

There is no god, and yes I *can* say that.

By Paul Almond, 7 June 2009

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1 Abstract

Theists and agnostics often say that nobody can say that *there is no god*. This is not merely disagreement with the statement that there is no god – for example because they think the claim is reasonable or is supported by evidence. They mean that nobody can validly say that there is no god *even in principle*, because this would mean proving with certainty that God does not exist, and total knowledge would be needed to rule out the idea completely. This article argues against this, showing that it is semantically consistent to say that there is no god, if we consider God to be sufficiently implausible, *even in the absence of an absolute proof of God's non-existence*. Any claim made for an object's existence implies many claims of the non-existence of “invalidators” – implausible objects that would invalidate the claim, or at least make it unsafe, if they existed. If God is like an invalidator, asserting God's non-existence is entirely consistent, regardless of what position is taken on invalidators, with how semantics normally deals with invalidators.

2 Introduction

In debates about the existence, or otherwise, of God, theists often claim that atheists cannot prove that God does not exist. One reason sometimes given for this is that “you would have to search every bit of the universe”. The idea is that you would have to claim total knowledge, that nobody can have, to know whether or not God exists.

Many atheists accept that they cannot prove that there is no god, and say that their position is one of *non-belief*, and that saying that you do not believe in something is not the same as saying that it does not exist. I will not argue with this. My own view, however, is this:

There is no god.

I have no problems stating that. I can justify my position and I hope to persuade more people to say it, rather than accommodating what is one of the most extreme, implausible ideas in human history with any kind of fence-sitting. I am not trying to change the definition of the word “atheism”. I am merely saying that, irrespective of what the word “atheism” means, it can be valid to say that there is no god. The idea that saying this would amount to claiming total knowledge will be shown to be a semantic fallacy in this article.

This article may seem long, given that it just deals with a semantic issue. I apologize for this, but saw no alternative to expressing the following reasoning in detail. When I have presented shorter versions of this reasoning, people have been waiting with various

flawed objections that merely perpetrate the same semantic inconsistency that has got us into this situation. A mess of semantic confusion has been created for centuries around the issue of whether or not it is valid to say that there is no god, with many incorrect views being widely believed to be correct. Untying a semantic knot that people have been tying for centuries is not easy, and there is not much point in doing this and leaving a lot of loose ends.

While writing this article I gave an outline of the argument on the www.richarddawkins.net forum [1].

3 The Idea that Atheists Cannot Say that there is No God

I will start by giving an idea, with examples, of the sort of position against which I am arguing. Many theists claim that it is invalid to say that there is no god, there is no such thing as God, God does not exist, or anything equivalent. Of course theists think that God's existence is a sensible proposition, and that it would be wrong to say that there is no god, but this idea goes beyond that. The idea is that it is invalid *even in principle* to say that there is no god, regardless of how implausible or extreme God may seem, and regardless of how lacking in evidence God may be, because you can never be absolutely sure, and that you would have to know anything to make such a statement. Here is an example of such thinking, by Hank Hanegraaff, a Christian:

To begin, atheism involves a logical fallacy known as a universal negative. Simply stated, a person would have to be omniscient and omnipresent to be able to say "there is no God" from his own pool of knowledge. Only someone capable of being in all places at the same time – with a perfect knowledge of all that is in the universe – can make such a statement based on the facts. In other words, a person would have to be God to say there is no God. Hence, the assertion is logically indefensible.¹ [2]

and Hanegraaff states this in other articles [3].

Here is an example by another Christian:

All atheists posit what's called a universal negative. A universal negative requires absolute knowledge (omniscience) whereas a universal positive may not require that...So, in essence, any time an atheist claims that there is absolutely no God, they are claiming absolute and full knowledge of the universe (omniscience). If they are not claiming absolute knowledge, then they are going off of faith, but in fact, since they could never EVER know for sure that universal negative, then they are requiring much more faith than a person who claims there is a God (because finding out if there is a God may not require absolute knowledge). [4]

Many atheists disagree with such statements because they do not regard atheism as asserting that there is no god. Rather, they regard atheism as being a *lack of belief* in god.

¹ Note that that quote refers to a *universal* negative.

In my experience, this seems to be the widespread, modern understanding of the word according to people who say they are atheists. There is a subdivision of atheism known as *positive atheism* or *strong atheism* [5] which does involve asserting God's non-existence.

In this article I will not argue about the definition of the word "atheism". I want to show that sort of claim, mentioned above, by theists – that it is impossible, even in principle, to know enough to say that God does not exist – is invalid. I will be showing that it can be valid, in principle, to say that there is no god, provided that the characteristics that God is claimed to have would put him in a particular class of objects that we already state, implicitly, not to exist.

Some positive atheists say that God, when defined in some ways, can be said not to exist because the definition is inconsistent – or that the concept can be dismissed because the concept is incoherent:

All that is needed to prove such a negative is to show that the concept in question is meaningless or contradictory. For example, an argument often used against the existence of hypothetical gods is the Argument from Evil. In this case, the evidence is that a god must be omnibenevolent, omniscient and omnipotent, and the fact that evil exists. We do not need to know everything to know that evil exists and compare this with a god's infinite attributes, and yet it is sufficient to argue strong atheism, because it shows that gods are incompatible with our universe. [5]

I find this reasonable, but I will go further and show that we are justified in saying that God does not exist if God's claimed characteristics simply make him implausible enough. The same website from which the above quote came does go further. It points out that we cannot have certainty, but that this should not prevent us making an assertion:

How do you define "prove"? The dictionary defines it as "To establish the truth or validity of by presentation of argument or evidence". By that standard, a great number of scientific and technical propositions are proven. "There is no god" would be one of them.

If by "prove" you mean "establish the truth with 100% certainty", then you're asking for the impossible. We can't do that, and neither can you. But that doesn't mean we don't know anything. [5]

I agree with this. However, some theists or agnostics² object to this kind of view by saying things like, "If you are an atheist you are saying that there is no god. You are saying you *know* that there is no god," as if that position does imply certainty. I think there is a major abuse of semantics – in the form of inconsistency – by theists in making this point. The same website anticipates such objections, stating:

To understand this, we need to understand the difference between a claim and the confidence we put on that claim. We can make claims about a great number of things, but the nature of the claim itself does not indicate how confident we are in it. [5]

² using a particular understanding of the word "agnostics"

I will be going into this kind of issue in more detail. I will provide a detailed argument showing that, if we think God is implausible enough, we should say that there is no god, and that we can do this *without even taking a position on whether or not we can make assertions with certainty*. I will be considering a class of objects that I will call *invalidators*. Most people would regard claims for invalidators as extreme and lacking anything like enough evidence. I will be showing that almost any statement we might make asserting the existence of an object (and any other type of statement really), actually implies a position on the existence of invalidators and that the semantics that we all use routinely implies the non-existence of these invalidators. I will be showing that if we regard God as a claim that is as extreme as the claims for invalidators, and similarly unsupported by evidence, then we should say that there is no god. Anyone arguing that we should not say that there is no god in such a situation is making up special semantic rules for God. This is important, because many theists and agnostics think that the assertion that there is no god is unreasonable in principle – in the sense that it must be a claim to know everything, or to have a degree of certainty which could never be justified, irrespective of how extreme or implausible the claim might be or how lacking in evidence it is.

4 Proving that Something Does Not Exist

4.1 “You can’t prove a negative.”

A widespread saying is: “You can’t prove a negative.” This is a useless statement. We first need to consider what it means. Some people point out that the statement is wrong by showing examples of negatives that are easily proved to most people’s satisfaction, or at least to the same extent to which we might disprove anything; for example, that 18 plus 2 is not 50³, that London is not the capital of France, or that a global nuclear war did not happen yesterday.

When this statement is made in discussions about religion, the supernatural or other areas in which extreme claims may be being considered, the statement usually has a more particular meaning. It usually means a *universal* negative – and this is often explicitly stated and it usually means, more particularly: “You can’t prove that something does not exist.” I will be showing that it is a useless statement to make. This will not help the theistic side of the debate.

4.2 The Implication of “You can’t prove a negative.”

There is a problem with the idea that you cannot prove that something does not exist. Although it is not explicitly stated, there is an implication that you *can* prove that something *does* exist. Statements about the existence of things are viewed as fundamentally different to statements about their non-existence. Anyone who doubts this should ask why people do not often say, “You can’t prove a positive *or* a negative,” or “You can’t prove that anything exists or doesn’t exist,”: the whole point of saying that

³ given the appropriate mathematical postulates

you cannot prove a negative, or that you cannot prove that something does not exist, in these kinds of debates, is to assert that claims for non-existence are different.

5 Every “positive” claim implies many “negative” claims

The problem with the statement, with its implication that it does not apply to claims for the *existence* of things, is this:

Any claim that something exists can be easily shown to rely on many other claims that other things do not exist.

This means that “positive” claims for the *existence* of things do not have any *qualitatively* different status than “negative” claims for the *non-existence* of things, because each “positive” claim for existence of something is only as “safe” as the “negative” claims for non-existence of other things, which I will call *invalidators*, on which it relies.

The word “invalidators” in this article will not really mean routine things that could make a statement false, but the sort of things that would let us make almost any statement false. The claims for the non-existence of “invalidators” considered here will be, in most people’s opinions, fairly safe claims – though “fairly safe” could mean different things.

6 Example

The “positive” claim is this: *Your car exists.*⁴

This “positive” claim is untrue if any of the following “positive” claims are *true*.

Invalidator Claim: *Aliens, called Zoogvugians, exist, who hate cars, who have technology so powerful that they could easily come to Earth and destroy someone’s car, silently and without any passing witnesses noticing, and replace it with a hologram of a car so nobody notices that the car is gone, and who have done this to your car.*⁵

Comments: If this claim is true then the Zoogvugians destroyed your car and all that remains outside your house is a hologram. If this is the case you do not own a car, as your car has been destroyed by the aliens. The “positive” claim that your car exists is only as safe as the “negative” claim that the Zoogvugians *do not exist*. The Zoogvugians are an *invalidator*, because their existence would invalidate any claim of the car’s existence.

Invalidator Claim: *There exists a kind of delusion, called Carownphrenia which causes someone to think they own a car, when in fact they do not have one, and which has you as one of its sufferers. Sufferers invent memories of car ownership and use, and can even have realistic hallucinations that they are in their car when they are not. Even when their*

⁴ I am assuming that you own a car. If you do not, please imagine you do, or substitute something else.

⁵ Only consider this relevant if you are not touching your car right now: if you are, I would need to specify a more powerful invalidator.

family members and friends scream at them they do not own a car, the delusion is so extensive that they just hear the words as other things. There is no way of persuading someone with Carownphrenia that they do not own a car: they think everything is normal and that they own a car.

Comments: If this claim is true then you do not own a car and all your memories of owning and using your car in the past are caused by Carownphrenia. Even if you are reading this while sitting in your car⁶, the experience you are having, right now, of being in your car would be a hallucination caused by Carownphrenia. The “positive” claim that your car exists is only as safe as the “negative” claim that Carownphrenia *does not exist*.

Invalidator Claim: *There exists an all-powerful being, who likes to make people who do not own cars think that they own cars when they do not own cars, and who is making it seem to you as though you own a car.*

Comments: This claim is vaguer, but some claims about God are equally vague. We do not have to specify how the all-powerful being makes people think they own cars: if he is all powerful he can do it. If such a being exists, your experience of owning a car is just caused by this all-powerful being. The “positive” claim that your car exists is only as safe as the “negative” claim that such an all-powerful being *does not exist*.

All of these invalidator claims did not just involve claims for things which could fool you: they involved claims for things which *are* fooling you. One of the characteristics of the invalidator is that it is fooling you: that is what it does. I could have defined invalidators that had the capability to fool you, but may or may not actually be doing it, but for the use of my argument these kinds of invalidators are more convenient. The argument would still work to some degree, however, even if the invalidator may or may not be fooling you: if the invalidator existed, any claim which it invalidates would still be *unsafe*.

The invalidators I am discussing here are objects – things – that may or may not exist, and if an invalidator exists it invalidates a claim for an object’s existence. A more general version of this could be described in which an invalidator is simply a claim, which might or might not involve the existence of a thing, and which if true, would invalidate some other claim which might or might not involve the existence of a thing. Most of this article will describe invalidators as objects and the claims they invalidate as being ones for the existence of objects, because this relates to the *existence* of God and it makes it easier to see what is going on.

7 The Principle of Invalidator Consistency

The examples of invalidators given above will seem stupid, but that is an intuitive response. Why are they stupid? It would be hard to prove them non-existent with absolute certainty. Even if you could prove one of the invalidators not to exist, I could just move it

⁶ and if so, in the interests of safety, please do not drive while reading it

one step ahead of a disproof by complicating it with more attributes, such as special powers. People who have discussed the existence of Santa Claus with children will be familiar with this. If you prove that he does not exist because he could never deliver all those presents, it can be claimed that he has help from elves, or magic transportation. If you prove that he does not exist because he would be seen by people it can be claimed that he has magic powers to avoid being seen, and so on. For almost any claim, we could hypothesize many invalidators that have been complicated by enough attributes that they defy any attempt to prove them not to exist with total certainty.

It would be naïve, however, to think that this means that invalidators must be taken seriously. Invalidators will tend to have these features:

- Claims for their existence are extreme.
- There is insufficient evidence to justify such an extreme claim.

For now, I will leave it for readers to decide for themselves what an “extreme” claim is, but most readers will have some idea that the sorts of invalidators we have been discussing are extreme. If you think that invalidators can be proved not to exist, with certainty, you are basically asserting that things *like* invalidators can be known not to exist with certainty. If you think that invalidators can be known *almost certainly* not to exist, then you are asserting that things *like* invalidators can be known almost certainly not to exist.

This can be generalized as what I will call *the principle of invalidator consistency*. This merely requires that you are consistent in how you treat invalidators and how you treat other things, the existence of which is *as plausible* as invalidators – *invalidator-type objects*. There are two versions of it: a philosophical version and a semantic one, as follows:

The Principle of Invalidator Consistency: Philosophical Version

If you are prepared to assert the non-existence, or some degree of unlikelihood of existence, of invalidators, as a philosophical view, you should accept that the same can be said about invalidator-type objects (objects, the existence of which is not significantly more plausible than that of invalidators) and that an argument for the assertion of the non-existence or unlikelihood of existence of a thing could rely merely on showing that its existence is not significantly more plausible than that of an invalidator.

The Principle of Invalidator Consistency: Semantic Version

If your semantic conventions allow you to assert the non-existence, or some degree of unlikelihood of existence, of invalidators, you should accept that the same can be said about invalidator-type objects (objects, the existence of which is not significantly more plausible than that of invalidators) and that an argument that an assertion of the non-existence or unlikelihood of existence of a thing is valid, given your semantic

conventions, could rely merely on showing that its existence is not significantly more plausible than that of an invalidator.

Deciding whether or not something is an invalidator-type object is based on its plausibility, relative to that of invalidators, and it just involves being consistent about how we make decisions about plausibility for invalidators and other objects. One thing that we can do is look at the characteristics of a claim for some object's existence and ask ourselves if those characteristics, in a claim for the existence of an invalidator, could lead us to make our decision about its plausibility.

For example, if we regard claims for the existence of many invalidators as implausible because they are extreme claims, unsupported by evidence, then we should regard any other object as an invalidator-type object if a claim for its existence would be similarly extreme and unsupported by evidence.

Few people are likely to think that invalidators are likely to exist, so the principle of invalidator consistency is likely to apply, with regard to existence, in one of two ways:

1. If you think that invalidators *certainly* do not exist, and I define some hypothetical thing, X, then you should accept that someone could show that X *certainly* does not exist merely by showing that X is like an invalidator, or that X's existence is not significantly more plausible than an invalidator's.
2. If you think that invalidators *almost certainly* do not exist, then you should accept that someone could show that X *almost certainly* does not exist, merely by showing that X's existence is not significantly more probable than an invalidator's

This does not mean that any claim about the existence, or otherwise, of X will be uncontroversial. Other people's opinions about the existence of invalidators may differ from yours. Someone may argue that X is similar to an invalidator and you may reject it. The idea is that you should accept that an argument for treating X just as you treat any invalidator can be based purely on showing that X is like an invalidator, or that X's existence is not significantly more plausible than an invalidator's.

For example:

If you think that some invalidators *certainly* do not exist because "they are just stupid" then you should accept that an argument for the certain non-existence of X could be based on trying to show that "it is just stupid" and nothing else. (This does not mean that you have to accept the argument: you may think that X is not a stupid idea. It just means that a *successful* attempt to show that X is stupid should be enough.)

If you think that many invalidators *almost certainly* do not exist because they involve things with magical powers then you should accept that an argument for X's almost certain non-existence can be based on nothing more than trying to show that X has magical powers.

If you think that many invalidators can be validly said not to exist because they seriously complicate things and are unsupported by evidence then you should accept that trying to show that X seriously complicates things and is unsupported by evidence is a valid way of justifying the statement that X does not exist.

The principle of invalidator consistency has implications for the validity of statements about God's existence.

8 Implications for Proving a Negative

Almost any "positive" claim for a thing's existence relies on the non-existence of many other things. Therefore, any proof that a thing exists would be invalidated if any one of many different things were found to exist: any proof that a thing exists is only as safe as our confidence in the non-existence of many other things.

This means that there is no *qualitative* difference between "positive" claims for the existence of things and "negative" claims for the non-existence of things. It is wrong to say that you cannot prove a negative (meaning you cannot prove that something does not exist) if the implication is that positives are different and that you *can* prove a positive (meaning you can prove that something does exist). This means that when the statement, "You can't prove a negative," is made it is useless⁷. If it is referring to the general idea of negatives, for example in mathematics, it is invalid, because negative statements are proved as easily as positive ones. If it is referring to the non-existence of things then it is useless due to the argument given here. When a theist asks an atheist for proof that God does not exist, "You can't prove a negative," is an ill-advised response. This does not mean that the atheist should be able to disprove God. Many atheists do not claim to know that God does not exist, instead describing their position as "non-belief in God", so they would not even try. Other atheists might maintain that God does not exist.

This can be viewed in a number of ways. We should first consider what we mean by "prove". Do we mean a "mathematical" level of proof, equivalent to 100% confidence, rather than 99.99999....a few thousand nines.....99999% confidence?⁸ Do we mean proof "beyond reasonable doubt"⁹, so that something is regarded as being proved to exist or not to exist if that has been established with a given degree of confidence? We need to be careful to apply semantics *consistently*.

The simplest way of viewing this is that it means that you can prove, with absolute certainty, that things exist and that you can prove, with absolute certainty, that things do not exist. This is *possibly* an incorrect assumption, at least if we try to apply it to all positives and all negatives, because if we previously thought that you cannot absolutely prove a negative, the argument I have made has done nothing obvious to give us more confidence in these negatives: it has merely shown that each positive also depends on

⁷ which is not necessarily the same as untrue

⁸ but see my later comments on "mathematical" proof in Section 18.

⁹ a term used in courts in the United Kingdom

many negatives, suggesting that it is our confidence in *positives*, claims for the existence of things, that should possibly be reduced.

9 Possible Positions on Invalidators

9.1 The Possible Positions

Every claim for the existence of something is only as safe as our confidence in the non-existence of many invalidators. We can make up as many invalidators as we want for almost any claim of the existence of anything – if not for all claims of the existence of anything. Can we somehow prove these invalidators away? Whether or not we can do this, or the extent to which we can do it, defines the situation. There are many different levels of confidence we could conceivably have in the non-existence of an invalidator; however, I will simplify things by assuming that we have one of four general positions on invalidators:

1. Invalidators are reasonably likely to exist.
2. Invalidators certainly do not exist.
3. Invalidators *almost* certainly do not exist.
4. Any issues that would be raised by the existence of invalidators are philosophically discounted.

I will now examine each of these possible positions on invalidators.

9.2 Invalidators are reasonably likely to exist

In this view, we cannot even *probably* rule out many invalidators. Although the invalidators seem to be extreme ideas, we accept that their existence is reasonably likely. Almost any claim would have many invalidators that are reasonably likely to exist. We could not have anything near certainty about claims for the existence of things. Almost no claim would be worth stating.

Applying the principle of invalidator consistency would be trivial. It would tell us that, to be consistent, we should accept that we have no idea if things *like* invalidators exist, but we already seem to be in a position where we are claiming to know pretty much nothing about everything anyway so that should not worry us.

This is a strange view. There would be little point in even bothering to get in your car: there would be many *reasonable* claims for the existence of invalidators that would invalidate the claim that your car even exists and that you are not being fooled when you see it. It is difficult to see how a rational person could hold such a view: if we generalize this view to include statements about reality in general, rather than just those about existence and non-existence, it would have to involve a lack of expectation of any predictability in the world.

If such a view were correct (and I find it absurd), it would be true that we cannot prove that something does not exist. This would apply whether “prove” means “establish with certainty” or “establish with near certainty”: we would not have *any idea* even about the probability that claims of non-existence are true. However, this would not be profound: we could say the same about claims for *existence* and we would have no idea about *anything*. Asking an atheist to prove that there is no god, or even to establish that there is no god with a high probability, would be pointless. It would also be pointless to say that an assertion of God’s non-existence is at some kind of disadvantage: *practically all* assertions would be pointless. It would even be pointless to discuss the issue with someone: you would have no reason for thinking they are not really an alien from the planet Zog.

9.3 Invalidators *certainly* do not exist

In this view, the invalidators tend not to be a problem, because they can be known not to exist with *absolute certainty*. By the same reasoning, this means that you can be sure of the existence of things with absolute certainty. For example, you can assert the existence of your car with certainty because the existence of any invalidators which could cause problems is utterly rejected. We should consider how wide in scope this view is. For any claim we could make up a probably unlimited number of invalidators and this view maintains that they can *all* be said certainly not to exist. By the principle of invalidator consistency, you should hold this view about anything that is like an invalidator, and you should accept that a proof of something’s certain non-existence is valid if it can show that the thing has those characteristics of invalidators which cause you to view them as certainly non-existent.

If you take this view, by the philosophical version of the principle of invalidator consistency, you should accept that the same principles on which your disproof of invalidators is based could be applied to God and that, therefore, a proof of God’s certain non-existence could be based merely on an argument that God is the same sort of claim as an invalidator. If that were established, God’s non-existence would be certain. Stating “God does not exist” should cause no problem in such a situation. You may disagree with a *particular* proof of this kind, but you should accept the general validity of basing proofs that things do not exist just on their similarity with invalidators, or on them being no more plausible than invalidators.

9.4 Invalidators *almost certainly* do not exist

In this view the invalidators tend not to be much of a problem, because they are known not to exist with *almost* complete certainty. This small doubt about the existence of invalidators affects almost any statement you can make about the physical world. For example, when you assert that your car exists, you should accept that there is a very small chance that some invalidator exists that could compromise your statement and that you cannot be *certain* that your car exists. This does not mean that you must entertain all kinds of silly ideas to any great degree: you can regard the existence of your car as so

close to certainty that it is impractical to consider the small amount of uncertainty routinely.

You could express the uncertainty by qualifying all your statements in everyday life. For example, you could say, “I almost certainly own a car.” Few people holding such a view will do this. It would mean having to qualify *everything* we say in everyday life.

An implication of this, with regard to religion, is that an argument showing God’s *almost certain* non-existence might be based on nothing more than showing that God has the sorts of properties that cause some invalidators to be viewed as almost certainly not existing.

9.5 Any issues that would be raised by the existence of invalidators are philosophically discounted.

I added this option following the discussion on the www.richarddawkins.net discussion forum [1] in which I briefly stated the ideas behind the argument in this article, while I was writing it. Someone argued that when we make statements that would be invalidated by invalidator existence, we are not implicitly stating that the invalidators do not exist: we philosophically discount things like invalidators when making statements. This position is basically saying, “Stop playing pointless semantic games. When we make statements about things existing, etc we do not take any philosophical position on invalidators.”

I think that this is not a well-defined option: to me it is just a vague version of one of the other positions, but I have included it anyway, merely to stop it being used as a loophole.

Here is an example of how this position would be applied.

The Eiffel Tower exists.

An invalidator for this statement could be: *There exists an evil space-time pixie that can put delusions that the Eiffel Tower exists into your brain and is doing so right now.*

Does stating that the Eiffel Tower exists involve an implicit statement that the evil space-time pixie does not exist? I would say it does, but someone holding this position would say that we do not need to go that far. The position would be:

When we state that the Eiffel Tower exists, we do not philosophically concern ourselves with the evil space-time pixie, or any other invalidator. We philosophically discount such things. This does not mean that we have to think that they are impossible or unlikely: they simply play no part in our thinking.

This position probably best reflects what does – or rather does not – go through people’s minds when they make conventional statements. When I describe it as an ill-defined

position, it does not mean that I am claiming that it does not reflect the position that people take – just that it is a poorly defined position for people to take.

Importantly, *philosophically* discounting something automatically means *semantically* discounting it. If the existence of something has no place in our philosophy then it has no place in our semantics. I will look at this in more detail later.

10 Invalidators and Everyday Language

Everyday language does not acknowledge invalidators. If you think that all the silly invalidators we might propose for the existence of all kinds of everyday things certainly do not exist then this should not bother you: you need not acknowledge the existence of things that *certainly* do not exist. If, however, you merely think that invalidators *almost certainly* do not exist, then almost all of your everyday statements about things will be affected by the possibility of invalidator existence.

This is an important point. If you think that invalidators *almost certainly* do not exist, and fail to qualify all your everyday statements with some acknowledgement of uncertainty, you are accepting that statements for which the uncertainty is of the very small kind, associated with invalidators, do not need qualifying, as the uncertainty is implicit in the statement. For example, the statement, “There is a church near my house,” would have to mean, “There is a church near my house, unless some invalidator is just making it seem like there is; however the chance of such an invalidator existing is so small that it has no practical significance.” If you take this position on invalidators, and you do *not* want all your statements to carry some implication of uncertainty like this there is only one way out: start qualifying everything; for example, “There is *almost certainly* a church near my house.”

I know of nobody who qualifies statements in such a way. Everyone I know makes unqualified assertions about things in everyday life.

11 Saying that there is no God

11.1 The idea that we cannot say that there is no God

Many atheists define atheism as having no belief in any god. Some theists claim that atheism goes further and actually denies God’s existence, that atheists say that there is no God. Theists might use the definition of “atheist” in the *The Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary* as evidence of this:

atheist (n)

1. *One who disbelieves or denies the existence of a God, or supreme intelligent Being.*
2. *A godless person. [6]*

Many atheists despise this kind of definition, because they only regard atheism as lack of belief. I do not intend to argue, here, about the definition of “atheism”. Regardless of the definition of atheism, some atheists go beyond mere lack of belief and assert the non-existence of a god [5] and, for such people, even if the Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary definition, above, is incorrect on the definition of atheism, it does reflect their views. I am one of these people. I actually assert that there is no god. So that there is no misunderstanding about what I mean by this, I am saying:

There is no god.

Theists tend to claim that this position is unjustifiable, and that I can only validly say that I do not know if God exists or, at the most, that there probably is no god. This is not about the evidence for God, an entirely separate matter, but about the more general idea that I cannot justifiably make a statement that something does not exist and that I should at least qualify it with uncertainty. Theists ask for proof that there is no god – and they do not just mean statements about the incoherence of claims for some gods (which they may dispute), or its extreme nature and the lack of evidence (which they will not see as a disproof): they mean proper, mathematical-level, absolute proof. Theists often claim that you cannot say that God does not exist unless you have looked everywhere in the universe or unless you know everything. Even many atheists take this position and avoid asserting God’s non-existence, or qualify the statement when they do assert it. The British Humanist Association started placing advertisements on buses in London in 2008 stating, “There’s probably no god,” the “probably” apparently being added for a number of reasons, one of which was to avoid breaching advertising standards [7]. The general idea behind all this is simple:

If you are saying that there is no god, you are claiming to know with 100% certainty that there is no god, and you should not do that without proof, which you obviously do not have.

How then, can I state that there is no god? There are three parts to my justification for this:

1. I regard God as being like many invalidators.
2. Whatever this means about any uncertainty, or lack of it, regarding God’s existence, almost everyone makes other statements without the use of any qualifying words like “probably” or “almost certainly”.
3. This means that if I state that God does not exist then I am following normal conventions for language, based on the view that God is like an invalidator.

Some readers might challenge my view that God is like an invalidator, and there could be debate about that, but this article is not for that. Instead, I would point out that many invalidators could be proposed for all kinds of things that you regard as existing and all kinds of statements which you regard as true, and you would not typically ask for a mathematical-level proof of non-existence to accept that something is an invalidator. I am not trying to show, here, that God is like an invalidator, but rather that if someone does

consider God to be like an invalidator then that in itself, without any proofs of non-existence, searches of the entire universe or omniscience, is adequate justification for saying that God does not exist while following normal language conventions.

Earlier, I described four possible positions about invalidators:

1. Invalidators are reasonably likely to exist.
2. Invalidators certainly do not exist.
3. Invalidators *almost* certainly do not exist.
4. Any issues that would be raised by the existence of invalidators are philosophically discounted.

We will now look at how justified it would be to say that there is no god, if God is similar to an invalidator, within the context of each of these positions.

11.2 Invalidators are reasonably likely to exist.

If you take this view, then as I have already stated, you must regard almost any statement about the existence of anything as in serious doubt. If you take this position then you would have to take my statement that there is no god as unjustified, even if God is like an invalidator, because you think that invalidators are reasonably likely to exist. Because you think that invalidators are reasonably likely to exist, *serious* doubt must be placed on any claims that the invalidators would invalidate – and as an invalidator can be found for a claim of the existence of almost anything, this means that you should accept significant uncertainty in almost any claim for the existence of a thing, or almost any other type of claim. For example, you should not say something like, “I am sitting on a chair,” because invalidators for the claim that your chair exists, or that you are sitting on it, could easily be defined and you would have to accept them as reasonably likely to exist, making it similarly, reasonably likely that your chair does not exist, or that you are not sitting on it.

You might seek refuge in saying that when you say something like, “I am sitting on a chair,” you are not actually claiming that you are certainly sitting on a chair, that there is significant uncertainty in the statement and that this uncertainty is associated with so many things that it is impractical to acknowledge it every time you make a statement. If you take that view then you should have no problem with me saying that God does not exist: according to your semantics you should view everyday language as implying significant uncertainty.

11.3 Invalidators certainly do not exist.

If you take this view then you may argue with me about whether or not God is like an invalidator, but that is all you can reasonably argue about. You cannot reasonably argue that thinking that God has the characteristics of an invalidator does not justify an assertion of God’s non-existence. The philosophical version of the principle of invalidator consistency demands it.

If you take this view it would make no sense to ask me for proof that God does not exist, or to challenge me to look everywhere, or to require me to be omniscient before I say that there is no god. Your own standard makes it easy to say that God does not exist – and you should accept that anyone who thinks that God has the characteristics of an invalidator should be 100% sure of God’s non-existence. I can write off God as easily as you write off all the other things like it – and I am just as justified in asking you for proof.

You have taken this position if you simply declare that X is stupid and obviously does not exist, because... well, because X is stupid really and that is that, without the need to prove that X does not exist.

11.4 Invalidators *almost* certainly do not exist.

If you think that invalidators almost certainly do not exist, but cannot be ruled out in some “hard” mathematical sense then, to be consistent, you should accept some small, *residual* uncertainty in almost any statement asserting the *existence* of a thing, or almost any other type of statement. If God is to be treated as an invalidator, this means that God *almost* certainly does not exist. Does this cause problems with my assertion that there is no god?

What do you regard as reasonable semantics, if you take this position? Almost any statement you could make will be contaminated with some small amount of uncertainty from the possible, if unlikely, existence of some invalidator that would, by existing, make the statement false.

If you take such a position, what sort of statements do you make about the existence of a thing? Do you qualify statements that you make in everyday life, or even in most discussions like this, with “almost certainly”? Do you say “My car is parked in front of my house,” or do you say, “My car is *almost certainly* parked in front of my house,” or words to that effect, to take account of the possible existence of invalidators which could mean that your car or your house do not exist, the outside of your house does not exist or that even if your car does not exist it is not parked outside.¹⁰

Most people do not qualify most of their statements in this way. To give an idea of how extremely it would affect your language if you did this, if you claim, “Yes, I do qualify my statements like that,” then I would reject your claim immediately: you have to say, “Yes, I *almost certainly* qualify my statements like that,” because there are invalidators which, if they exist, would compromise your memory of how you have qualified statements in the past.

If you really do insist on qualifying statements like this, then I would admit that, if we use your semantics, my statement that there is no god cannot be justified merely based on God being an invalidator. Of course, I might produce various arguments attempting to show that God certainly does not exist, but that is not what is being discussed here: the issue is, what can reasonably be said about God if I take the view that God is like an

¹⁰ You hardly even need a full-scale invalidator for this one either: a car thief would suffice.

invalidator? If you are going to take this position, then you need to be careful to be consistent. Here is an example of what could be an inconsistent position, and one which many atheists will have encountered in some form:

You just said that there is no god, but how can you say that? Do you know everything? Can you prove that God does not exist? Have you looked everywhere in the universe for God or possible evidence for God?

Such rhetorical questions suggest that a position of invalidators almost certainly not existing is being adopted. If not – if the person is not taking this position on invalidators – then he/she seems to be making a special case for God, by saying that we can be certain about the non-existence of invalidators without knowing everything, without proof (unless the person is going to provide proof that invalidators do not exist) and without looking everywhere in the universe. This would be inconsistent. If you claim that invalidators certainly do not exist you are admitting the idea, in principle, of declaring a large number of absurd things not to exist based, presumably, on their absurdity and the lack of evidence for them, and you should accept that God *may* be validly held not to exist for the same reasons if God happens to be like an invalidator.

If you think that invalidators almost certainly do not exist then practically any statement about the world should have residual uncertainty, because an invalidator could be imagined which, if it exists, would invalidate your statement. It does not matter how unlikely you think such invalidators are to exist. If you think there is a small chance that invalidators exist, however small, you can assert practically nothing with certainty.

This brings us to the issue of semantics, if you think invalidators almost certainly do not exist then you should qualify all your statements with some acknowledgement of residual uncertainty or accept that when you make statements, this residual uncertainty is implied.

For example:

Consider the idea that you bought vegetables yesterday.

You could qualify this statement to acknowledge some residual uncertainty that is there because of the possible (but unlikely) existence of some invalidator:

Yesterday I almost certainly bought vegetables.

This could reflect the possible existence (even though this is *almost certainly* not the case) of false memory implants, mental disorders, brain infecting nanomachines, alien mind engineers, etc.

Alternatively, you could simply state it without qualification:

Yesterday I bought vegetables.

If you think that invalidators almost certainly do not exist, then you should view this statement as having some residual uncertainty, which you are not *explicitly* acknowledging. If this is how you make statements, and you are being consistent, the residual certainty should be presumed to be *implicit* in the statement. In other words:

“Yesterday I bought vegetables” = “Yesterday I *almost certainly* bought vegetables”

It should be noted that the “almost certainly” here does not imply a serious level of uncertainty, but merely the very low level of uncertainty, *residual uncertainty*, which you associate with the existence of invalidators.

Let us now consider this statement:

There is no God.

With this kind of semantics, this statement would also be viewed as having residual uncertainty because of the language conventions that you follow. In other words:

“There is no god” = “There is *almost certainly* no god”

It should be noted, again, that the “almost certainly” here does not imply a serious level of uncertainty, but merely whatever level of uncertainty you associate with the existence of invalidators. This residual uncertainty may be so small that it is not even worth the effort of trying to put a number on it.

If you accept the possible, but unlikely, existence of invalidators and you do not like this implicit uncertainty in almost every statement, you can solve the problem by qualifying all your statements, but I do not know anyone who does that. Normal language conventions seem to be to make unqualified statements. The issue of residual uncertainty is not even considered.

The important point is that, if semantics like this are being assumed, the assertion that there is no god has residual uncertainty *like almost every other statement*. It needs no more justification than showing that God can be treated like the invalidators that are viewed as almost certainly non-existent when making almost any other statement.

For example:

There is no god. – Not true if god exists.

My house has a green roof. – Not true if the roof color hallucination causing aliens that are causing you to have wrong beliefs about your house roof color exist.

Each of these statements can only be trusted if something else does not exist. In the first statement it is God. In the second statement it is an invalidator.

If semantics like this are used, it is a double standard to ask someone who asserts that there is no god for mathematical proof for his/her “certainty” in this. If you hold this view on invalidators, and if God can be shown to be no different to an invalidator, saying, “There is no god,” should be viewed as a reasonable statement, implying no more, in terms of confidence, than is implied by *any* statements that you make about things existing – and that confidence should be slightly less than 100% due to your acceptance that invalidators have a small chance of existence. “God does not exist,” should be viewed as no more problematic than, “My car exists”: one would be wrong if God happened to exist, while the other would be wrong if an invalidator for the claim of your car’s existence happened to exist, both of these chances being approximately equivalent *if God is like an invalidator*.

Anyone holding this view on invalidators should see an assertion of God’s non-existence as no more problematic, if God is treated like an invalidator, than assertions of the *existence* of many other things. The statement might not be totally provable, but nor would practically any other statement, so this should hardly be a surprise.

11.5 Any issues that would be raised by the existence of invalidators are philosophically discounted.

This view is one of not taking any of the previously described views. It is not a position of declaring invalidators not to exist, but is simply a position characterized by not taking any of the other positions. Invalidator existence is not philosophically recognized.

With the previous positions of considering invalidators as certainly not existing or almost certainly not existing, I have shown that applying either position consistently means that a similar view would need to be taken on God, if God is thought to be like an invalidator, and that this gives a philosophical justification for taking the semantic position that it is valid to say that there is no god.

I cannot do this with this position, because there is no well-defined philosophical position with which to do it. Instead, we must now turn to semantics, rather than philosophy, and look at this in terms of semantic consistency. If a possibility is *philosophically* discounted then it must also be *semantically* discounted: our conventional language cannot be acknowledging a possible situation that we do not even philosophically acknowledge. The existence of invalidators is being *philosophically* discounted, so it must be *semantically* discounted. It must be normal semantics not to acknowledge the presence of invalidators, and not consider the possibility of their existence when deciding whether or not to assert a conventional statement. Such semantics are required by this position on invalidators, but they are the normal semantics that we use anyway. Our normal, everyday semantics does not acknowledge the possibility of invalidator existence. This philosophical position on invalidators and, in fact, any possible position – or lack of one – on invalidators will now be dealt with by a more general, semantic argument.

12 The More General, Semantic Argument

I have been arguing for philosophical consistency, as a way of requiring semantic consistency, in the context of different philosophical positions on invalidators. I will now give a general argument that does not rely on philosophical consistency, or any particular philosophical position. Instead, it relies on semantic consistency. It is particularly relevant to the last philosophical position that I discussed above (Any issues that would be raised by the existence of invalidators are philosophically discounted.) as this position is not sufficiently defined to build a philosophical argument around it. Here is the general, semantic argument:

When we make a statement, for example, when we say that something exists, many invalidators could be proposed, any one of which would invalidate that statement if it existed. Whatever our position is on invalidators – whether we think they are likely, unlikely, impossible, not relevant, etc – the only possibilities which should affect our decision about whether or not to assert a statement as true are those which do *not* rely on invalidators: *situations which would be caused by the existence of invalidators do not count semantically.*

Let us consider an example statement:

*There is a viewing gallery on the Tokyo Tower.*¹¹

I could suggest an invalidator for this statement:

There exists an evil magician who is fooling you into thinking many wrong things, one of which is that there is a viewing gallery on the Tokyo Tower.

This evil magician has no effect on whether or not we assert that statement as true. He is an invalidator. His existence, likely existence, unlikely existence, philosophically discounted existence or any other type of existence has no effect on our decision to assert that statement. Semantically, we assert this statement about Tokyo tower *as if invalidators do not exist* – regardless of what our philosophical views on this are. We can describe this as “asserting statements as if invalidators do not exist”, as “not counting situations which would be caused by the existence of invalidators” or as “unqualified statements semantically implying the non-existence of any of their invalidators”, but it is really the same thing: *normal language statements are made without regard for invalidators and possibilities that would require invalidator existence are not acknowledged.*

The semantic version of the principle of invalidator consistency means that we should treat *invalidator-type objects* like this as well. We should also be consistent and not treat a statement differently just because it is explicitly talking about an invalidator rather than implying something about it. Still with the Tokyo Tower example:

¹¹ For anyone unfamiliar with the Tokyo Tower there is, the best efforts of Godzilla notwithstanding.

There is no evil magician who is fooling you into thinking many wrong things, one of which is that there is a viewing gallery on the Tokyo Tower.

Anyone who says, without qualification, that there is a viewing gallery on the Tokyo Tower, but disagrees with this statement, is being semantically inconsistent. The assertion that the viewing gallery exists is not affected by any issues that would be caused by the evil magician's existence. The fact that the evil magician's existence would make the statement false does not count: *it does not get in the way of asserting the statement*. Similarly, the statement asserting the *non-existence* of the evil magician should not be affected by the existence of the evil magician either! However, in this statement the evil magician, the invalidator, is what the statement is about, and such existence is the only thing that could make the statement false. Therefore, to be consistent, we have to assert this statement as true.

Another way of looking at this is to imagine that we want to check that we can safely make the statement asserting the existence of the Tokyo Tower's viewing gallery, so we make a table containing various statements which, if true, would make the statement false. Suppose one of these statements is the one asserting the existence of the evil magician? If we want to assert the statement about the viewing gallery, we have to remove the statement asserting the evil magician's existence from the table, or simply declare it to be false. Now, when we consider the statement asserting that the evil magician does not exist, we make another table, and this table also contains the statement asserting that the evil magician exists. We need to be consistent in how we deal with this: we should either assert it as false, or remove it from the table. Whatever we do, it is no longer an issue and is no further obstacle to the statement being asserted as true.

If we think God is like an invalidator, we should apply the same semantics to God. Considering this statement:

There is no god.

The only thing that would make this statement false is the existence of God, an invalidator-type object (if we think he is one). However, normal semantics means that any issues that would be caused by the existence of an invalidator-type object do not affect assertion of a statement, or normal statements are asserted as if invalidator-type objects do not exist. This means that we should consider the statement valid. We do not need to qualify the statement with something like "probably" or "almost certainly", because by doing so we are acknowledging the possible existence of an invalidator-type object. Normal statements, made according to normal semantics, do not acknowledge the possible existence of invalidators.

To summarize this:

It is valid to say that there is no god, if God is considered to be like an invalidator, because such a statement would only be wrong if an invalidator-type object (God) exists,

and almost any other statement, including statements that are routinely asserted as true, and including assertions of the existence of objects, would also be wrong if any one of many invalidator-type objects (the invalidators for that statement) existed, yet this does not prevent such statements being made, nor does it demand that they are qualified with words such as “almost certainly” to acknowledge issues that could be caused by invalidator-existence.

If this seems like some trick with words, it is not. It is no more different than saying that the possible existence of an alien that fools you into thinking the Eiffel Tower is real is not considered a valid obstacle in the way of asserting that the Eiffel Tower exists. The only difference is that the invalidator-type object (God) is the same object as the one that the statement being asserted is about, which may make it seem like a trick.

It may seem that in doing this I am trying to use semantics to try to get some kind of questionable, philosophical disproof of God off the ground, in the same way that the (now largely discredited) ontological arguments attempted to get a proof of God off the ground just from his definition. I want to make it clear, again, that all I am advocating is semantic consistency.

This general argument works irrespective of what philosophical position is being taken on invalidators, because the semantics we use are independent of the philosophical position¹²: in fact we can use semantics without even considering our philosophical position. This general argument is actually strongest when we take the philosophical position that any issues that would be raised by the existence of invalidators are philosophically discounted, because this position demands that we do not semantically acknowledge invalidator existence, but it is still valid for the other philosophical positions on invalidators, or any other philosophical position that anyone may think of, because we do not semantically acknowledge issues that would be caused by invalidator existence anyway.

13 The Principle of Implicit and Explicit Consistency

What I have said here has relied on the principle of invalidator consistency, but another principle is being applied. This principle should be obvious by now, but I will state it anyway:

If a statement X is made, and X would be false if some object Y existed, then it should be regarded as valid to state that Y does not exist.

¹² We might actually wonder if this is true of someone who takes the position that invalidators are reasonably likely to exist: we might wonder *what* semantics someone with this position would use in everyday life, but I think it is reasonable to assume we are talking about people who make normal, everyday statements.

and a more general version of this:

If a statement X is made, and X would be false if some statement Y were true, then it should be regarded as valid to state that Y is false.

Some readers may argue with this, saying that you may assert X without really meaning it as a philosophical claim or without meaning it certainly, but this is the whole point: you cannot have your semantics both ways.

This does not mean that you must be “sure” that Y does not exist, or that Y is “proven” not to exist. No position is being taken on that. *This is only about semantic consistency.*

14 The Double Standard About Invalidators and God

This issue of semantic consistency is lost on people who insist that atheists assert with absolute, 100% certainty that there is no god, and then expect atheists to justify this. Many atheists would disagree with this purely on the grounds that their position is one of lack of belief. That is fine, but even if we want to go all the way and assert that there is no god, all we need for justification is a reasonable argument that God is like any one of the invalidators that could be associated with almost any claim that we could make for the *existence* of a thing.

An idea of this semantic issue can be gained by considering how theists attempt to use dictionary definitions of atheism, such as the Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary one:

one who believes that there is no deity [6]

There are different versions saying more or less the same thing in different dictionaries: atheists are people who say that there is no god. Many atheists would dispute this on the grounds that they are *not* saying that there is no god. While definitions of atheism like this may be widely regarded by atheists as misrepresenting their positions, they describe my view reasonably, so I will just examine the definition, what it is viewed as meaning by theists, what it could reasonably be viewed as meaning, and whether the sort of view it describes could be viewed as reasonable.

The common behavior of a theist, armed with a definition like this, is to say that atheists are “100% sure that there is no god”, “absolutely sure that there is no god” or something similar. Some do not even bother to qualify this with any explicit description of the degree of certainty, instead just stating it with emphasis to make it clear that atheists are certain that there is no God: “If you are an atheist you say that there is *no* God.” The implication is that this kind of definition implies absolute conviction, which needs justifying. This is a double standard, because statements of *other* positions are interpreted in an “everyday” sense as having an “everyday” level of conviction, without any regard for what degree of confidence is implied by the definition, and none of the issues raised by invalidators are considered.

As an example, if someone says that the Republican Party is the best party for America, people may challenge this by trying to show that it is not the best party. It would be unusual for someone to try this response, though:

You say that you believe that the Republican Party is the best party for America. That means you are sure that it is the best party, but what about lots of things that might exist that would invalidate that belief? How can you be so sure none of these things exist? You would need to know everything to be sure that the Republican Party is the best party for America. As an example, what if there is an alien warship from the planet Zog in orbit around the earth, and they hate the Republican Party, and if we elect a Republican government next time there is an election, they would destroy the earth. The Republican Party would not be the best party then, would it? Electing it would be a disaster! Your certainty in the idea that the Republican Party is the best party is just based on assumptions about the non-existence of lots of things, none of which you can prove not to exist. You should say that you don't know, or at most that the Republican Party is probably the best party for America.

Someone who seriously tried to make that point would be considered demented, because we generally ignore the issues raised by the possible existence of invalidators. It may be because we think we can be sure that invalidators do not exist, because we think invalidators almost certainly do not exist and we can ignore any residual uncertainty in statements caused by their possible existence – or we may not have thought of why we ignore invalidators, or even noticed that we do ignore them. The point is that, whatever position we take on invalidators, the possible existence of invalidator-type things is not considered to be something that someone should have to disprove when making statements. Regardless of our *philosophical position* on invalidators, we do not acknowledge them *semantically*.

If God can be treated like an invalidator, this should apply to statements about God too. The only difference with statements about the existence of God would be that, in them, the non-existence of an invalidator-type thing is being asserted explicitly, whereas in other statements, it is implicit in the statement: either way, the statement is only as safe as our confidence in the non-existence of invalidators. If you can say that your car has four wheels, I can say that God does not exist.

15 Prove I said that there is no god.

This double standard in how almost all extreme claims are viewed, and how God is viewed, can be shown by a situation I have often encountered.

I often assert that there is no god, and I am usually told that I would have to know everything to know that, or that unless I can *prove* it I cannot be sure. When I reply that I regard God's existence as (at best) an extreme claim, unsupported by evidence, I am often told that I still cannot be *sure* that God exists. A response I like to make to this is to ask the person saying this to *prove* that I said that there is no god. I am usually told that this is *stupid*, because of course I said that. Why would I want proof of something that is

obviously true? The person to whom I am talking remembers me saying that there is no god, so I *obviously* said it. I point out the possible existence of various invalidators that call into question the idea that I certainly said that there is no god. Maybe there is a disorder in the person's brain that makes him/her recall events incorrectly? Maybe there is some demon, alien or other entity that is putting false memories of me saying that into the person's brain? Almost always, the person dismisses any such ideas as *stupid*. If these kinds of invalidators for the claim that I just said that there is no god are being dismissed just because "they are stupid", without any better-defined reason, then this is a double standard, because the person is suggesting that something can be legitimately dismissed as stupid because it seems stupid, while saying I should not do this for God. If the person proposes some reason for dismissing these invalidators, such as lack of evidence, the fact that they are extreme claims, the fact that they use magical powers, etc, then, again, a double standard is being followed, because I am only treating God the same way. The person may admit that he/she cannot be absolutely sure that I did say it: the person may regard invalidators as *almost certainly* not existing. In that case, the person should not have said that I said that there is no god: he/she should have said that I *almost certainly* said that there is no god: and if such a person claims that they do not need to do this then they are being hypocritical if they expect to me to follow different semantic rules.

Some readers may point out that this assumes that everyone will regard God as being like an invalidator. I think God is like an invalidator¹³, and theists do not. Why is it a double standard for a theist to dismiss various invalidators that might be proposed for the claim that I did say that there is no god, when the theist may simply think that there is a good case for God's existence, unlike those of all the invalidators?

The reason for this is that when I am challenged to prove that there is no god, or when I am told that I would have to know everything to know that there is no god, the point being made by the theist is *not* that there is a good argument for God's existence. It is the much stronger point, that *even* if I reject all the arguments for God's existence, and *even* if I find the claim extreme and implausible – in short, even if I do think that the God claim has all the characteristics we would normally have with the claim for an invalidator – I cannot justifiably say that there is no god. This is a last resort of the theistic position – to argue that one's opponents, even if they reject every part of your argument for something's existence, should at least refrain from saying *you are wrong*. It is this very principle which is not followed when a theist insists that I did say that there is no god, in the face of all the claims I could make for invalidators for his/her "memory" of that event.

¹³ When I say that I think God is like an invalidator, this does not mean I believe that God exists. I regard God as an imaginary being and this is just shorthand for saying that his *claimed* characteristics are similar to those that invalidators would be claimed to have.

16 Shouldn't you say you are an agnostic?

I have discussed four general, possible positions on invalidators:

1. Invalidators are reasonably likely to exist.
2. Invalidators certainly do not exist.
3. Invalidators *almost* certainly do not exist.
4. Any issues that would be raised by the existence of invalidators are philosophically discounted.

Some readers may be wondering which of these positions I take. It does not matter with regard to the argument that I am making here. Almost any statement – whether it asserts a thing's existence, non-existence or something else – relies on the non-existence of invalidators, and whatever our position is on invalidators, consistent use of semantics should allow us to say that there is no god, if we think God is like an invalidator.

I will, however, tell you which position I favour on invalidators. You will know that I do not go for “Invalidators are reasonably likely to exist,” because I would be unlikely to be allowed out in public if that were the case.¹⁴ I take this one:

Invalidators almost certainly do not exist.

If something has a coherent enough description that a statement about its existence or non-existence is meaningful then, until I can prove that it does not exist, I have to accept the possibility of its existence. However, this does not mean that I have to take the idea seriously. People have different ideas about God, some of which are incoherent, but if someone proposes a coherent god idea, which I cannot disprove totally, I have to accept the possibility (*not* the same as significant probability) of *that* god's existence.

If a theist got me to admit this in a debate (and it would not take much effort: I am quite forward about it) the theist may be exclaiming triumphantly at this point, “So you *do* accept there may be a God.” Any theist who thinks that he/she has “won” anything of any consequence from me with such an admission would be mistaken. The sort of uncertainty involved here is merely the residual uncertainty injected into statements by invalidators *and is associated with practically any statement you could make*. Practically, it counts for nothing. In terms of giving the god hypothesis any worthwhile status it counts for nothing. In terms of distinguishing the god hypothesis from any less controversial assertion of the non-existence of an object it counts for nothing. The most important point, here, is that it leaves me fully entitled to say that there is no god, because the normal rules of language do not require us to acknowledge whatever uncertainty may be introduced by the possible existence of invalidator-type objects, regardless of what your view is on invalidators. All of this, of course, is even assuming that the theist has made a claim that is coherent and consistent enough to get this far.

¹⁴ I would be doing things like hitting people in the face in case they are the Zolverqs from beyond the Vortex of Qualzonk, etc

This does not make me right. I think God is like an invalidator, but theists will disagree with me on this. This is not the important issue in this article. The important issue is whether or not a statement of God's non-existence can be validly made *in principle* without knowing everything, and the argument in this article has shown that it can.

Given my views on invalidators, and therefore on God, some people may think that my residual uncertainty about God means that I should call myself an agnostic – because I am “not absolutely sure”. The idea that atheists should rationally be agnostics is stated by Matthew Slick, a Christian apologist:

Refuting evidences for the existence of God does not prove atheism true anymore than refuting an eyewitness testimony of a marriage denies the reality of the marriage. Since atheism cannot be proven, and since disproving evidences for God does not prove there is no God, atheists have a position that is intellectually indefensible. At best, atheists can only say there are no convincing evidences for God that have been presented so far. They cannot say there are no evidences for God, because the atheist cannot know all evidences that possibly exist in the world. At best, the atheist can only say that the evidence presented so far has been insufficient. This logically means that there could be evidences presented in the future that will suffice. The atheist must acknowledge that there may indeed be a proof that has been undiscovered, and that the existence of God is possible. This would make the atheist more of an agnostic since at best the atheist can only be skeptical of God's existence. [8]

Reasoning like this would be based on the kind of definition of atheism in *The Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary* that I quoted previously:

one who believes that there is no deity [6]

Many atheists would dispute that definition and regard atheism as not involving a statement of God's non-existence, but merely being a lack of belief, meaning I could validly call myself an atheist, even allowing for residual uncertainty. *Strong atheism* or *positive atheism* [5], however, does go as far as stating that there is no god. Here is what is said about it on *Wikipedia*:

Strong atheism is the explicit affirmation that gods do not exist. [9]

Even if the Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary definition were accepted I would still say that I am an atheist. I say that there is no god. If we reject the Merriam-Webster definition I would actually say that I am a *strong atheist* or *positive atheist* because I do make the explicit affirmation that gods do not exist. I have explained why normal semantic conventions entitle me to do that, despite any residual uncertainty. *The fact that I do that satisfies these definitions.* Theists may protest that these definitions demand absolute certainty, but this is moving the goalposts. The definitions say nothing about certainty. They merely refer to believing that God does not exist and explicitly affirming

that gods do not exist – something that I have been doing, and justifying, throughout this article.

I also think that some atheists who say that they are not positive atheists might call themselves positive atheists if they really thought about what their view on God really is and how they apply semantics in other areas.

17 How do you know God is like an invalidator?

17.1 Reasons for treating God like an invalidator

Throughout this article I have been treating God as an invalidator-type object. Some theists will say that my argument fails because God is not like an invalidator: we may have more reason to believe in the existence of God than to believe in the existence of an invalidator.

My argument, however, is not intended to prove that there is no god, or to prove that it is correct to say that there is no god. What I have been trying to show is that it is valid to say this, according to normal semantics, if you think God is an invalidator-type object. Many people say otherwise. It is one thing to say that it is wrong to say that there is no god because there is reason to think that God is real, and another to say that it is invalid *even in principle* to say that there is no god, irrespective of how implausible the concept may seem, or how lacking in evidence it may be, because to do this would be claiming total knowledge. It is against this second idea that this article is aimed, and it is intended to establish the idea that it is valid in principle to say that there is no god, subject to it being shown that God should be treated like an invalidator.

I will not be making a detailed argument in this article for treating God like an invalidator: thousands of articles by other atheists already do that anyway. I will, however, quickly give some reasons why we might treat God as an invalidator-type object:

- God is claimed to have magic powers.
- God is claimed to be supernatural.
- God is claimed to be able to do anything.
- God is claimed to be able to operate anywhere.
- God is claimed to know everything.
- Some descriptions of the god hypothesis involve unnecessary complexity, while others are incoherent.
- The god hypothesis involves a being, without a plausible cause for that being's existence.
- The god hypothesis involves a being which has intentions, without any explanation of how that being exists and has intentions.
- Arguments for God are often based on faith.
- There is a lack of strong evidence needed to justify such an extreme claim.

Of course, theists will disagree with some or all of these points and I do not intend to get into defending them here. I am merely saying that points like this alone, if valid, could be sufficient, in principle, for saying that there is no god, without having to qualify the statement. Some theists may say that God is not like an invalidator because the claim for god's existence is supported by philosophical arguments or evidence. Issues like that are beyond the scope of this article, which is merely trying to show that it can be valid *in principle* to say that there is no god, according to normal semantics.

Some of these reasons, such as descriptions of god being incoherent, should be viewed as meaning that there is not even a meaningful claim. Others, such as God being claimed to know everything may also be viewed as impossible by some people. Rather than getting involved in the issue of whether it is possible for God to exist, or what different definitions of God say, I will just suggest that it might be reasonable to say that God, as understood by most people, *at least* meets the criteria for being an invalidator-type object.

17.2 Specificity of Relationship

The kinds of invalidators that I have suggested have a specific relationship, either with people in general or with you. For example, part of an invalidator's definition may be that it is somehow fooling people, or that it is somehow fooling you, in some specific area: these invalidators have a particular relationship with you and the world. In this respect, they are different to other objects that might be imagined. For example, I might imagine pink unicorns that live in flying castles, but these would not have any specific involvement with you. The unicorns may seem implausible, but there is a lot of reality for things to exist in, so it may be presumptuous to write them off. On the other hand, it may seem easier to write off something which has the very specific relationship with you and the world that invalidators are claimed to have: invalidators may seem particularly implausible compared to other things that might exist. To think of this another way, the pink unicorns that I just suggested "benefit" (in a kind of way) from the amount of space we have for stuff to be found in, but most invalidators do not, as they are expected to be doing specific things, *here*, to you, to delude you. An analogy would be the difference between a pink unicorn that is supposed to exist anywhere in reality and a pink unicorn that is stealing your food. It could be argued, then, that invalidators are less plausible than any god hypothesis and that, for this reason, God is not an invalidator-type object. The problem with this, however, is that the idea of God does involve a specific kind of relationship with you and everything. God is supposed be the creator of everything except God. The relationship between God and you is supposed be that between the creator and that which is created. This is not the same as proposing that "there may be a god out there somewhere". Suggesting that something exists *which made you* and which made everything is specific in the same general way as suggesting that something exist *which is deluding you*, or which is deluding everyone.

That specificity of relationship is shared by invalidators and God should be apparent if we consider that a claim for either is not just a claim about the invalidator or God: *it is also a claim about your own status*. If an invalidator that would be deluding you, if it

existed, actually exists then your status is one of *being deluded*. If God exists, your status is one of *being created by God*.

Someone may try to argue that there is a difference between invalidators and God, based on the *degree* of specificity. If God is the creator of *everybody* then this may seem less specific than, for example, some alien or demon that is the deluder of *just you*. Some invalidators may be described as deluding just you because it makes things easier. For example, if I invent an invalidator for your belief that London is the capital of England it may be more convenient for me to describe that invalidator as deluding just you, because if an invalidator is deluding everyone into thinking that London is the capital of England, it might be argued that that actually makes London the capital of England, based on the idea that regarding a particularly city as a country's capital is just a social convention. This seems to me, however, to be unlikely to help much. Even if the relationship between an invalidator and you had to be this specific, in terms of deluding just you, the basic proposal is so extreme, in terms of the specificity of what is proposed, before we even start to look at how specifically it is aimed at people, that whether one person or a few billion is affected hardly seems to be the main problem: once we are making this kind of claim we are into the area of invalidator-type objects. I think this is the easiest reply to make and that it is entirely effective. In any case, any extra specificity an invalidator might seem to have by you being targeted can easily be made up for by proposing that the same invalidator is deluding everyone else in different ways about the same subject. It could also be argued that an invalidator might delude you and a sizeable minority of people into thinking that London is the capital city of England, while the correct majority know that it is not. If this issue is considered a problem another easy way round it is to avoid considering statements that some people may think are based on social constructions. Many claims could be considered that are just about the physical nature of the world and for which a widespread belief by everyone would not be right just by being convention. For such claims, invalidators could be proposed that affect everyone in the same way. Ultimately, however, I think that most of this is unnecessary. When we start talking about things like demons with the power to delude people, and which are deluding humans, we are clearly into the realm of invalidator-type objects, regardless of how many people are supposed to be getting deluded, and then the only issue that matters is whether or not God has characteristics that would, in any other object, cause it to be treated like an invalidator in the same way.

Because both invalidators and God have this specificity of relationship, any objections to what I have said that are based on invalidators being less implausible because they are doing something to you are flawed.

This neglect of the fact that the God claim involves a specific relationship with other things, and a claim about your own status (that of something that is created) is already widespread in theological debate, so I will just mention this as we are on the subject. Theists will often use, as an analogy, some strange creature which might be said to exist. Let us take a pink unicorn as an example. A theist might say that you cannot say that a pink unicorn does not exist somewhere unless you search all of space – unless you know everything. An atheist may need to accept that he/she cannot rule out pink unicorns. In

fact, he/she might even have trouble stating, confidently, that they almost certainly do not exist. There is a lot of space for pink unicorns to be found in. If any one of a number of multiverse theories are correct there could be even more space in the other universes¹⁵ for pink unicorns to turn up in: there could be an infinite amount of it, which might be reasonably considered as *guaranteeing* that pink unicorns turn up somewhere. Theists make this kind of suggestion, or imply it, for various extreme objects which may exist out there somewhere to weaken the case that something might be said not to exist with any confidence. They then apply the same reasoning to God and suggest that is similarly presumptuous to say that God does not exist. The fault with this reasoning is that it ignores the fact that the pink unicorn (or whatever object is being used in its place) does not have any specific relationship with you: it is just “out there” somewhere, whereas God, on the other hand, is not supposed to be merely “out there”: God is supposed to have a specific relationship with you (being your creator). The God claim goes much further than just a claim that “something is out there”: it is a claim about the status of the universe – a cosmological claim.

The lack of similarity between the two types of claim should be obvious if we think about the thing that makes the pink unicorn claim more likely: a bigger reality. The more space there is for pink unicorns to be found in – the more planets for them to be on – the more likely it is that at least one exists somewhere. Having more space available would not help the God claim. The claim is that everything except God was made by God – and having more of reality just means that there is more of reality for the God claim *to be about*, rather than more of reality for God to be found in.

As an analogy, this is rather like two ants standing on what looks like a stone surface. All they can see around them is more stone. One ant suggests that all the stone that they can see is not natural stone, but artificial concrete and that, somewhere, there is a creator of this concrete. The ant supports this claim with the idea that there could be a huge world of concrete out there, that the creator could be out there somewhere and that you could never search everywhere, and that with so much world out there it is very likely that a creator of the concrete is out there somewhere. This would clearly be a fallacy: the size of the world has little bearing on whether the surface on which the ants are standing is artificial. Likewise, the amount of reality that is out there has little bearing on whether the piece of reality you are “standing on” right now was made by an ultimate creator of everything. Some people might object to this, saying that when people ask if we have searched all of reality, they are not suggesting that God is more likely, given a larger reality. I would say that such an idea is not explicit, but it is implicit in the argument; such arguments encourage us to think that way.

This is a convenient place to mention another issue. Some readers may say that an invalidator may not necessarily mean that a claim is false, or that something does not exist, because you may just be lucky: even if an invalidator is somehow interfering with your thought processes, or doing something extreme to reality in another way, to make you think that the claim is true, the claim may happen to be true anyway. One problem

¹⁵ This is using the word “universe” in the diminutive sense in which it does not mean “all of reality”, which is often used in modern cosmology.

with this is that, even if we accepted it, it would still make the claim unsafe, and with many different invalidators available, we should ask if the distinction between making the claim false or just unsafe in many different ways matters much. A better reply, though, is that the invalidator descriptions, as I have given them, state what they are doing and state they are deluding you. This implies that they are doing something to change a correct view to an incorrect one. The invalidator claim encompasses a claim about your own status: the invalidator is fooling you and you are being fooled. Some people may think this is unreasonable, as it may sound like an extra claim stuck onto the invalidator one, but all it really means is that a claim about your own status (someone with an incorrect belief because an invalidator is fooling you) is implied by the invalidator claim, just as a claim about your own status (someone who is part of God's creation) is implied by the God claim.

17.3 Serious Doubts About Your Own Position

There is another issue that I will just mention for completeness. You may have serious doubts about your own situation and you may think that some *specific* ideas, that many people would consider as corresponding to invalidators, may well be correct. However, rather than thinking that this means that various statements about reality are false, you may think that it instead simply means that reality takes a particular form.

One example of a hypothesis that many people would find extreme is Nick Bostrom's simulation argument [10, 11], which argues that we may be in a computer simulation¹⁶ in which everything we know, including our own minds, is just software. There are a number of such views which someone may use to suggest that we should have serious doubts about statements such as "My car exists". The problem with this is that, even if we accepted a particular hypothesis like this, it could just be thought of as describing what is meant by car existence, rather than invalidating it. It would not necessarily be a foothold for a general attack on the idea of invalidators. We would have to decide whether it is meaningful to say that some statements can be validly asserted while others cannot. If you think this is the case then it is obvious that no hypothesis like the simulation argument is getting in the way of you choosing between statements – though you may have to refine your concept of existence a bit. If you think this is not the case then all you have done is say that we cannot know anything. If you take such a view you are hardly arguing against my right to say that there is no god, but rather, against my right to say *anything*.

18 If you can say that there is no god are you claiming it is proven that there is no god?

I will point out again that this article is about semantic consistency and I am not claiming to prove that there is no god, or even that God is unlikely. However, the word "proof" in relation to God should be considered.

¹⁶ Bostrom's argument is actually a bit more involved than this, arguing that one of three possibilities must apply.

Many people think that the word “proof” corresponds to 100% certainty – and in the sense of 100% rather than 99.99999....a few thousand nines.....99999%. They would say that something is only proven when there is no doubt whatsoever. With this meaning of “proof”, if you think invalidators *almost certainly* do not exist you could never claim a statement to be proven if there is an invalidator for it.

I have often sometimes referred to “mathematical-level” proof when I mean this kind of proof, and I think most people will understand that I mean this kind of 100% proof. If we are to be rigorous, however, we should realize that *even mathematical claims of proof have invalidators*. One reason for saying this is that even mathematical observations are empirical. You never see a mathematical theorem being proved, or a calculation being performed, in some kind of “Platonic space”. You only ever see theorems being proved or calculations being performed on physical systems such as computers or calculators. Even if you abstractly think through the steps of some mathematical proof, using only your mind, when you get the result you are really observing a physical system – your own brain. There is no getting away from empirical observations. Another reason for saying this is that any thoughts we have about mathematics are just thoughts and we should be able to imagine invalidators that disrupt our thoughts. Even in mathematics then, we might have legitimate doubts about whether or not 100% certainty is available.

Outside mathematics, the word “proof” is used in many situations that would clearly be vulnerable to invalidators. Cases are considered to be “proved” in court. It is said that something may be “proved” to cause a type of illness. Scientists are generally well-aware of the issues around the word “proof” and if speaking formally, many would probably say that a scientific theory is merely a provisional working model – although it may be one in which they have confidence. Even in science, however, the word “proved” is often used informally.

The word “proved” is often used when something is known to be true that would not be true if some invalidator existed: in fact, things are often said to be “proved” when they are nowhere near that level of certainty. This might put us into a situation similar to the one about saying that there is no god. If the only thing that would make a statement false is the existence of some invalidator, and if that would not normally stop us from asserting something as “proved”, then we should have no problem in saying that any invalidator-type object is “proved” not to exist, because the only thing that would get in the way of such a proof is the existence of an invalidator-type object, which is not being allowed to stop us from claiming a proof anyway.

This means that we may consider all invalidators as proved not to exist and therefore, if we consider God to be like an invalidator, we may consider God proved not to exist. This would not necessarily mean a 100% claim of certainty: it would merely be for consistency with other claims for proof that we may make which invalidators are not allowed to prevent.

In this article I am not going to claim that we should say that God can be proved not to exist. There are so many issues with semantics here, and different uses of the word

“proof”, that it is just going to cause me trouble. I just wanted to point out some of the issues.

19 Different Levels of Formality

Some readers may have noticed an apparent inconsistency in the language I have been using. I have said that my view on invalidators is that they almost certainly do not exist, but I stated that God does not exist¹⁷. Is there not an inconsistency in stating what your view of invalidators is – and admitting to some uncertainty – and then going on to make statements as if there is no such uncertainty?

This is an issue of different levels of formality. We may have the philosophical view that invalidators almost certainly do not exist, but when we say that, we are speaking more formally: we are using semantics that more precisely describes our philosophical views.

This may *seem* to introduce inconsistency, because in discussions about this we may go from one level of formality to another, with no indication that the semantics has changed. Using everyday semantics, I would say that there is no god. Using the more formal (which just means “pedantic” really) semantics I might say that invalidator-type objects almost certainly do not exist – and according to these semantics, if we have a coherent, self-consistent definition of God I would say that *that* God *almost certainly* does not exist, rather than making an assertion of non-existence.

Some theists may see this as important. Does it not destroy the case I have made? Not at all – we can validly say that there is no god, if we regard God as being like an invalidator, whenever we are applying normal semantics. We may start to qualify statements like this if we use the more formal semantics that enables us to discuss our philosophical positions on issues such as “certainty”. Earlier, I gave some quotes by theists saying that atheists were committing an error if they said that there is no god. The theists writing those quotes were not talking about more formal semantics: there was no recognition of this.

Some theists may think that something has been “won” if a positive atheist asserts that there is no God, but admits some uncertainty on this when using more formal semantics. In reality though, nothing worthwhile would be “won”. All it would mean is that some residual uncertainty in the God claim might be acknowledged, if we move to semantics that would force people who changed their semantics in this way to start admitting residual certainty in almost *everything*.

We can see how pedantic such formal semantics are, and how removed they are from “normal” statements, if we consider my earlier example about asking people to prove that I said that there is no god. Suppose I say that there is no god and a theist challenges me using the formality issue, asking me to presume that we are speaking formally. At this stage, I would say there is *almost certainly* no god. The theist might say I have just admitted that God might exist. I could reply that this is a worthless thing to try to “win”,

¹⁷ which just happens to my own view – not something this article is trying to prove,

based on what I said earlier. Instead, however, I might ask the theist to *prove* that I just said that there is almost certainly no god. This is a serious point, which shows just how worthless such a “win” would be for theists. The level of formality in semantics needed to get someone to start admitting the possible existence of invalidators is so high that, if you *consistently* employ it in a discussion, *you cannot even make firm statements about what was just said. You cannot even have a coherent discussion in which both parties are sure about what anyone has said.*

Some theists might claim that this high level of formality should be applied, and assumed to be applied, in discussions about God. That is fine, but just be prepared to prove that people said things you think they just said if you want to do that, or if you want that assumed as a rule, be prepared to apply semantics like that in other matters relating to God; for example, if you want to argue that miracles occurring at Lourdes, in France, prove God, be prepared to prove that Lourdes, and France, exist. You cannot have it both ways. I think that theists sometimes try to mix demands for special levels of formality for assertions of God’s non-existence into discussions in which they themselves are using much lower levels of formality about everything else.

20 Conclusion

Many theists and agnostics say that nobody can validly say that there is no god, not because God is supposed to be a good theory, supported by lots of evidence (though theists believe that anyway), but because it is invalid even in principle. The idea is that if you cannot prove with mathematical-level certainty that there is no god, and nobody could do this without knowing everything, you must accept the possibility that there is a god and you can therefore not validly say that there is no god.

I have dismantled the semantics of what it means when we say that things exist or do not exist and made an argument that it can, in principle, be valid to say that there is no god.

The argument is based on invalidators. An invalidator is an entity which, if it exists, makes a claim false, or at least unsafe.¹⁸ For any assertion of an object’s existence, many invalidators could be specified, any one of which, if it exists, invalidates the claim. The assertion of an object’s existence is therefore only as safe as the assertions of non-existence for many invalidators and any assertion of an object’s existence implicitly states that many invalidators do not exist.

A general justification for saying that there is no god, based on *semantic consistency* in dealing with invalidator-type objects, is as follows:

It is valid to say that there is no god, if God is considered to be like an invalidator, because such a statement would only be wrong if an invalidator type object (God) exists, and almost any other statement, including statements that are routinely asserted as true,

¹⁸ This is actually a special case: a more general treatment of invalidators would merely involve invalidating *statements*.

and including assertion of the existence of objects, would also be wrong if any one of many invalidator-type objects (the invalidators for that statement) existed, yet this does not prevent such statements being made, nor does it demand that they are qualified with words such as “almost certainly” to acknowledge issues that could be caused by invalidator-existence.

People often have a double standard about applying semantics when dealing with issues like God and other matters. This can be shown by saying that there is no god and, when a theist or agnostic demands that you prove that there is no God, asking him/her to prove that you said there is no god. This will usually be met with an assertion that of course you said there is no god and that it is stupid to suggest otherwise. The double standard here should be obvious: an assertion that God does not exist is expected to be justified with a proof, whereas an assertion that someone said something is justified because challenging it is “stupid”, even though many invalidators could be imagined for such a claim.

Some people say that anyone who does not claim the certain non-existence of God should regard him/herself as an agnostic. This would be disputed by many atheists who regard atheism merely as lack of belief, rather than the position that God does not exist, but even if atheism did assert this, it would make no difference. For example, one dictionary defines an atheist as “one who believes that there is no deity” [6]. It is merely defining an atheist as taking a position on something. Someone who says that there is no god has taken a position on the issue and, as I have shown, such a position can be justified using nothing more than the idea that God is like an invalidator – a long way from having to provide a detailed, mathematical proof of God’s non-existence.

Some people will argue with me by saying that God is not like an invalidator, claiming that God is a reasonable idea, God can be proved to exist, there is evidence for God, etc, but if such people have previously said things like, “You can’t say that there is no god because this is a universal negative...” then this would be moving the goalposts. If some theists feel the need to go from talking about universal negatives to claiming that God is *plausible* then I will consider this article successful. Although I have briefly discussed the issue of God’s plausibility, I have not attempted any detailed argument that God is like an invalidator in this article. The purpose of the article is merely to show that it is valid to say that there is no god, if God is like an invalidator, and that a justification for saying that there is no god need be based on nothing more than showing that God is like many other implausible things that might be imagined. Anyone saying that God is *not* like an invalidator should possibly realize that the burden is on him/her to tell us why we should *not* treat God like an invalidator. There are some specific claims we can make about our situation, but there are many more such claims that we could imagine. If someone makes an arbitrary, extreme claim about our status in reality (that we are created by a God) then we may have good reason to presume that such a claim “belongs with the invalidators-type things” *unless we have reason to think otherwise.*

Others may argue with me by saying that we should have a higher standard of formality in discussions about God: however such people should be prepared to follow such formal semantics themselves, and rarely do. Such a “win”, in getting any admission of the

possibility of God's existence, would be worthless anyway, as it would have to be seen in the context of all the other statements asserting almost anything being qualified with the same uncertainty. Despite this, some theists try to selectively demand more formal semantics when assertions of God's non-existence are being made.

I have the disappointing thought that some theists will read about my view of invalidators as almost certainly not existing and will then, be saying, "So you are admitting that there *might* be a god!" as if this counts for anything. Anyone thinking this has not really understood a thing I have been saying. *The argument in this article does not involve taking any position on whether you can say with certainty that there is no god*, and any such uncertainty to which I may admit (even if you could present me with a definition that is incoherent) would be a mere philosophical artifact that would count for nothing.

Some people will undoubtedly read this article as a claimed proof that there is no god, or even as a claimed proof that it is correct to say that there is no god. I am claiming neither, and anyone who says I am is misrepresenting me. This article has merely argued that it is valid to say that there is no god if God has the characteristics of one of the invalidators which might be proposed for many statements with which we routinely deal every day. Some people might also claim that the article is just trying to use a semantic argument to prove something. Of course it is: it is an argument *about* semantics. I have been trying to show that statements asserting the non-existence of God can, in principle, be asserted just as validly as other statements if we are semantically consistent. Some people may think that this is an attempt to use a play on words to disprove God, but an argument for semantic consistency is not a "play on words", but merely an argument for applying words consistently.

Many atheists say that the default position on God is not to believe, until given adequate evidence, but is this really the default position? I think this is actually giving too much credit to the god claim. Every time you make a normal statement, you implicitly dismiss as *not existing*, infinities of things that would, by existing, invalidate that statement – you dismiss infinities of other things many times every day. Those things are not getting this "not being believed in until there is adequate evidence" status. Why should God be special? Most claims that could be randomly made up, which say specific things about your status, and the status of the entire universe, would be wrong, simply because there is only one version of your status, and only one correct cosmology – and the chances that an arbitrary, very specific claim would happen to match this are remote. The default position on arbitrary, very specific¹⁹ claims about your status, and about the status of the universe, should be to dismiss these claims as *false*, until you have some reason to think otherwise.

This article has been long for what it deals with, for which I apologize. This is because of how deeply entrenched this semantic mistake is and the importance of being thorough, and anticipating many things that might be said in dealing with it. The main problem, in arguing about this whole issue, is that it is based on a semantic mistake – an assumption –

¹⁹ People should not take this out of context, or ignore my qualification on this statement. There may be some claims about which the degree of specificity is in dispute, or where the grounds for accepting the claim are in dispute. Examples of this are found in cosmology.

which is not supported any well-developed, coherent argument, but by centuries of semantic inconsistency involving many different, flawed arguments being made.

I hope I have persuaded you that it can be valid, at least in principle, to say that there is no god for the same reason that you can assert lots of other things. Whether or not you think this is a justification for saying that there is no god should depend on whether or not you think God is an invalidator-type object. If you have trouble deciding, it may help to write down a list of statements which you would normally have no trouble asserting as true – I am not talking about statements you would claim to be “certainly true” or “proved to be true” – just statements which you would assert to be true with whatever normal meaning is attached to that. For each statement try to write a list of invalidators, any one of which, if it existed, would make that statement false. Now, look at your list of invalidators. None of these invalidators prevented you asserting those statements. Ask yourself if you think God is significantly more plausible than these invalidators. If the answer is “no” you should have no problem in saying that there is no god. At the same time, I can understand that some people will regard the assertion that there is no god as possibly hard to defend, given the semantic misunderstandings that have grown around it over centuries, and will therefore have reservations about making it in public.

21 Acknowledgements

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