

21st Century Atheism

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Good evening friends. Thank you to the sponsors of tonight's event for inviting me. Thanks to Prof. Craig for participating, and thanks especially to all of you for coming out! Those of you in the audience tonight or those watching the video can find this presentation and my remarks right now on my website at kevinscharp.com. Well, Prof. Craig went first and got to give his case for theism. Going second, I am now expected to present my position, argue for it, and dismantle his. So I better get started. I call the position *21st century atheism*. Why 21st century? Because we have learned some important lessons in the 20th century about philosophy of religion. And it's time to take advantage of those insights.

Defining religious views

Belief vs. Confidence

Use a confidence scale from 0% - 100%.

General vs. Particular

'Atheist about X' and 'Theist about X' are primary.

Weak vs. Strong

Greater than 50% confidence vs. high enough confidence for knowledge or outright belief.

Let's define the position first.

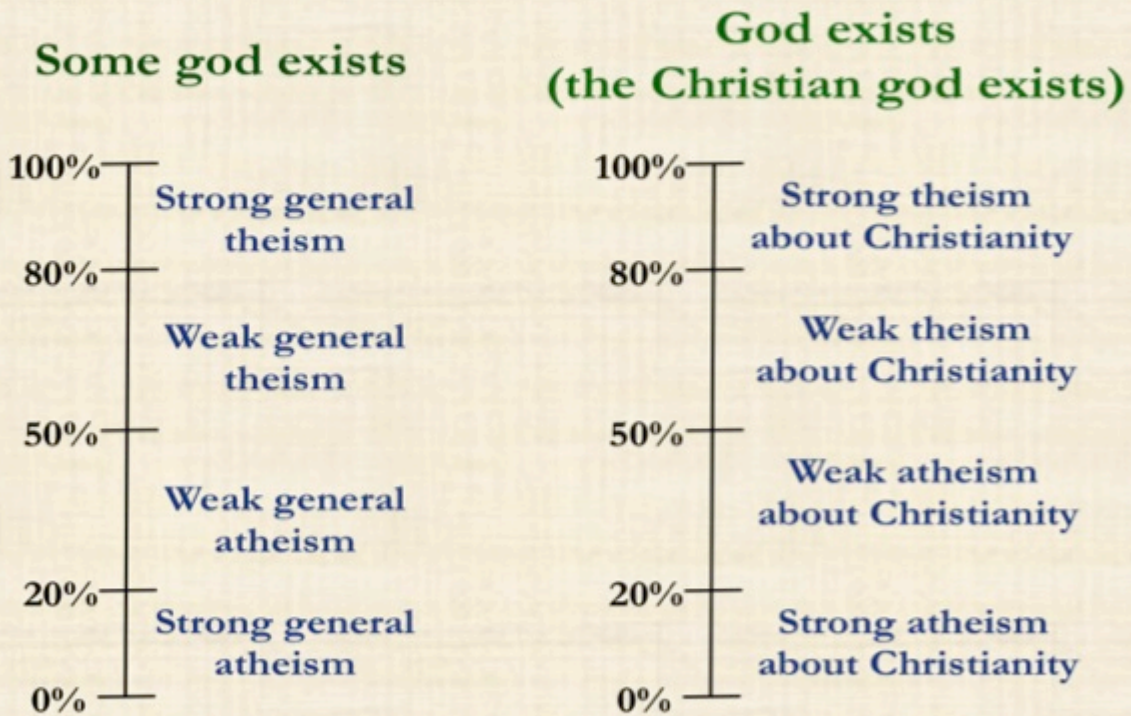
We should be formulating theism and atheism in terms of confidence levels (0% - 100%), not belief. Confidence levels are much more precise. For example, if forced to say who would be the next president, I'd say probably Hillary Clinton, but I'm only at about 51% confidence there, so I would never sincerely say 'Hillary is going to win' in normal circumstances. A certain level of confidence is needed to count as a belief.

We should formulate theism and atheism in terms of specific gods or religions. The terms 'theist about X' and 'atheist about X' should be primary. Then we can define general theism and general atheism in those terms.

We need to distinguish between weak religious views and strong ones.

Weak views state that one's confidence should be greater than 50%, while strong views state that one's confidence should be high enough for belief or knowledge.

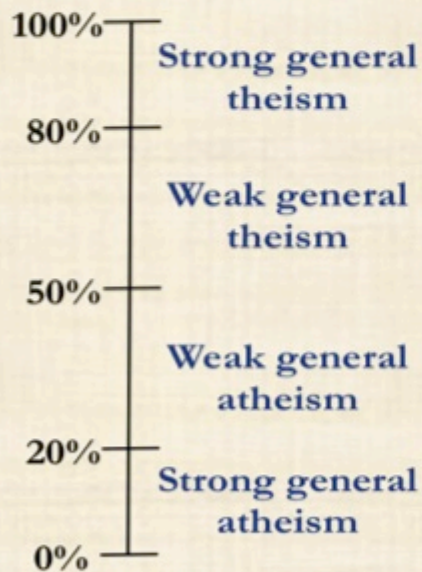
The space of religious views



Using these points, we can map out the various options.

The space of religious views

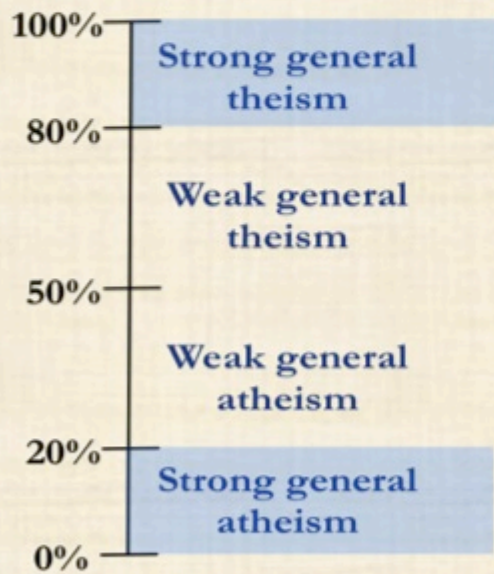
Some god exists



On the left are the views on whether some god exists. Here I've put in the threshold for belief at 80% confidence, but that's just an example. Saying that it's more probable than not that some god exists means you only need to show greater than 50% confidence. But saying we know or believe that some god exists requires a higher confidence level.

The space of religious views

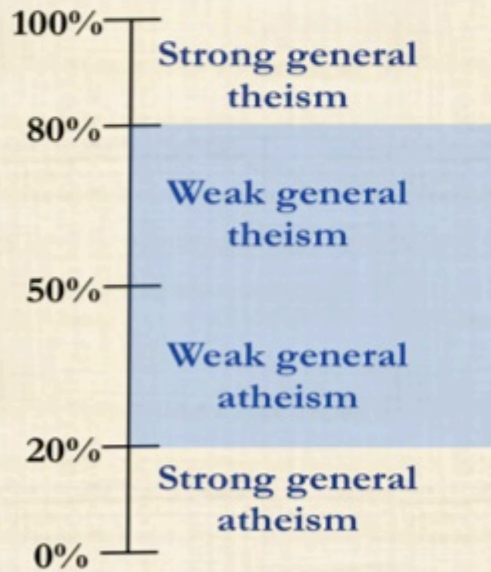
Some god exists



The top and bottom are strong positions, which correspond to outright beliefs—believing that some god exists at the top and believing that no gods exist at the bottom.

The space of religious views

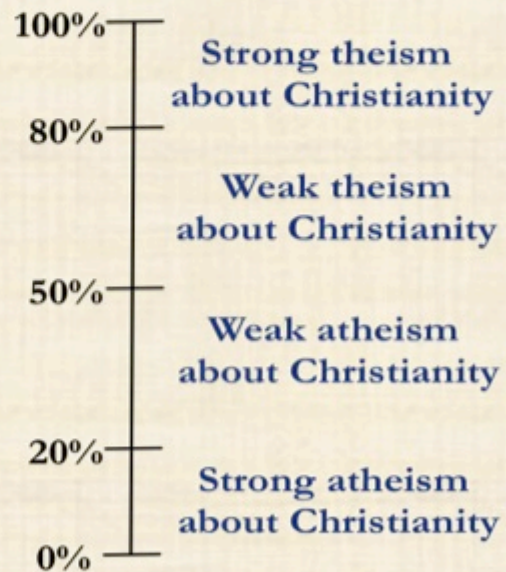
Some god exists



In between we have two weak positions: just above the 50% line for weak theism and just below the 50% line for weak atheism.

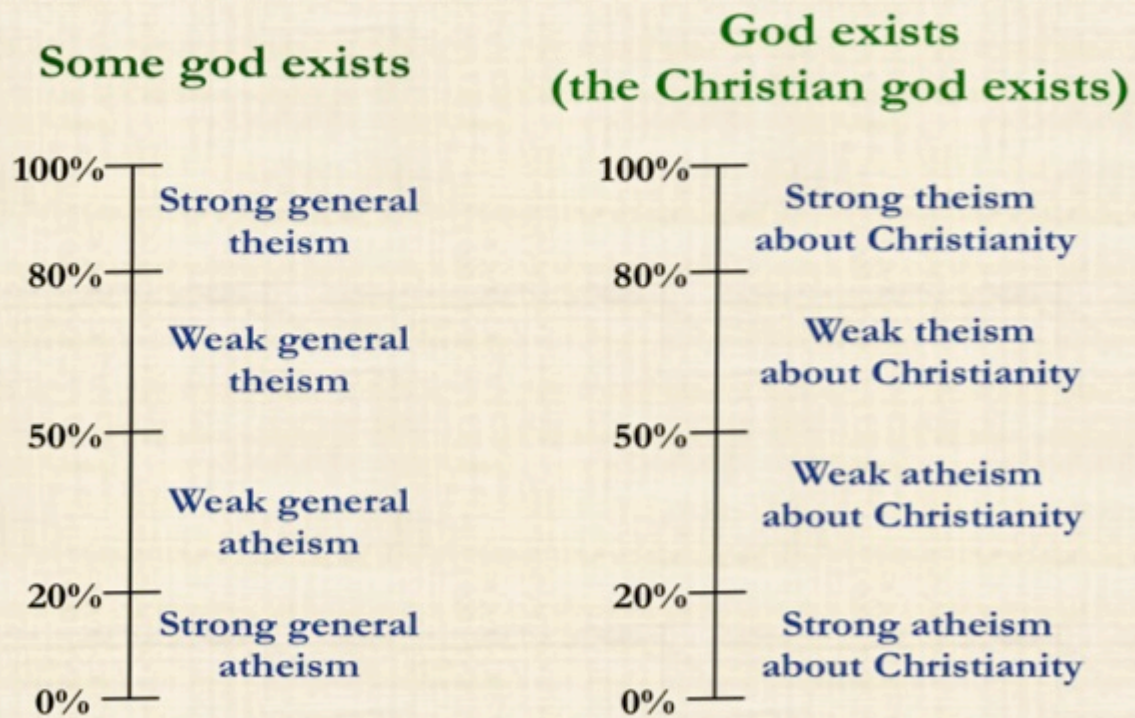
The space of religious views

**God exists
(the Christian god exists)**



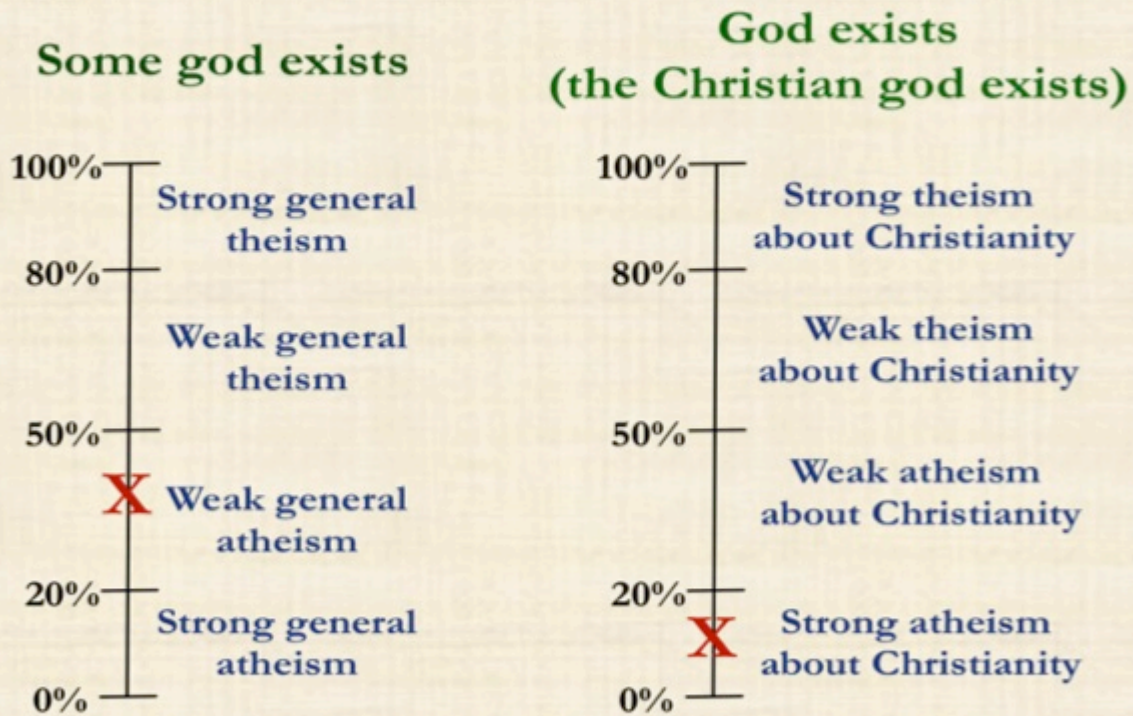
Now on the right we have the same kinds of options, but instead of being about whether there are any gods at all, they are about whether God, the Christian God, exists.

The space of religious views



And now back to both frameworks.

21st Century Atheism



And here we have 21st century atheism depicted on the previous framework as the red X on the left and the red X on the right. The left X indicates that it is more probable than not that there are not gods. I call that weak general atheism. The right X indicates the strong claim that there is no Christian God. Of course, you could imagine lots of diagrams like the one on the right for other familiar gods like Zeus and Thor, and the X would be in the same place on each one.

The confidence argument

1. The existing evidence for any familiar god is very weak.
2. The existing evidence for any familiar god conflicts with our best scientific theories.
3. We should have *much higher confidence* in our scientific theories in biology, chemistry, and physics than we have in any existing evidence for any familiar god.
4. Therefore, we should have *high confidence* that the familiar gods do not exist.

So, 21st Century Atheism is a fairly simple theory, and the primary argument for it is fairly simple as well. I call it the *confidence argument*.

For any familiar god, including God, the evidence is always either in ancient history or some place where there were few witnesses, or it is based on someone's private experience. Also, the evidence for it conflicts with our best scientific theories in biology, chemistry, and physics. And we should have way more confidence in those scientific theories than in any existing evidence for any familiar god.

The confidence argument should give us high enough confidence to say that God does not exist, and Zeus does not exist, and Thor does not exist, and so on.

But what about our confidence for the claim that there are no gods at all? Any god that supposedly intervenes in the world in any familiar way would be undermined by the confidence argument.

And we have no reason to believe in gods that do not intervene at all in the world because they are not needed to explain anything. So there is no reason to think they exist and very weak reason to think they do not exist.

Therefore, it is more probable than not that there are no gods, but this confidence level isn't high enough to count as knowledge or outright belief.

What 21st Century Atheism is NOT

~~Strong general atheism.~~

Reductive naturalism.

Religion has bad consequences.

Theists are stupid.

Miracles are impossible.

That's my position and my arguments for it.

It is important to note that 21st Century Atheism has nothing to do with the following views.

No strong general atheism. That would require arguing for high confidence against the existence of all conceivable gods, even those gods that might want to deceive us about all the evidence like Descartes' evil deceiver. Defending strong general atheism is a sucker's bet.

What 21st Century Atheism is NOT

~~Strong general atheism.~~

~~Reductive naturalism.~~

Religion has bad consequences.

Theists are stupid.

Miracles are impossible.

No reductive naturalism. I have no patience with the claim that everything can be reductively explained in terms of science and it is completely independent of 21st century atheism.

What 21st Century Atheism is NOT

~~Strong general atheism.~~

~~Reductive naturalism.~~

~~Religion has bad consequences.~~

Theists are stupid.

Miracles are impossible.

I have not argued that religion has bad consequences.

What 21st Century Atheism is NOT

~~Strong general atheism.~~

~~Reductive naturalism.~~

~~Religion has bad consequences.~~

~~Theists are stupid.~~

Miracles are impossible.

I have not implied that theists are stupid. Prof. Craig might be the smartest person in the room for all I know.

What 21st Century Atheism is NOT

~~Strong general atheism.~~

~~Reductive naturalism.~~

~~Religion has bad consequences.~~

~~Theists are stupid.~~

~~Miracles are impossible.~~

I have not argued that miracles are impossible. Only that all the evidence we have for them does not override or even come close to our evidence for scientific theories that conflict with the miracle.

No divine psychology

The problem of evil: how can there be evil if God exists?

Divine psychology—claims about a god's psychology—what a god would do or believe or desire or plan.

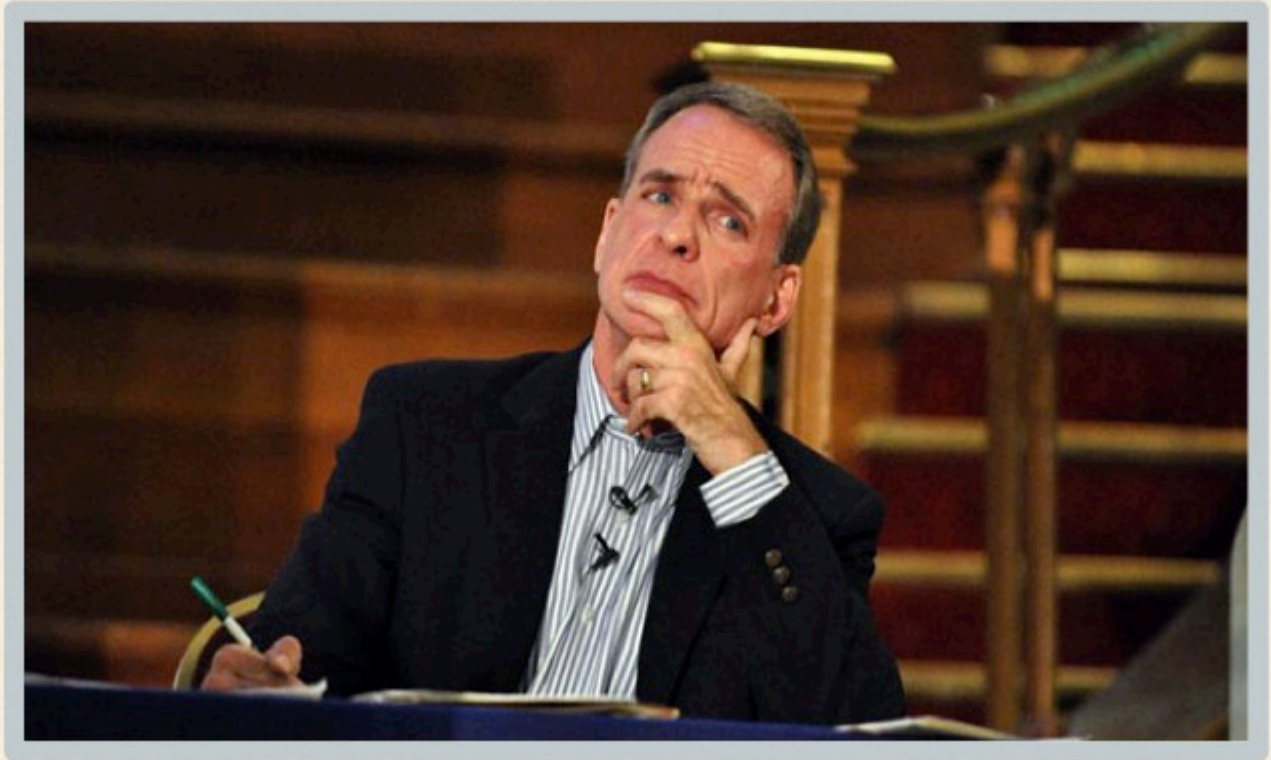
Without appeals to divine psychology, the theist is harmed more than the atheist.

Now I want to develop a new kind of criticism of arguments for theism and for Christianity. I call it *the appeal to divine psychology*. You might have noticed that I didn't use the problem of evil to argue my case. That's because contemporary Christian philosophers of religion, to their great credit, have largely dismantled the problem of evil. In essence, the theist points out that we should have no confidence at all in understanding God's global plans or how the evil we see could be outweighed by some more important part of the plan. Then the argument turns into a fight about divine psychology. By divine psychology, I mean what God would do, what God would believe, what God would want, what plans God would have, and what reasons God would have. And arguing with a theist about divine psychology is like arguing with a little kid about his imaginary tea party. All the parents in the audience know you lose that argument every time.

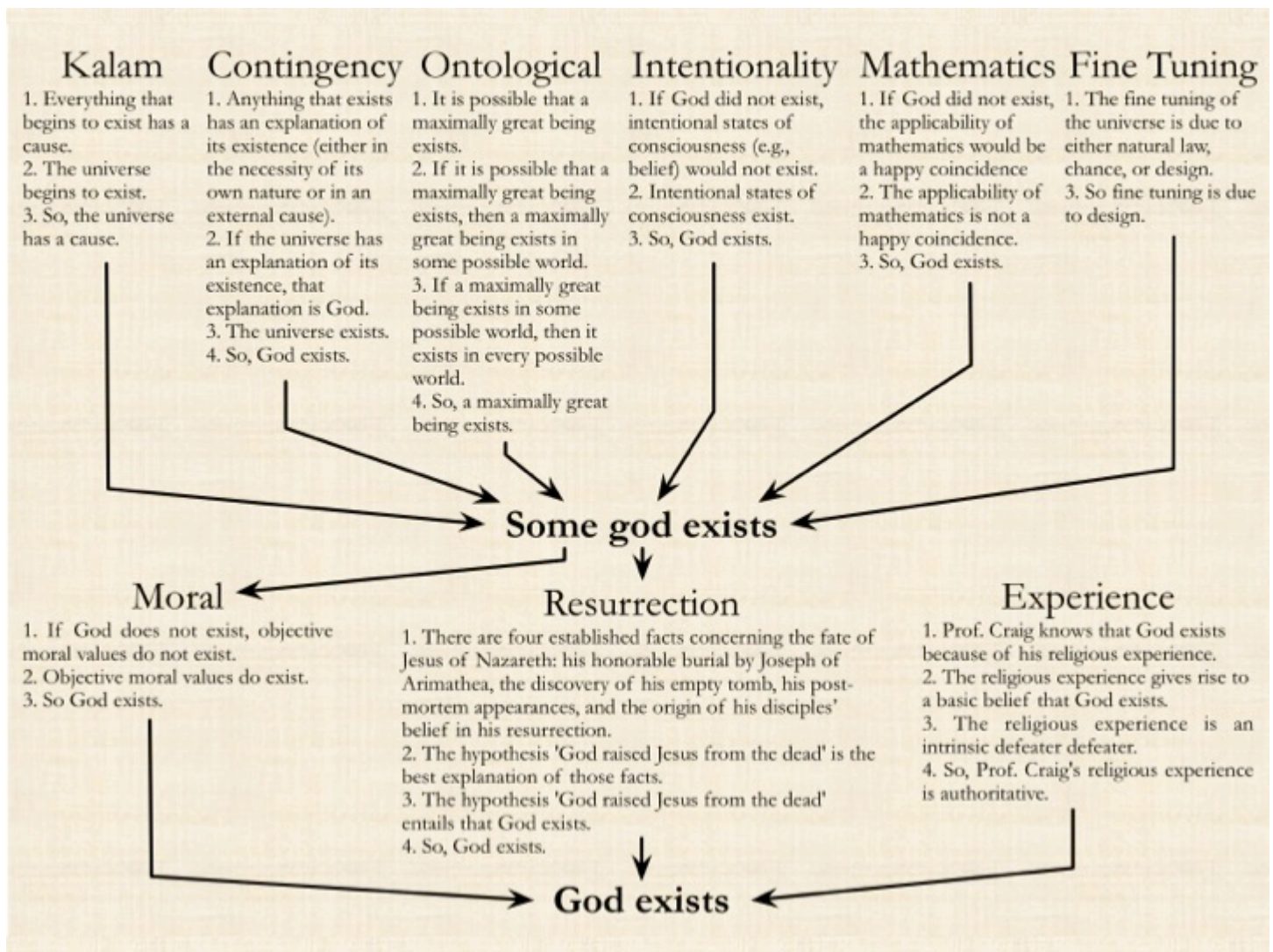
But no one seems to have realized that the point can be generalized to show that an entire category of arguments is unacceptable—that entire category I call appeals to divine psychology. And it includes many of the theists' favorite arguments as well. Abandoning divine psychology cuts both ways, but it cuts the theist deeper. In particular, cosmological arguments, teleological arguments, explanatory arguments, and miracle arguments all make appeals to divine psychology.

The Christian might claim that appeals to divine psychology are just fine. But the theist cannot have it both ways. If we allow claims about God's psychology, then the problem of evil comes roaring back.

The opposition



Now we need to turn to the arguments for theism and for Christianity in particular. Because my discussion partner is Prof. Craig, I'll be focusing on his work in what follows. In assessing his arguments, I will talk as I would to any other professional philosopher whose system I've managed to work my way into. That is, I don't pull punches; but I don't ever attack character. So, it isn't personal. Prof. Craig knows this, and I know this, but I'm saying it for the benefit of the audience. I do this in part because I respect the guy. He has some great philosophical skills, he's a talented system builder, and he's done a tremendous service to the atheist movement by trouncing most of its heroes and raising the bar for both sides.



I've managed to take a look Prof. Craig's whole system and here's what we have—I think all the major arguments are here that Prof. Craig has either advocated or proposed. It's divided into arguments for theism in general and arguments for Christianity in particular. Recall that he just presented the contingency argument, the Kalam argument, the mathematical applicability argument, the fine tuning argument, the moral argument, and the experience argument.

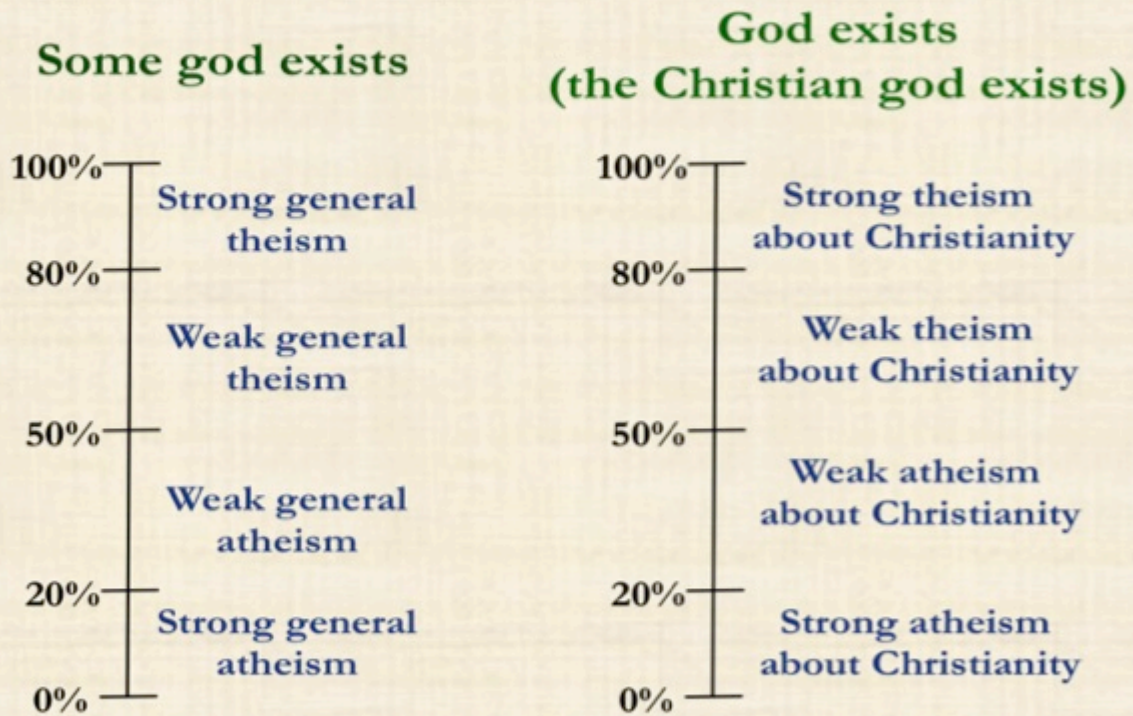
	Objections					
	Weakness	Explanation	Divine Psychology	Reductive Naturalism	Bad Science	Circular
Kalam	X	X	X		X	
Contingency	X	X	X			
Ontological	X					
Mathematics	X	X	X			
Intentionality	X	X	X	X		
Fine Tuning	X	X	X		X	
Moral	X	X		X		X
Resurrection	X	X	X			X
Experience						

In this table, Prof. Craig's arguments are on the left and some of their problems are listed along the top.

	Objections					
	Weakness	Explanation	Divine Psychology	Reductive Naturalism	Bad Science	Circular
Kalam	X	X	X		X	
Contingency	X	X	X			
Ontological	X					
Mathematics	X	X	X			
Intentionality	X	X	X	X		
Fine Tuning	X	X	X		X	
Moral	X	X		X		X
Resurrection	X	X	X			X
Experience						

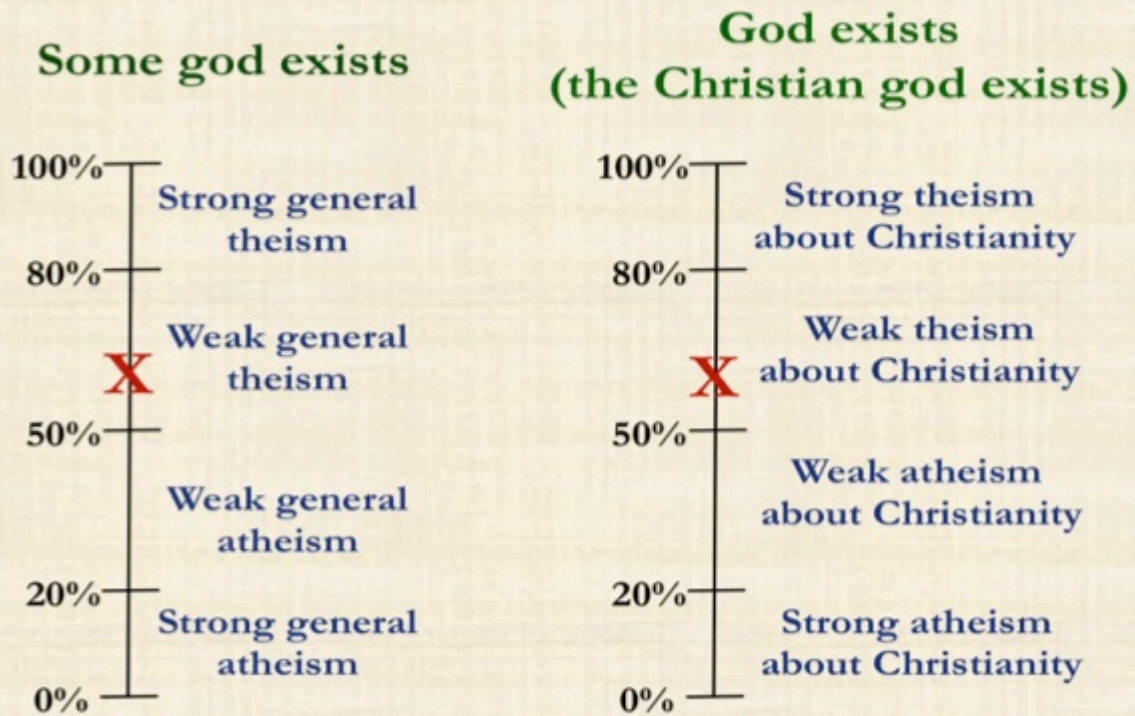
We can see first a previously unknown problem that affects the entire system. I call it the weakness problem. Prof. Craig has routinely defended his arguments for the theism by saying that he only needs to convince you that the premises are more plausible than not. But it should be obvious that it takes more than only 51% for knowledge or outright belief.

The space of religious views



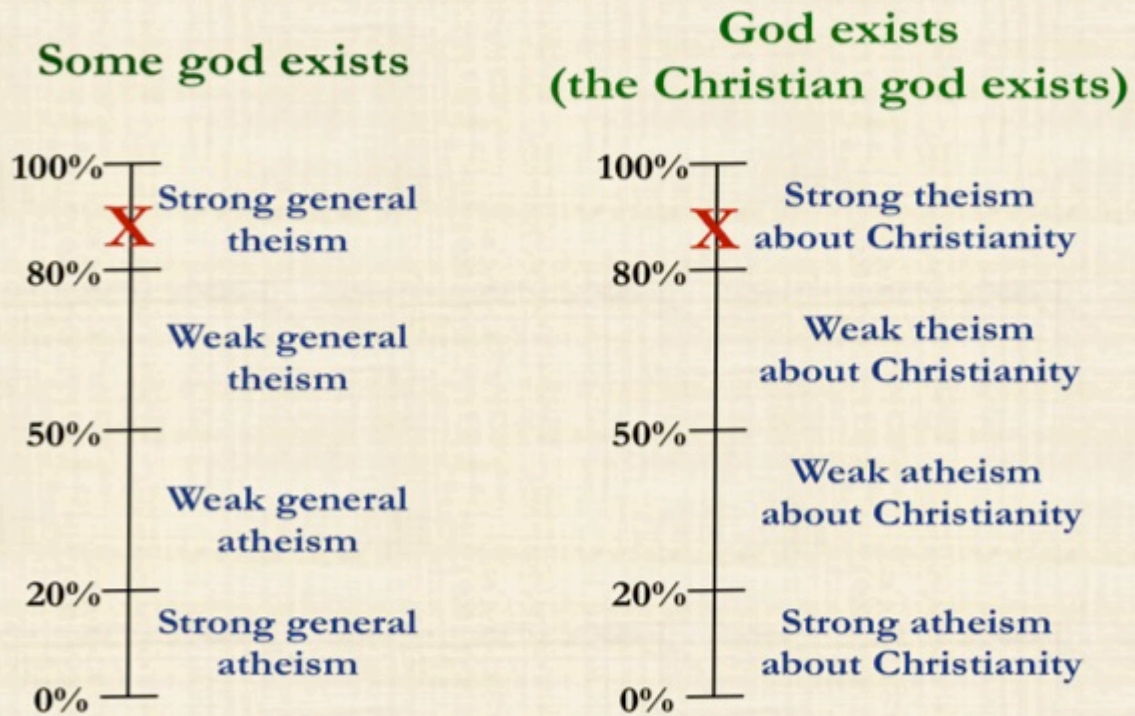
Look back at the earlier framework for illustration.

The space of religious views



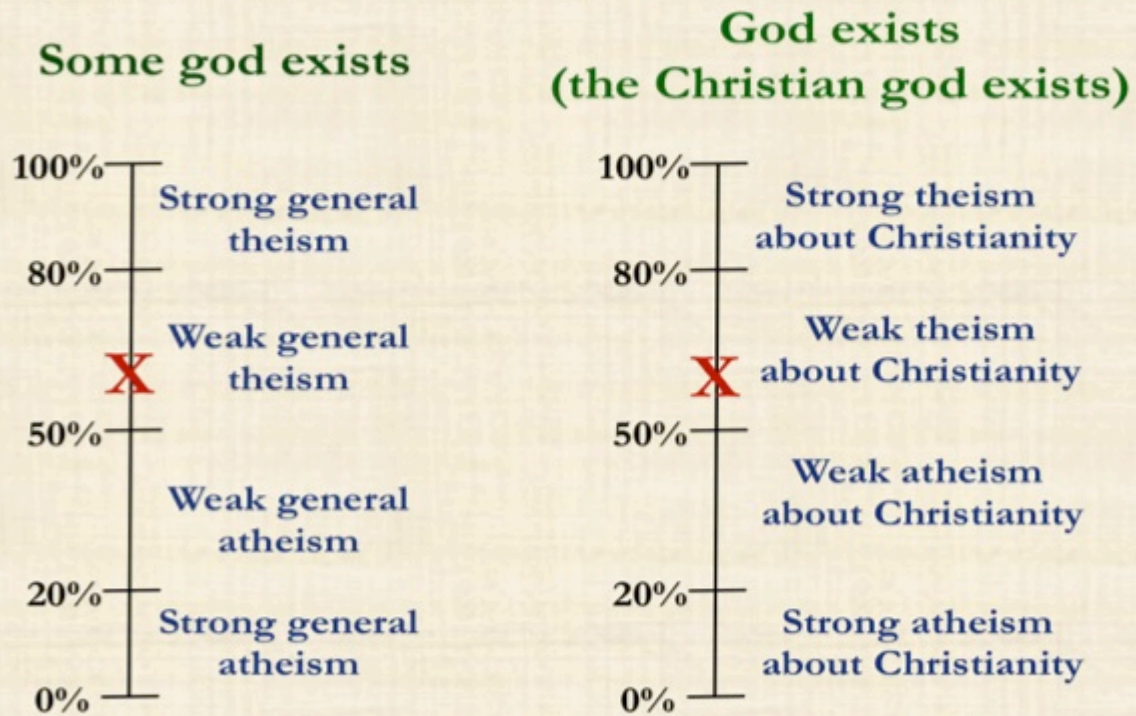
Here is what Prof. Craig actually argues for and,

The space of religious views



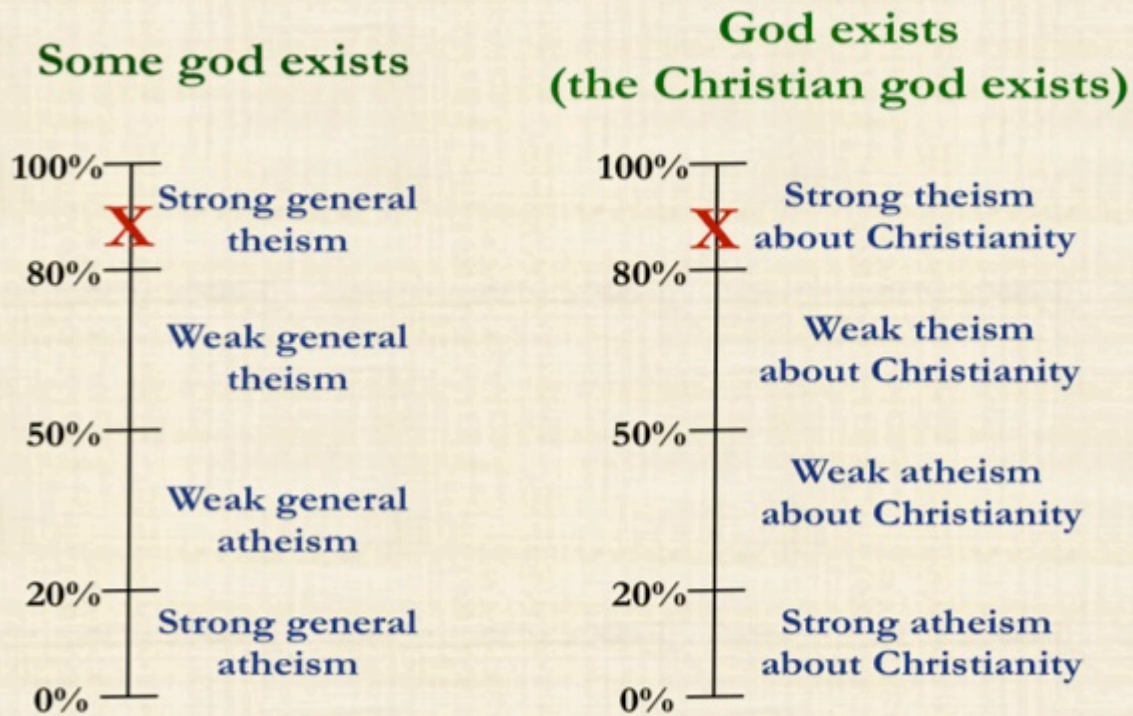
here is the view he claims to hold.

The space of religious views



Here again is the view he argues for,

The space of religious views



and here is the view he holds.

Therefore, he's been defending his arguments as if advocates weak theism. But he's been advertising his view as strong theism. So the weakness problem is that his arguments are far weaker than they need to be to support his strong conclusions.

Therefore, no one should take any of these arguments seriously until they are completely redefended from the ground up to match the standard Prof. Craig has set for himself. Otherwise, he can back peddle and opt for weak theism. Either way, the entire system needs to be reworked.

	Objections					
	Weakness	Explanation	Divine Psychology	Reductive Naturalism	Bad Science	Circular
Kalam	X	X	X		X	
Contingency	X	X	X			
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Fine Tuning	X	X	X		X	
Moral	X	X		X		X
Resurrection	X	X	X			X
Experience						

While there are plenty of interesting things to say, I don't really need to do any more to undermine his entire system of arguments, with the exception of the experience argument, which I'll get to in a moment.

However, I want to emphasize a couple of points.

	Objections					
	Weakness	Explanation	Divine Psychology	Reductive Naturalism	Bad Science	Circular
Kalam	X	X	X		X	
Contingency	X	X	X			
Ontological	X					
Mathematics	X	X	X			
Intentionality	X	X	X	X		
Fine Tuning	X	X	X		X	
Moral	X	X		X		X
Resurrection	X	X	X			X
Experience						

Look at the power of the divine psychology objection. This problem affects every single argument he presented tonight with the possible exception of the moral argument.

	Objections					
	Weakness	Explanation	Divine Psychology	Reductive Naturalism	Bad Science	Circular
Kalam	X	X	X		X	
Contingency	X	X	X			
Ontological	X					
Mathematics	X	X	X			
Intentionality	X	X	X	X		
Fine Tuning	X	X	X		X	
Moral	X	X		X		X
Resurrection	X	X	X			X
Experience						

Next think about explanation. Prof. Craig routinely formulates his arguments as inferences to the best explanation, but he admits that it is almost impossible to determine what God would do or plan at all. For example, if we think of God alone existing all by himself, then there is no way to infer that God would create the universe. Prof. Craig freely admits the God hypothesis does not make any predictions, but it makes no retrodictions either. A retrodiction is like a prediction, but it's a prediction of something we already know, like the existence of the universe. The God hypothesis offers no predictions and no retrodictions. As such, it is a terrible explanation.

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	Weakness	Explanation	Divine Psychology	Reductive Naturalism	Bad Science	Circular
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Resurrection	X	X	X			X
Experience						

Focus now on the moral argument here.

The first premise states that if God does not exist, then objective moral values do not exist. In arguing for this premise, Prof. Craig just assumes that the atheist has to explain all morality in terms of evolutionary theory.

But that is so completely wrong that no one who accepts could know anything about the study of ethics in the last century. There are literally dozens of theories of moral values and moral duties that are objective, non-naturalist, and make no appeal to gods. For example, G.E. Moore, Sir William David Ross, Christine Korsgaard, Thomas Scanlon, Derek Parfit, Philippa Foot, David Enoch, Russ Shafer-Landau, Rosalind Hursthouse, John McDowell, Jonathan Dancy, H. A. Prichard, Roger Crisp, Joseph Raz, Jean Hampton, and Ralph Wedgewood.

Therefore, until he has refuted every single one of these theories, he needs to stop using the moral argument.

The lesson for everyone else: stop assuming that atheists cannot accept that there are objective moral values. All it demonstrates is that you know nothing about ethics.

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Kalam	X	X	X		X	
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Moral	X	X		X		X
Resurrection	X	X	X			X
Experience						

Finally, Prof. Craig makes a big deal of his knowledge of cosmology, and he uses it in the Kalam argument and the fine-tuning argument. However, he rejects evolutionary theory—and with it contemporary biology—in favor of intelligent design, which is the idea that biological species developed by God’s guidance.

But doesn’t makes sense to claim to be an expert on cosmology and at the same time reject evolution. That’s just cherry picking. Does he think there’s a magic dividing line between biology and chemistry? How does he think the fine tuning argument even works? Those calculations are about biochemistry, and that’s the basis for evolutionary theory and biology. And at this point we understand life well enough that if you reject evolutionary theory, it’s pretty easy to trace out how you’d have to reject chemistry, and ultimately physics as well.

So, Prof. Craig, from one philosopher to another—drop intelligent design. I’d like to have a stronger opponent than that. It does nothing to help you, and it makes you look like you are more scared of evolutionary theory than Richard Dawkins is scared of you. And we both know ... that’s pretty scared!

We don’t need to go through any more partly because for the apologist, these arguments are just smoke and mirrors anyway. As we will see, their fate has no impact on the apologist’s belief that God exists. The real heart of the system is the experience argument; so let’s turn to it.

The experience argument for strong theism about Christianity

A justification for thinking that the Christian's religious experience is authoritative.

Appeal to basic beliefs

Appeal to intrinsic defeater defeater

Problems

Religious experience is not like perception.

There are no intrinsic defeater defeaters.

The *power* of an experience has no bearing on what is true.

Irrationality

Prof. Craig claims that even if all the other arguments for God's existence were shown to be worthless, that would have absolutely zero impact on his belief that God exists. That's because by his own religious experience, he knows God exists independently of any argument or evidence.

He makes two appeals to justify this radical thesis. First, his belief that God exists is a basic belief because it is like a perceptual belief. Second, he claims that his religious experience is an intrinsic defeater defeater. That means that his experience is so powerful that it undermines any reason one might have to doubt it. So, according to Prof. Craig, his religious experience is so powerful that it allows him to know God exists, and it cannot ever be reasonably doubted, and he doesn't have to provide any arguments for it at all. You have to hand it to the guy, he knows where his weak spot is.

The fact is that religious experiences do not fit well into the basic belief structure because they don't behave like perceptual experiences at all. Perceptual experiences are backed up by other evidence including biology. Not so for religious experience.

In addition, we have very good reason to think that there are no intrinsic defeater defeaters because any experience can be misleading. Indeed, we can stimulate a person's brain in certain ways and cause them to have very powerful religious experiences even though they aren't experiencing anything. If Prof. Craig's experience was truly an intrinsic defeater defeater, then it would have to defeat all the neuroscience that potentially undermines it. But that is absurd.

Subjective experiences, even really really really really really powerful ones, are just that – subjective. All by themselves they don't allow us to know anything objective.

Apologetics is irrational

Apologetics: producing arguments for theism and against atheism to defend the faith. Giving up the belief that God exists is never an option.

Putting *any* belief “out of bounds” for critical thinking *is seriously irrational*.

If the belief that God exists is given a fair shake in the process of critical thinking, then *it will lose*.

By far the biggest problem with the experience argument is that it is supposed to justify being an apologist, which is how Prof. Craig identifies. The apologist is concerned first and foremost with defending the belief that God exists. There is never an attempt to figure out whether it is true that God exists. And the apologist is completely opposed to even considering that God might not exist.

I am ready to become a Christian tonight. But, Prof. Craig, because he is an apologist, has decided to put becoming an atheist completely out of the question. The apologist puts this belief that God exists completely out of bounds for critical thinking.

Being an apologist is seriously irrational. First of all, putting any belief completely out of bounds for critical thinking is irrational. How irrational? Well, we have lots of great theories of rationality and critical thinking, but none of them can even model the apologist's irrationality. For example, you might be able to come close if you stipulate that the belief in God has 100% confidence. But Prof. Craig emphatically denies this. So he's suggesting that we should take a belief that isn't even certain and put it out of bounds for critical thinking. Our best theories of rationality can account for many kinds of irrationality, but the apologist's irrationality is so extreme that it cannot be modeled at all. Being an apologist is off the charts irrational.

And when discussing the case of Ryan Bell, the pastor who tried atheism for a year and lost his faith, Prof. Craig freely admits that any Christian who allows Christianity to be subject to critical thinking, just like any other belief is probably going to end up an atheist. That's Prof. Craig's own stated view.

The greatest Christian apologist of the last half century is convinced that if the Christian gives the belief that God exists a fair shake in the process of rational belief revision, then the belief that God exists is going to lose. Let that sink in for a minute.

Why it matters:

Arbitrary hatefulness

Theism impacts social issues.

Creeping apologetics.

Prof. Craig campaigns *against* same-sex marriage and the right for these couples to adopt children.*

It affects nothing else in Prof. Craig's entire theological and philosophical system.

You can *always* change your mind.

*Reasonable Faith Podcast, 5.10.2015

Why should any care about this discussion of God and gods? Well, it has a huge impact on social issues. In particular, apologetics tends to creep into related beliefs and lead to arbitrary hatefulness.

For example, Prof. Craig campaigns against same sex marriage and the right for same sex couples to adopt. To try to undermine some perfectly great parents' right to have kids is a personal disgrace. Moreover, it's not supported by anything in the bible or entailed by anything that is.

Of course, there is no outcry about single people adopting kids. Nor is there an outcry about rich people adopting kids even though greed is mentioned right along with homosexuality in First Corinthians, and is emphasized over and over throughout the New Testament. When Prof. Craig cites evidence for his view, he focuses exclusively on the four studies that suggest some problems for kids from same sex households. Conveniently, he ignores the over 70 studies concluding that there are no problems specific to kids from same sex households.

Prof. Craig ... don't forget, you can always ... change. your. mind.

Thank you