

The Honest Seeker's Duty: Critically Evaluating God-Concepts

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This paper argues that, prior to accepting the existence of any proposed God, the honest seeker has an epistemic duty to critically evaluate the coherence, consistency, and relevance to human well-being of that God's character and actions (Dawes, 2009; Oppy, 2013). Using an analogy between a marriage proposal from an unverified suitor and divine claims, the analysis underscores that rational belief requires examination before commitment. It rejects circular reasoning that forbids questioning God on the grounds that doing so is irreverent or presumptuous. Instead, it affirms that a God worthy of devotion would welcome honest inquiry, and that prohibiting such inquiry undermines both epistemic responsibility and genuine faith. The argument concludes that refusal to critically assess a God-concept is incompatible with intellectual integrity, since rational permission to believe presupposes both evaluation and passage of coherence, consistency, desirability, and openness tests.

Evaluating Claims About God

Should a seeker evaluate the character and actions of a proposed God before accepting that God's existence? This is not irreverence but the foundation of responsible belief. Belief in God, in most traditions, entails allegiance and trust with profound consequences. Without prior evaluation, allegiance risks binding one's life to a being

whose intentions may be misaligned with human flourishing.

The Duty of Critical Examination

The obligation to scrutinize claims about God is grounded in the same principles we apply to other domains of life, but with greater urgency given the stakes. When entrusting our health to a surgeon, we expect evidence of competence. When electing a leader, we examine their record of honesty and effectiveness. In each case, we recognize that trust without evaluation is reckless. Belief in God amplifies this principle: allegiance involves not only intellectual assent but also profound existential and practical commitments. A God is not simply an abstract hypothesis but a proposed authority with power to shape ethics, community, and destiny. For this reason, critical examination is not optional but obligatory.

To waive this responsibility under the banner of “faith” or “humility” is to reverse the order of inquiry. If belief comes first and evaluation later—or not at all—the seeker risks binding allegiance to a being who may not merit it. As the formal system shows, high-stakes commitments (P1, P2) generate an epistemic duty to evaluate before belief can be rationally permissible. This is not antagonism toward religion but respect for the gravity of the claim. A God worthy of trust would invite such inquiry, since truth loses nothing from scrutiny. To forbid evaluation is to court circularity and to erode the very conditions of rational permission.

Plurality Trigger. The existence of multiple rival God-concepts itself activates an obligation to evaluate. With high-stakes claims and mutually exclusive competitors, responsible belief requires comparison across coherence, record-consistency, openness, and independence from circularity.

Responding to Common Objections

Objection 1: Humans cannot judge the infinite. If our faculties are too unreliable to test divine claims, they are too unreliable to affirm divine goodness in the first place (Swinburne, 2004).

Objection 2: Faith requires trust beyond evidence. Trust divorced from evidence is recklessness. In ordinary life, blind trust is condemned when the stakes are high; so too in religion (Basinger, 2002).

Objection 3: Questioning is rebellion. A God secure in truth would not fear inquiry but welcome it (Zagzebski, 2012).

Intimidation by Piety

A common rhetorical move in religious contexts is the cry of “How dare you judge God?” This appeal substitutes reverence for reasoning and attempts to shame the questioner into silence. Yet if worthiness requires openness, as our criteria demand, then forbidding scrutiny is itself evidence against worthiness. A deity secure in truth would not require believers to suspend critical faculties in order to remain devout.

Criteria for Evaluation

If evaluation is the duty, then its content must be clear. The honest seeker’s test is not arbitrary but anchored in four indispensable criteria that flow directly from rational standards of belief:

- **Coherence:** A God-concept must be free from internal contradictions. Attributes such as omniscience and omnipotence must not cancel each other out. If a concept collapses under its own definitions, it cannot be a candidate for truth.
- **Consistency:** The attributed actions of the deity must align with the professed character. If a God is described as just but commands injustice, or as loving but

permits cruelty without reason, then the record contradicts the claim. Consistency is the bridge between description and behavior.

- **Desirability:** Allegiance should be to a being whose nature sustains human well-being, trust, and flourishing. While not a guarantee of comfort, the relationship must not be destructive or manipulative. A God who demands child sacrifice or suppresses honest inquiry undermines the very goods allegiance is supposed to secure.
- **Openness:** Above all, a worthy God-concept must be open to independent evaluation and free from circularity. If scrutiny is forbidden or if standards of judgment are reduced to “because God says so,” the concept fails the openness test. Without openness, belief becomes indistinguishable from coercion or self-deception.

Each criterion functions as a filter. Failure on any one dimension defeats rational permission (P4). Coherence prevents logical collapse; consistency tests the record; desirability checks existential alignment; and openness preserves discriminative power. Together, they ensure that belief is not blind submission but responsible trust. These criteria also integrate seamlessly with the formal derivations in the appendix: they are the operational meaning of $C(g)$, $K(g)$, $D(g)$, and $Op(g)$ in the logical system. The Blind Judge analogy illustrates how failure of openness unravels the evaluative process; the “Intimidation by Piety” response shows how forbidding scrutiny directly violates these conditions. Rational permission thus requires not only evaluation but success on all four fronts.

When “Mystery” Erodes Meaning (Analogy)

Appeals to “mystery” become incoherent when they unfix evaluative terms. If “love” can appear as cruelty, the term loses discriminatory power. In logical terms, this is a failure of $Op(g)$: the predicate ceases to rule anything out.

Analogy: The Blind Judge (Logic-Focused). Suppose a rule states: if a verdict appears unjust, treat it as just. Formally: let $A(v)$ mean “ v appears unjust” and $J(v)$ mean “ v is just.” If $\forall v (A(v) \rightarrow J(v))$ and some verdicts do not appear unjust, then *every* observable state becomes compatible with J . The predicate loses falsifiability and evidential content. Likewise, if every state is compatible with “divine justice” or “divine love,” then the openness condition $Op(g)$ fails, defeating rational permission.

Closing Reflections

The honest seeker’s task is not exhausted by the question of whether some deity exists. The deeper task is to determine whether any proposed God-concept can withstand the scrutiny of coherence, consistency, desirability, and openness. These criteria are not optional; they are the minimal thresholds for rational permission. To believe without evaluation is to abdicate responsibility, and to continue believing after a concept fails evaluation is to embrace incoherence.

Rational permission requires two things: first, that the seeker has in fact evaluated the candidate God; and second, that the concept has passed all four evaluative tests. Failure on any dimension blocks rational warrant. A concept that is incoherent, inconsistent with its own record, undesirable in its demands, or closed to independent scrutiny cannot be worthy of allegiance. Prohibitions against questioning or appeals to “mystery” that nullify meaning are not marks of depth but signs of collapse.

A God worthy of trust would not fear inquiry but would welcome it, knowing that truth is never threatened by examination. By contrast, a God who demands silence, forbids questions, or insists on circular self-validation reveals fragility, not strength. Allegiance under such conditions ceases to be trust and becomes subservience to authority without justification.

Because the existential and practical stakes are immense, belief in God cannot rest

on circular reasoning, appeals to intimidation, or the refusal to test. If faith is to retain intellectual integrity, it must be anchored in evaluation that a worthy God would invite. Anything less is not faith in truth but surrender to untested authority.

References

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Appendix A: Formal Argument

Core Premises

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| $P1 : H(x) \rightarrow O_s(E_s(x))$ | <i>High-stakes duty</i>
(1) |
| $P2 : \forall g \in G, H(g)$ | <i>Theistic stakes</i>
(2) |
| $P3 : R_s(g) \rightarrow (C(g) \wedge K(g) \wedge D(g) \wedge Op(g) \wedge \neg Cir(g))$ | <i>Permission requires all criteria</i>
(3) |
| $P4 : (\neg C(g) \vee \neg K(g) \vee \neg D(g) \vee \neg Op(g) \vee Cir(g)) \rightarrow \neg R_s(g)$ | <i>Failure defeats permission</i>
(4) |
| $P5 : R_s(g) \rightarrow E_s(g)$ | <i>Permission requires evaluation</i>
(5) |
| $P6 : W(g) \rightarrow Op(g)$ | <i>Worthiness requires openness</i>
(6) |
| $P7 : B_s(g) \rightarrow W(g)$ | <i>Belief presupposes worthiness</i>
(7) |
| $P8a : Forbid(g) \rightarrow \neg Op(g)$ | <i>Forbidding implies closed</i>
(8) |
| $P8b : SelfOnly(g) \rightarrow Cir(g)$ | <i>Self-only implies circularity</i>
(9) |
| $P9 : \exists h \in G (h \neq g \wedge Competes(h, g)) \rightarrow O_s(E_s(g))$ | <i>Plurality trigger</i>
(10) |

Narrative Walkthrough

The formal system captures the central logic of the paper. Premises P1 and P2 establish that any high-stakes commitment—such as allegiance to a God—creates an obligation to evaluate. From this it follows (Theorem 1) that all proposed God-concepts must be critically examined.

Premises P3–P5 show that rational permission to believe requires both evaluation and satisfaction of core criteria: coherence, consistency, desirability, openness, and non-circularity. The Blind Judge analogy illustrates P4: if a concept makes every state of affairs compatible with “justice” or “love,” then openness fails, and the concept cannot warrant belief.

Corollaries 2a and 2b demonstrate that forbidding independent scrutiny or relying only on self-referential standards each block rational permission. Theorem 3 extends this: if worthiness presupposes openness, then forbidding scrutiny negates worthiness, thereby undercutting belief itself. The “Intimidation by Piety” move is exactly such a case—prohibiting questions as arrogance is evidence against worthiness.

Finally, P9 and Theorem 4 highlight that religious diversity intensifies the duty: the existence of rival God-concepts ensures that evaluation is unavoidable. The headline sequent unites these results: seekers must evaluate every God-concept, and failure on any dimension defeats rational permission to believe.

Figure 1
Extended Symbolic Logic Formulation.