



## PROVING A NEGATIVE

Freethinkers don't believe in deities just as Muslims and Christians (and Freethinkers too, for that matter) don't believe in reincarnation. Of course, Freethinkers' atheism is not motivated, as Muslims' and Christians' disbelief in reincarnation is, by any doctrinal commitments. But it is often said that atheism is unreasonable because it is impossible to prove that deities do not exist and that this, in turn, is because "you can't prove a negative." For some reason, though, believers who reject reincarnation never seem to be troubled by this supposed impossibility of proving a negative.

In fact, we can prove – and have proved – many negative claims. There is no such thing as phlogiston, for example. The reasons for believing in it disappeared with an understanding of the chemistry of combustion. Neither is there such a thing as the universal ether once thought necessary for the propagation of light. Because experiments disproved it. And there is no such thing as the continent of Mu, for which there never was any evidence, the evidence that would be expected if it ever did exist is absent, and the idea is at odds with the known geological history of the earth.

Now it might be that we are mistaken in not believing in phlogiston and the ether and Mu. Perhaps, despite all previous efforts, something was missed. Or perhaps extraterrestrials manipulated the evidence and experimental results to deliberately deceive us. As the 20th Century Austrian-British philosopher Karl Popper pointed out, authentic knowledge about the real world has to be subject, at least in principle, to revision and even rejection – falsification – if it is to be useful. So perhaps "proof" is too strong a term when it comes to anything outside of mathematics. But there is no intrinsic or logical problem with "proving a negative."

The question of the burden of proof looms large when it comes to "proving a negative." For anyone with sufficient imagination could come up with innumerable claims of something existing or being the case that others would find difficult or even impossible to refute. And there is no symmetrical obligation on the part of those who make claims and those who remain skeptical of the claims. Nor is it any kind of evidence for the existence of god(s) that claims that they exist are constructed in such a way that they cannot be falsified. The 20th Century British mathematician and philosopher (and atheist) Bertrand Russell put it this way:

"If I were to suggest that between the Earth and Mars there is a china teapot revolving about the sun in an elliptical orbit, nobody would be able to disprove my assertion provided I were careful to add that the teapot is too small to be revealed even by our most powerful telescopes. But if I were to go on to say that, since my assertion cannot be disproved, it is intolerable presumption on the part of human reason to doubt it, I should rightly be thought to be talking nonsense. If, however, the existence of such a teapot were affirmed in ancient books, taught as the sacred truth every Sunday, and instilled into the minds of children at school, hesitation to believe in its existence would become a mark of eccentricity."

Clearly, the "absence of evidence" of Russell's teapot is not "evidence of its absence." Yet belief in the existence of the teapot is certainly as unwarranted as any other fanciful claims. Nor is it reasonable to believe in such a thing anyway because its existence has long been accepted, is emphatically and emotionally insisted upon by many people and because no one can prove that it does not exist. And what shall we say, meanwhile, of believers in the teapot who either ignore or dismiss out of hand as "myth" such claims as that a bottlecap orbits between Mars and Jupiter or a thimble orbits between Neptune and Pluto and so on and so on? Although "absence of evidence is not evidence of absence," in the absence of evidence the burden is on those who assert a claim to provide

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 compelling evidence for it.

Proving – or even considering – anything is also made the more difficult when the terms or concepts are vague or are subject to almost unlimited changes in meaning. “God” is the term or idea that is most troublesome here because the claim that “God exists” could mean many different things and in practice may mean anything.

It is not difficult to climb to the summit of Mount Olympus, for example, or overfly it, and show that there are no gods there. Similarly, although the biblical deity had to stop the builders of the Tower of Babel from raising a structure that would reach the heavens, we now fly above and even beyond the heavens and have yet to encounter jealous superbeings in these places. This is not just “absence of evidence.” It is evidence of absence.

Phlogiston, the universal ether, the continent of Mu, and many other ideas have fallen in this way. As the 19th Century British naturalist TH Huxley once put it, it feels even a bit tragic when “a beautiful hypothesis” is slain “by an ugly fact.” Some ideas have lingered, but none have been resurrected, by make-shift and embarrassingly self-serving – the Latin phrase is ad hoc – qualifications and excuses. But this is all that now remains to justify a belief in deities.

Huxley would surely agree that the real beauty, the overwhelming appeal, and the actual value of an idea is its correspondence with facts. Besides, there is really nothing else for god(s) to do anymore. They are as useless as the epicycles and deferents that once held Ptolemy’s geocentric solar system together.

**YOUR GENEROUS DONATIONS TO THE NTCOF ARE NEEDED, APPRECIATED, AND TAX-DEDUCTIBLE!! (AND NECESSARY FOR AN AUSPICIOUS START OF A NEW YEAR!)**

**PLANNED FOR NEXT MONTH: WE’LL JUST SEE ABOUT THAT!**

**>>> Sunday, April 7th, 2013 <<<  
 SHERATON GRAND DFW AIRPORT  
 SE CORNER OF 114 AND ESTERS**

All NTCOF events can be found through our website calendar , or through our meetup page, from which you can RSVP, at: - [www.meetup.com/church-of-freethought](http://www.meetup.com/church-of-freethought) - **JOIN THE NTCOF MEETUP GROUP !!!**

**Social Luncheon:** Today, immediately after our Service, join us for lunch and discussion at the Golden Corral Buffet and Grill in Grapevine, located just across from the Grapevine Mills Mall, at 2605 E. Grapevine Mills Circle, phone (972) 874-7900. To reach Golden Corral from the Sheraton, cross over the freeway and make a left onto John W. Carpenter Freeway (114) going west. Then take the first exit RIGHT onto International Parkway (121), then Grapevine Mills Parkway exit. Turn LEFT on Stars and Stripes Way, continuing on to E. Grapevine Mills Circle.

**Freethought Salon:** Get together to discuss today’s service topic or other conundrums of interest for Freethinkers. Most Sundays, over breakfast, at the Hilton Vineyard in Grapevine beginning 10:30 AM; see the meetup site!

**Game Night:** The regular game night crew meets nearly every Friday night at the IHOP on 2310 Stemmons Trail (I-35), near Northwest Highway (Loop 12). Plan to arrive at about 7:30 PM, and stay late playing Risk, Rummikub, and other fun games!

**Secular Singles:** Freethinkers have met their life-partners with whom they have begun families through the Secular Singles group. Check the meetup site for the next date, time and location!

**“Insofar as scientific statements refer to the world of experience, they must be refutable; and insofar as they are irrefutable, they do not refer to the world of experience.”**

- Karl Popper



**DFWCOR**

Dallas-Fort Worth Coalition of Reason

The North Texas Church of Freethought  
 The Fellowship of Unbelievers

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 Tim Gorski  
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