence of God. Take a last look at my list of some of God's attributes. According to the fourth attribute, there are no limits to God's knowledge; according to the fifth one, God is *infinitely* powerful; and according to the sixth one, he is *infinitely* good. If God exists, there are *actual* infinities. Craig does not accept actual infinities in the spatiotemporal world, but he has to accept them in the non-spatiotemporal world where his God exists. Therefore, Craig has not, contrary to what he thinks, really ended the infinite regress which is at the center of the cosmological argument. He has merely pushed it out in another realm beyond space and time.

I do not intend to offend anybody in this room, but I must be allowed to state concisely my sincere opinion. And, sincerely: I think that the Christian God is just as bad at stopping infinite regresses as the old Indian Big Turtle was.

(I cannot end by saying "God bless you!", but perhaps I can indicate my atheist way of looking upon the world by ending with the following appeal: "Try to bless each other - in this world".)