

IS BELIEF IN GOD SCIENTIFIC?

I. THE MOST CONTROVERSIAL VERSE IN SCRIPTURE?

Controversy has always swirled around the Bible, but for thousands of years one of the least controversial verses in the Bible was its great opening line, “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” Scripture begins with God, posits God, assumes God—His self-existence, His necessity, and His power to create the universe from nothing (*ex nihilo*). In more recent times however, controversy around the concept of the existence of God and His creative powers has been the topic of intense debate and public provocation. Since the highly publicized “Scopes Monkey Trial” in 1925, science and religion have seemed locked in a fearsome duel to the death over whether the world in which we exist is better explained by natural causes or by the God of the Bible. I will argue that science and faith are not at war and that reason and science support belief.

II. WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO ‘PROVE’ THAT GOD EXISTS?

Have you ever been asked to ‘prove’ that God exists? Maybe at some point you’ve run into a skeptic, agnostic, or atheist who demanded absolute proof of God’s existence, and when you couldn’t produce a picture of God or an empirical test to demonstrate His presence right beside you, he or she simply laughed and walked away. This is exactly the kind of proof demanded today from extremely outspoken atheists like Daniel Dennett, Victor Stenger, Sam Harris, and Richard Dawkins. Dawkins argues that the claim of God’s existence is a scientific hypothesis that should be open to rational demonstration. He and others want an airtight, empirical argument from God that convinces every person. Is this a fair request? I don’t think so.

- A. “STRONG RATIONALISM” WON’T WORK—What these skeptics are asking for is what has been termed ‘strong rationalism, meaning that no one should believe any proposition unless it can be proved rationally by loci or empirically by sense experience. According to Tim Keller, proof, “in this view, is an argument so strong that no person whose logical faculties are operating properly would have any reason for disbelieving it. However, ‘strong rationalism’ is impossible and cannot be defended. It cannot abide by its own most foundational premise. How could you empirically prove that no one should believe something without empirical proof? Notice how W.K. Clifford’s statement betrays that belief, not science is at the core of strong rationalism: “It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient [empirical] evidence.” This is a statement of ethics, belief, and faith, not a statement of science. Thus, any call for ‘strong rationalism’ is by nature self-defeating. This is why the books of the new atheism have not found kind quarters among even fellow atheist reviewers. Marxist scholar Terry Eagleton wrote a scathing review of Dawkin’s *God Delusion*, attacking the naïve ideas that faith has no rational component, and that reason isn’t based on faith:

“Dawkins considers that all faith is blind faith, and that Christian and Muslim children are brought up to believe unquestioningly. Not even the dim-witted clerics who knocked me about at grammar school taught that. For mainstream Christianity, reason, argument and honest doubt have always played an integral role in belief...Even Richard Dawkins lives more by faith than by reason. We hold many beliefs that have no unimpeachably rational justification, but are nonetheless reasonable to entertain.”

- B. THE NATURE OF SCIENCE—Historically, scientists did not always think this way. In fact, you may be surprised to know that science once acted on core theistic beliefs, namely that this world was a product of God’s mind, that His personhood, replete with personality, thought, and love, were the basis for our trusting our basic senses and rationality, and that science was a way to investigate the mind of God. Not surprisingly, these beliefs brought us what has been dubbed the “Scientific Revolution.” Copernicus, Galileo, Kepler, Newton, Pascal, many others were Christians who brought their beliefs to bear on science.
- C. ADOPTING “CRITICAL RATIONALISM”—The best approach to take is what C.S. Reppert called “critical rationality.” It assumes that there are arguments that many or most will find convincing but that in the end, there will always be some way to rationally avoid ANY conclusion. On this basis, we can evaluate belief without requiring empirical, conclusive proof. This is exactly how science works. Even Dawkins admits that Darwinism cannot be finally proven, and that “new facts may come to light which will force our successors to abandon Darwinism or modify it beyond recognition.” But as Tim Keller writes, “that does not mean that science cannot test theories and find some far more empirically verified if it organizes the evidence and explains the phenomena better than any conceivable alternative theory. In exactly the same way, we can test to see if there is a God. In other words, as a hypothesis, does naturalism or belief in God best explain that we have a universe, that regular laws operate within it, that it contains human life with consciousness and moral sense, and that we are personal in nature? Without belief in God, we would not expect any of those things.

- D. A THOUGHT EXPERIMENT WITH CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS—Suppose it is 1490 and you are a sailor who has been recruited by Columbus for an exciting voyage to the new world. It is a voyage with the possibilities of thrill, fame, and gold, but it could also be perilous if the new world is simply a myth that will lure you to your destruction. What will you do? How will you decide?

III. REASONS TO BELIEVE

In the 1950s, a Russian cosmonaut returned from space and declared that he had not found God. C.S. Lewis responded that this was like Hamlet going into the castle attic looking for Shakespeare. If there is a God, he wouldn't be another object in the universe that could be put in a lab and analyzed with empirical methods. He would relate to us the way a playwright relates to the characters in his play. We might be able to know quite a lot about the playwright, but only to the degree the author chooses to put information about himself in the play. Therefore, in no case could we 'prove' God's existence as if he were an object wholly within our universe like oxygen and hydrogen. Rather, as C.S. Lewis also notes, "I believe in God as I believe the sun has risen, not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else." Thus, we don't learn about the sun by staring into it but by looking at the world it reveals and sustains.¹

- A. THERE IS SOMETHING RATHER THAN NOTHING?—Carl Sagan famously said, "The Cosmos is all there ever is, all there ever was, and all there ever will be." Besides being a revealing wordplay on the *Gloria Patri*, it is also a bad explanation of the facts. Consider the words of scientist Francis Collins: "Fifteen billion years ago, the universe began with an unimaginably bright flash of energy from an infinitesimally small point. That implies that before that, there was nothing. I can't imagine how nature, in this case the universe, could have created itself. And the very fact that the universe had a beginning implies that someone was able to begin it." Everything we know in this world is contingent, that is, it has a cause outside of itself. So it stands to reason that a supernatural, non-contingent being must have made it happen. This is not conclusive proof, but it is a good reason.
- B. THE ARGUMENT FROM DESIGN—Richard Dawkins begins one of his books with the startling sentence, "Biology is the study of complicated things that give the appearance of having been designed for a purpose." He then spends the rest of the book attempting to show that this appearance is deceiving. His argument is against William Paley, an Anglican clergyman who with his book *Natural Theology*, offered one of the most irrefutable arguments for God—design. Paley wrote, "suppose I pitch my foot against a stone, and were asked how the stone came to be there, I might possibly answer, it had lain there forever. But suppose I found a watch upon the ground, I should hardly think of the answer I gave before." His point was that you don't have to know much about watches to know that someONE designed and made it. In the same way, he argued, we see that same design and intricacy in earth and all of its life forms. Dawkins believes that Paley was "gloriously and utterly wrong," because Darwin has shown a way that all things could have come about naturally. Physicist Stephen Barr brilliantly notes Dawkins' error in reasoning:

When examined carefully, scientific accounts of natural processes are never really about order emerging from mere chaos, or form emerging from mere formlessness. On the contrary, they are always about the unfolding of an order that was already implicit in the nature of things, although often in a secret or hidden way. When we see situations that appear haphazard, or things that appear amorphous, automatically or spontaneously 'arranging themselves' into orderly patterns, what we find in every case is that what appeared to be haphazard actually had a great deal of order built into it...What Dawkins does not seem to appreciate is that his blind watchmaker is something even more remarkable than Paley's watches. Paley finds a watch and asks how such a thing could have come to be there by chance. Dawkins finds an immense automated factory that blindly constructs watches, and feels that he has completely answered Paley's point. But that is absurd. How can a factory that makes watches be less in need of an explanation than the watches themselves?

- C. FINE TUNING THE UNIVERSE—With modern science, cosmologists have now discovered that the universe's fundamental forces are intricately balanced, as though on a knife's edge. If even one of the scores of fundamental forces and laws were not precisely exact, then life would not even be possible. Consider the following examples given by scientist Robin Collins:
1. If the initial explosion of the Big Bang had differed in strength by as little as one part in 10^{60} , the universe would have either quickly collapsed back on itself, or expanded too rapidly for stars to form. In either case, life would be impossible. This degree of accuracy could be compared to firing a bullet at a one inch target 20 billion light years away and actually hitting the target.
 2. If the strong nuclear force which binds protons and neutrons together in an atom, had been stronger or weaker by as little as 5%, life would be impossible.

¹ This paragraph closely mirrors Tim Keller's *Reason for God*, 122.

3. If gravity had been stronger or weaker by one part in 10^{40} , then life-sustaining stars like the sun could not exist, rendering life itself impossible.
4. If the neutron were not about 1.001 times the mass of the proton, all protons would have decayed into neutrons or all neutrons would have decayed into protons, making life impossible.

To make this logic clearer, Nancy Pearcey proposes to imagine that you found a huge universe creating machine, with hundreds of dials, each having trillions of settings representing these forces. Imagine that what you discover is that each of these dials just happens to be set to exactly the right value for life to exist when even the slightest tweak of one knob would produce a lifeless universe. Since the 'knobs' are not constrained by any natural law, they have all the earmarks of being a product of design or intention. It is this exact basis which led Nobel Prize winner Arno Penzias to say, "The best data we have are exactly what I would have predicted, had I had nothing to go on but the five books of Moses, the Psalms, and the Bible as a whole." Princeton physicist Freeman Dyson notes, "It almost seems as if the Universe must in some sense have known that we were coming." Not to be outdone, Stephen Hawking concludes, "It would be very difficult to explain why the universe would have begun in just this way except as the act of a God who intended to create beings like us." Robin Collins adds the illustration of hiking in the mountains and finding a group of rocks arranged in a formation that clearly formed the pattern, "Welcome to the mountains Robin Collins." One way to explain the formation would be to conclude that the rocks simply fell into that particular pattern by chance. Suppose the only other viable hypothesis was that my brother, who was in the mountains before me, arranged the rocks in this way. 99.9% of us would go with the brother hypothesis. Moreover, the best atheistic response to the fine tuning argument, or 'anthropic principle,' is posited by Richard Dawkins who argues that there may be trillions of universes, and given the enormous number of universes existing over enormous amounts of time and space, it is inevitable that one or a few of them are fine-tuned to sustain our kind of life. Thus, the argument is rationally avoidable but not, in my opinion, reasonably avoidable. Alvin Plantinga says that this line of reasoning is akin to dealing oneself 20 straight hands of four aces in the same game of poker. As his companions reach for their guns, the poker player says, "I know it looks suspicious! But what if there is an infinite succession of universes, so that for any possible distribution of poker hands, there is one universe in which this possibility is realized?" We just happen to find ourselves in the one where I deal myself 20 straight hands of four aces w/o cheating." To push this bit of science even further, consider the regularity of nature in the same light. All scientific and inductive reasoning is based on the assumption that all the forces in the universe will remain constant. Water will freeze under the same conditions, an object will fall at the same speed, the earth will continue to rotate, etc. Bertrand Russell was troubled by the fact that we don't know why nature is so regular now and we have no justification for believing it will behave that way tomorrow. Thus, science cannot prove continued regularity of nature, it must take it on faith. But it is precisely this confidence in a God who created an orderly universe that gave rise to modern science!

- D. **IRREDUCIBLE COMPLEXITY**—When Darwin developed the theory of natural selection in the mid 1800's, the face of science was much different. In the absence of powerful microscopes, Darwin believed the cell to be nothing more than a mere bubble of jelly. Today scientists cannot even talk of the cell without using terms that refer to building and engineering. Francis Crick, co-founder of DNA, writes, "The cell is thus a minute factory, bustling with rapid, organized chemical activity. Nature invented the assembly line some billions of years before Henry Ford." The problem this presents for the theory of evolution as an all consuming theory is that even these single cells are far too complex to be produced by gradual, single trait, natural selection. No single part of the cell would give any survival power to a cell; rather, they would all have to be present in order to function appropriately. Thus, natural selection could not simply select each trait individually. Michael Behe uses the example of a tiny string like flagellum which is attached like a tail to some bacteria. It is a microscopic outboard rotary motor that comes equipped with a hook, joint, drive shaft, O-rings, a stator, and a bi-directional acid-powered motor that can do 100,000 RPMs. Even the simplest living cell is one of the most complicated structures on earth, containing within it more information than multiple sets of the Encyclopedia Britannica. From this information Dinesh D'Souza comments, "It is crucially important to realize that this basic template of life, with all its intricate machinery of RNA and DNA, came fully formed with the first appearance of life. D'Souza's concludes, "Is it even reasonable to speculate that random combinations of atoms could have produced so marvelously complex and functional a thing as a living cell? 'However improbably the origin of life might be,' Dawkins writes, 'it must have happened this way because we are here.' It takes a lot of faith to believe things like this."
- E. **THE EXISTENCE OF COGNITIVE POWERS**—Converted atheist Antony Flew writes, "We are conscious and conscious that we are conscious. No one can deny this without self-contradiction." Although 'consciousness' is associated with certain regions of the brain, when the same systems of neurons are present in the brain stem there is no 'production' of consciousness. As physicist Gerald Schroeder points out, there is no essential difference in the ultimate physical constituents of a heap of sand and the brain of an Einstein. Flew concludes, "Only blind and baseless faith in matter lies behind the claim that certain bits of matter can suddenly 'create' a new reality that bears no resemblance to

matter.” Self-awareness is a nearly impossible threshold to cross under the auspices of natural selection, for how could the impersonal forces of trait selection lead to an evolution of consciousness and self-awareness? How could the impersonal lead to personality and the recognition of personal awareness? Even the most vociferous atheists, Steve Pinker and Richard Dawkins, after laying out the problem thoughtfully (even if reluctantly) admit they just don’t know. To quote Dawkins, it “Beats the heck out of me.” Steve Pinker writes, “The existence of subjective first-person experience is not explainable by science.”

- F. NONUTILITARIAN VALUE ABOUNDS—Tim Keller, quoting Bertrand Russell, writes, “If there is no God, and everything in this world is the product of ‘an accidental collocation of atoms,’ then there is no actual purpose for which we were made—we are accidents. If we are the product of accidental natural forces, then what we call ‘beauty’ is nothing but a neurological hardwired response to particular data. You only find certain scenery to be beautiful because you had ancestors who knew you would find food there and they survived because of that feature, and now we have it too. In the same way, though music feels significant, that significance is an illusion. Love too must be seen in this light. If we are the result of blind natural forces, then what we call ‘love’ is simply a biochemical response, inherited from ancestors who survived because this trait helped them survive.” Yet we cannot escape the fact that we are awe-struck before art, beauty, music, and love—we long for it and we gain meaning and fulfillment when we find it. Thus, we not only feel the reality of those things, we feel pain when they are absent. St. Augustine found these to be clues to the reality of God. He argued that for every desire we have, there is a corresponding reality (sexual desire to sex, physical appetite to food, tiredness to sleep, relational desires to friendship). We have a longing for joy, love, and beauty that no amount or quality of food, sex, or friendship, can fulfill. Keller writes, “Isn’t that at least a clue that this ‘something’ that we want exists?”

IV. THE FINAL STRAW

- A. ANOTHER EXPLANATION?—Of course, when it comes to such non-utilitarian value like religion, art, and beauty, evolutionists argue that these are simply the results of hard-wired brain chemistry, traits which helped our ancestors be less selfish, leading to higher tribal survival rates. However, I don’t think this position is tenable.
- B. NO OTHER EXPLANATION—Dawkins himself admits that since we are the product of natural selection, we can’t completely trust our own senses because evolution is interested only in preserving adaptive behavior, not true belief. Thus evolution can only be trusted to give us cognitive faculties that help us live on, not to provide ones that give us an accurate and true picture of the world around us. Patricia Churchland says this, “The principle chore of brains is to get the body parts where they should be in order that the organism may survive. Improvements in sensorimotor control confer an evolutionary advantage: a fancier style of representing the world is advantageous so long as it...enhances the organism’s chances for survival. Truth, whatever that is, takes the hindmost.” Even Darwin himself was plagued by this issue. To a friend he confided, “the horrid doubt always arises whether the convictions of man’s mind, which has been developed from the mind of the lower animals, are of any value or at all trustworthy.” So, if there is no God, just the blind forces of natural selection, then it’s not only our beliefs about God we can’t trust, it’s our beliefs about everything, including evolutionary science. In this system we would simply have no reason to trust what any of our faculties tell us for fear that they may simply be hard-wired neurochemistry that evolved there to help us survive. If what my brain tells me about God is just chemical reactions then the same applies to what their brain tells them about the world. Alvin Plantinga provides a scathing critique: “People like Dawkins hold that there is a conflict between science and religion...the truth of the matter, however, is that the conflict is between science and naturalism, not between science and belief in God...It’s as likely, given unguided evolution, that we live in a sort of dream world as that we actually know something about ourselves and our world.” The best way to explain the kind of universe we have is by belief in a personal creator God who imbues us with a mind where we can reasonably trust our faculties and also assume that there are realities corresponding to our desires. If we did not believe in God, we would expect NONE of these things to be the case. In addition, consider that every person on planet earth has a moral framework or orientation. There is some person, somewhere in the world who is doing something that you disagree with. Evolution cannot explain this human phenomenon because it would be purely anti-survival to put great care and self-sacrifice into the welfare of others. Dawkins himself admits the problem, “[To be nice] is a misfiring, even a perversion of the Darwinian take. Human super niceness is a perversion of Darwinism because, in a wild population, it would be removed by natural selection. Well, if that’s a perversion, it’s the kind of perversion we need to encourage and spread.” Notice at the end, that Dawkins leaps to an ethical claim of what we “need to encourage and spread.” This is a bald-faced faith claim, and there’s no way around it. Augustine said we must believe something in order to know anything. Thus, no matter what we do, we simply cannot extricate ourselves from a world in which we MUST make and live by faith. It’s almost as if the world were ‘designed’ that way!

V. CONCLUSION: FACING THE ODDS AND BACK TO COLUMBUS