

# Atheism's Best Arguments: Michael Shermer

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## Transcript - Long

### Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Michael, you're an atheist. Many of your best friends are atheists. You debate with people who believe in God. What are atheism's best arguments?

### Michael Shermer:

The atheists who take a philosophical perspective use a different set of arguments than I would. You know they have – has to do with the first cause and the prime mover and they debunk all of those. They sort of leave the theist arguments without any substance; ergo, there is no God. The approach I take is more positive. I actually in the sense of there's actually positive arguments against the idea that there is a God which is anthropological, psychological, sociological studies of religion. And so the fact that were you happen to be born tells us which God you believe in and which religion you adhere to. And the fact that there's 10,000 different religions around the world at least if not more, and thousands of different gods, that's indication, that's a strong indication that we created God, not vice versa.

### Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

The counter argument is that all of those different religions have a core concept of a supernatural agent of some kind and that culturally that, that core concept is then expressed in different ways and, and the very diversity and ubiquity were across the earth in every society that you're using against God would be used as a proof that there is a God. Or some sort of a, a supernatural force that exists.

### Michael Shermer:

You're absolutely right. That is the argument that they make, and my counter to that is actually no. We can look inside the brain and at evolutionary theory to explain why even that concept is constructed by humans and not vice versa. That is we make gods and God did not make us, because for example if you stimulate certain parts of the temporal lobe, people will experience floating out of their body. They will experience a sense presence. There is an invisible being in the room with me right now. I can just sense him here. And you can just poke around there and do brain stimulation. You can do it with like electromagnetic fields. You can do through sleep deprivation, through hunger and starvation.

### Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

And so playing the role of a theist I would say well of course there is that. If God is going to have a relationship with people there has to be a way that God can direct evolution so that people will have a way to communicate. Do we have – it's not a miracle that I see. I have to have eyes to see. So if I'm going to have a relationship with God there has to be a part of my brain to do that.

### Michael Shermer:

Good argument and that is the argument that they make and then I come back and say okay, but if, if God did it that way, why is that somebody born in India doesn't believe in your God at all. He believes in Ganesh the blue elephant god. But why would, why would God have done it that way and had I been born there that's what I would believe instead of a Western, so why is my brain different than the Indian's brain?

### Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

And the argument that some would make who are Universalists would say that both of those individuals are, are in touch with the same supernatural force or ultimate reality or the real. People have different characterizations of what that is. And, and that so many people do that is demonstration that there is some deep need.

### Michael Shermer:

Right, exactly. A deep need that evolved like all of our other needs. And you can just start it with something like hunger and thirst and sex. I mean really basic drives that obviously we evolved for very specific reasons for survival. But you just start building on to that all these other beliefs that, that are really no different. They are just emotions evolved to drive behavior to do certain things, including the emotion of wanting to be with other people a social thing.

**Robert Lawrence Kuhn:**

Okay, so we have this is an anthropological social argument which you make. Others, analytic would make analytical kinds of arguments to undermine the theist arguments. So those are two broad categories of atheistic arguments. Are there others?

**Michael Shermer:**

Well the problem of evil I think is probably the biggest one in terms of the way things are in the world and the way things should be if there were a God or not a god. And the way the world is structured with evil, you know, why bad things happen to good people. And I'm not talking about you know why you hate me and why there's genocide. No I mean just like innocent children getting cancer. Why would that happen? In a universe where there is an all-powerful all-good God that shouldn't be happening. In a universe where there is no God that is exactly what would happen, so it fulfills that. It's sort of a prediction.

**Robert Lawrence Kuhn:**

the argument from evil is a strong one because it, it leads directly, without a lot of complicated arguments, to the fact that the universe has no God, to explain it with a God you have to go through some complex thinking. And theists have a lot of those and there are dozens of explanations for the problem of evil. But they're complicated. They take books.

**Michael Shermer:**

That's right I know.

**Robert Lawrence Kuhn:**

You have one statement that therefore there is no God, to go the other way. So now so that's three. Would you say those are the three core kind of approaches to atheists or any others?

**Michael Shermer:**

Well, the cosmological arguments that are still a little iffy because we don't know enough now. But the idea that universes can pop into existence out of nothing, out of the quantum foam fluctuations, because nothing is actually not nothing but it's, you know, quantum physics and so forth. And the Planck scale, nothing is actually teeming with energy and things pop in and out of existence. Maybe that's where universes come from or maybe there's multiple universes. The multiverse and various kinds. But what those really do is they just remove the need for a God.

**Robert Lawrence Kuhn:**

So that's really part of your first category in a sense. It's analytical approaches from science or philosophy to undermine the, the core thinking of religion because each of those have counter-arguments as you well know. I'm just looking for these broad categories of how to understand atheism. So it's the analytical arguments, whether they are scientific or philosophical, the anthropological, sociological, and then the problem of evil.

**Michael Shermer:**

But the difference here, there are just two really. There's negative arguments that are just built around countering the theist arguments to leave them nothing to stand on, and then therefore you just infer okay then there must be no God. My argument is because most of these atheists start the debate going, look, I know I can't prove a negative. However, I can counter all of your arguments. I'm actually taking a different approach. I am saying I actually can show you how humans and cultures construct gods and religions, and that's a positive evidence in favor of that we invented gods.