



Theology, Religion and Philosophy of Religion

TASK

To decide if we can be objective when arguing for the existence or non-existence of God or gods. You can submit your response in any form you would like.

FINDING YOUR WAY

Start from what you know: think about people you've met who do/don't believe in God: ask yourself what evidence they rely on – books, teachings, history, authority figures, inspiration...

Then think about how best to argue (meaning not quarrels but discussions which aim to come to conclusions about what is true): do you say “I feel that...” or “it is known that...”? Which is better (if either) and why?

Pay attention to people whose viewpoints make you annoyed: what does your annoyance tell you about yourself: e.g. do you think they are stupid? or that they are judging you? or that they are exposing a weakness in your way of looking at things?

Ask yourself what God/Gods is/are. Not just in your own culture – draw on what you know of other cultures and societies, and other times in history. Think about god/gods in stories that you have read.

RESOURCES

Here are two dictionary definitions.

Remember that dictionary definitions are simply descriptions of how words are used at the time when the dictionary is written.

Objective

Not influenced by personal feelings or opinions in considering and representing facts; impartial, detached;
concerned with outward things or events rather than inward thoughts or feelings.

Subjective

Relating to, or proceeding from an individual's thoughts, views, etc. Expressing a person's individuality; personal, not impartial.

Here are two reflections on God/gods from a pre-Christian culture. Both are translated from Latin into English.

CICERO (Roman author, politician, philosopher 106-43BCE)

On the nature of the gods 1.1

There are and have been philosophers who thought that the gods had absolutely no direction of human affairs, and if their opinion is true, what piety can there be, and what holiness, and what obligation of religion? It is right that these should be accorded, in purity and innocence of heart, to the divinity of the gods, but only if the offering is observed by them, and if something has

been accorded by the immortal gods to humanity. But if they have neither the power nor the wish to aid us, if they have no care at all for us and take no notice of what we do, if there is nothing that can find its way from them to human life, what reason is there for our rendering to them any worship, or honour, or prayers?

On the other hand, in an empty and artificial pretence of faith, piety cannot find a place any more than the other virtues; with piety it is necessary that holiness and religious obligation should also disappear, and when these are gone a great confusion and disturbance of life ensues; indeed, when piety towards the gods is removed, I am not so sure that good faith, and human brotherhood, and justice, the chief of all the virtues, are not also removed.

But there is another school of philosophers, and a great and high-minded one it is, who hold that the entire universe is ordered and ruled by the mind and the intelligence of the gods, and, more than this, that the gods also take counsel and forethought for the life of men; for they think that the crops and other produce of the earth, the variations in the weather, the succession of the seasons, and the changing phenomena of the sky, by means of which everything that the earth bears is ripened and comes to maturity, are gifts bestowed by the immortal gods upon mankind, and they point to many instances which will be mentioned in the course of these books, and which are of such a kind as to almost make it seem that the immortal gods manufactured these precise things for the benefit of man!

Against this school one philosopher advanced many arguments, with the result of rousing men of intelligence to a desire for investigating the truth; for there is no question on which there is such marked disagreement, not only amongst the unlearned, but the learned as well, and the fact of their opinions being so various and so mutually opposed makes it of course possible, upon the one hand, that not one of them is true, and certainly impossible, upon the other, that more than one should be true.

LUCRETIUS (poet, follower of the Greek philosopher Epicurus; 99-55BCE)

On the Nature of Things

Once, human life lay grovelling on the earth, crushed by the weight of religion, which glared down upon them from its place in heaven. Then a man from Greece first dared to raise his mortal eyes, and stand against religion. He was not intimidated by stories of the gods, or thunderbolts, of the roaring of a storm across the skies, but rather was spurred on by the eager daring of his mind, yearning to be the first to break through the bolted door which shuts humankind off from understanding nature. So the lively force of his mind won its way, and passed beyond the fiery walls of this world, and in mind and spirit travelled through infinity...And so religion is cast beneath men's feet and trampled, and victory raises us up to heaven.

It is sweet, when, on the mighty sea, winds are buffeting the waves, to gaze from land on someone else's great struggles. This is not because it is pleasure or joy that anyone should be in distress, but because it is sweet to perceive that you yourself are free from such misfortunes. It is also sweet to watch great battles in wartime, armies spread across the plains, when you have no part in the danger. But nothing is more delightful than to dwell in tranquillity, safe on the heights, resting on the teachings of the wise, and looking down on others as they wander to and fro, going astray as they seek a path through life, competing in ambition, striving against one another for status and riches and in noble birth, to rise to the heights of power, and gain possession of the world.

What miserable minds of men, what blind hearts! In what darkness you spend this little span of life! How can you not see that nature demands nothing else but that the body may be kept free

from pain, and that, withdrawn from care and fear, one may enjoy in one's mind the sense of pleasure! We see that for the body's needs few things are indispensable...nor do you recover faster from a fever if you lie in a bed covered with fine silks instead of ordinary coverings.