**Christianity – The Debates**

A Look at Contemporary Debates About the Existence of God

Introduction

This essay was conceived by chance and almost spontaneously grew out of a set of innocent notes that I began taking while watching “a couple of debates on the internet”. As the religious speakers’ eloquent and often highly organised speeches fuelled my ire, and the sometimes (what I perceived as) less than adequate responses from the atheist/non-theist side aroused in me the will to offer my own response, the notes I was taking expanded in length and depth until they spanned almost thirty pages and covered fourteen separate topics. It was only halfway through this process that I realised I was researching what would eventually become an essay.

I watched a number of debates primarily featuring William Lane Craig and Dinesh D’Souza on the religious side but including other speakers such as Father Carter Griffin, Chris Hedges, David Wolpe, Ian Hutchinson, Uthman Badar, John Lennox, Nigel Spivey, Roger Scruton, Rabbi Julia Neuberger, and even former British Prime Minister, Tony Blair. The defenders of the secular motion included Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, A.C. Grayling, Lawrence Krauss, Andrew Bernstein, Bart Ehrman, Paul Shook, and Michael Shermer.

Most of the speakers defending religion are Christian but there are also a few Jews and one Muslim. I have directed this essay towards either religion in general or Christianity. As such, I haven’t targeted any specific Jewish or Muslim beliefs. The religious speakers, almost without exception, explicitly avoid the appeal to faith or Biblical authority in their arguments, arguing against secularism on the basis of logical, rational, or scientific grounds. They represent a conservative strand of what I have elsewhere called neo-Christianity, that is, Christians who unashamedly take massive liberties in interpreting the Bible, accept scientific theories such as evolution and the Big Bang, and in general recognise scientific authority in physical matters while at the same time trying to undermine it at the fringes of current knowledge. As such, the dogmas of the Christian faith; Jesus Christ dying for our sins, the existence of heaven and hell, original sin, and so on are not discussed. The only exception to this occurs in one argument made by William Lane Craig where he claims that Jesus Christ was in fact, raised from the dead.

My notes were initially grouped either by debate or by individual debater but I have elected to format the arguments discussed in this essay by topic. All the topics are phrased with the religious/Christian viewpoint being *for* the motion except with regards the problem of evil. Many of the former are positive assertions made in support of the religious viewpoint such as the cosmological or design arguments, and claims that Christianity is or was a force for good, but some are direct attacks on the inadequacies of atheism or rationality.

As I hinted at in the first paragraph, this essay is essentially a written rebuttal in response to the arguments put forward by the speakers arguing on the religious side. One of the reasons I was prompted to write this essay was that the religious arguments are often quite persuasive and, particularly in the case of William Lane Craig and Dinesh D’Souza, very well researched and immaculately presented. As such, it presents quite a challenge to uncover where their arguments go astray and how the flaws in their reasoning can be exposed. Reviewing the debates from the removed perspective of the spectator and having the advantage of being able to pause mid-speech to rewind or take stock of what was said, I believe gives me a more effective platform from which to identify and address these inadequacies. With luck, as you read my responses you will agree.

Some Preliminary Definitions

There are a couple of controversial terms that crop up on the secular side which I want to clarify before getting into the debate topics themselves.

*Secularism*

Secularism is a broad term indicating an outlook which operates completely independently of any religious opinion. It is not necessarily *against* religion; it just involves the discussion of issues without reference to religion or any religious tenets. When I refer to secularism in this essay, I just mean the case as it may be excluding any religious considerations.

*Materialism/Materialistic Naturalism*

Although perhaps not everybody does so, I will treat these two terms as interchangeable. Materialism (or materialistic naturalism) is simply the opinion that everything in the universe is composed of matter. Now, I don’t take materialism to be the somewhat weaker claim that everything we can know or everything we can experience is matter; rather I mean that everything is matter *and there is nothing else*. With this, materialism stands in direct opposition to the belief that there is a non-material realm or some non-material ‘substance’ we might call spirit or soul or some other such ill-defined and meaningless term.

*Atheism vs. Agnosticism*

Now, there exists an enormous amount of confusion and misunderstanding over these two terms which I will attempt to clarify once and for all here. *Atheism*, very simply, is the absence of a belief in a deity. It is the contention that God does *not* exist. Contrary to popular Christian belief, there are no positive tenets or beliefs associated with atheism which need to be accepted. I will have more to say about atheism in the first topic of the essay proper.

*Agnosticism* can take one of two stances. The first, ‘lite’ version, is a refusal to take a position at all on the existence of God. This is a personal opinion akin to saying, “Well, I can see the positives on both sides but I just can’t decide.” The second, ‘strong’ version, says that we *can’t* know whether God exists so, in effect, there’s no point speculating about it.

Atheism/Physical Naturalism

*What is the evidence for atheism?*

William Lane Craig in particular has made a fairly big deal about atheism and the “evidence” for it. He regularly tells the audience that he intends to make the case for religion and he will leave it to his opponent to make the case for atheism. This is a red herring. It’s a red herring because there are no arguments for atheism nor should the atheist be required to offer any.

Atheism entails a *negative* ontological position. What I mean by this is that atheism affirms a negative statement concerning the existence of some entity, namely God. It says that God does *not* exist. Now, it is impossible to prove a negative statement like this in the same way that one can prove a positive statement.

Imagine I claim that dragons exist. If I do this I am making a positive claim. You would be quite right, in turn, to ask me to provide some evidence in support of this belief. Now, there are a number of things I might highlight to this effect. I might reference impressions in mud made by a large creature, perhaps there are eye witnesses who have seen the dragon who I might call on, maybe there is some photographic or video evidence, and so on. It is easy to imagine the different kinds of evidence I could, in theory, amass.

What about you, my opponent, who claims that dragons don’t exist? What evidence could you be asked to provide to support your claim? If you think about this, you will realise that there is absolutely no evidence you could, even in theory, offer. Why? Because you cannot prove a negative. You cannot point to pictures of *no* large animal tracks or video footage that shows *no* dragon. These things are ludicrous but this is exactly the kind of thing that Craig is apparently expecting to hear from the atheist.

Secondly, it would seem extremely odd if we stood up and before you even asked me for my evidence I turned to you and said, “On what grounds do you not believe in dragons?” You aren’t the person making the positive (and definitely more outrageous) claim that certain mythical beasts actually exist. Why should you be called to account for your entirely sensible position? The answer is, you shouldn’t. In exactly the same way, the onus is not on the atheist to provide evidence in support of the less contentious, less outrageous claim that there is no omnipotent, omnipresent, and omniscient Being in existence.

The atheist can even go one further and say that it is not just the case that the believer *can* and *ought to* be the one to provide evidence but that if an omni-potent, present, and scient God who loves each of us and wants to have a personal relationship with us does exist there *should* be an abundance of evidence, which there just isn’t. If this much evidence existed, we wouldn’t even be able to doubt it. While some of us may dislike Him and wilfully choose not to follow Him, we shouldn’t be able to doubt His existence.

I was extremely surprised to hear Craig say in one debate that you can prove a negative. He used Santa Claus as an example. He claimed that he could just go to the North Pole and look for Santa. When he fails to find him, he can declare that he doesn’t exist. Has Craig *proven* that Santa doesn’t exist? Of course not. All he has proven is that he can’t find him. What if I defend the Santa hypothesis by saying that Santa and his house can dematerialise at will to avoid snooping philosophy professors? Or even better, Santa is non-physical. Either way, Craig has failed to provide conclusive (or indeed any) evidence that Santa doesn’t exist. What he has done is give us a reason to doubt the truth of the positive statement. What if twenty people look and can’t find Santa? What if everybody on the planet looks and turns up empty handed? With each failed search attempt, the likelihood that the Santa hypothesis is true decreases but this is still not proof. Despite what Craig seems to believe, you cannot prove a negative. You can offer reasons why the negative statement is likely to be true but you cannot provide direct evidence, especially when the person making the positive claim has access to supernatural explanations (i.e. it exists beyond space-time or is ‘non-material’).

This is incidentally what the atheist does do to call the God hypothesis into question. She points to things like the existence of evil in the world or highly implausible events (Jesus raising the dead, was raised himself from the dead, or my ancestors being kicked out of Paradise because a talking snake made a woman eat an apple from a tree) or the extremely *un*God-like behaviour of Yahweh in the Old Testament or unbelievable doctrines (the loving Creator of the universe who has everything could refuse me entry into heaven because I don’t believe in Him strongly enough), the cumulative weight of which make accepting the positive claim just too much of a long shot. None of these things, even all together, constitute *proof* but, as I have already said, the burden of proof is not on the atheist’s shoulders.

*What is the evidence for physical naturalism or materialism?*

Now this is slightly different compared to the demand for proof from the atheist, although it eventually cashes out in the same way. In this case, the materialist is not just claiming that physical matter exists (I would hope that this is an uncontroversial statement for atheists and believers alike) but that *everything* is material or that the natural (as opposed to the supernatural) is all that exists.

From the inference to the supernatural in that last statement we can see that everyone is a naturalist about the physical world. No proof is needed that physical matter exists. However proof *is* needed to justify the leap from there to the *super*natural which almost by definition, we can’t detect through normal physical means. From here, we can adopt the two pronged argument we used regarding atheism.

First, the side making the more outrageous claim, that there is an entire realm beyond the physical that is eternal and intangible and yet somehow still able to interact with the physical, is the side that must accept the burden of proof. It is trivial and unproblematic to assert that the physical world exists, however the leap from there to the supernatural requires… no, demands an explanation.

Second, the materialist is again making a negative claim, that there is *no* realm beyond the physical. The materialist cannot supply proof that the supernatural doesn’t exist because, as we have already discussed, it is impossible to prove a negative.

The believer might turn around and say that the materialist is not holding a negative proposition at all because she is claiming that the natural world is all that exists. This is a positive assertion and should therefore be subject to evidence.

We need to be careful with this kind of wordplay, but that is all it is. There are essentially two equivalent claims being made here but phrased in different ways:

1. The supernatural does not exist (negative)
2. The natural is all that exists (positive)

So is this a negative assertion or a positive one? Or perhaps there are no negative and positive assertions, just assertions that can be phrased either way.

Actually, I believe that with a little careful probing we can identify one of the above statements as being prior and the other as being derived from the first. The way we will do this is by attempting to discern which phrasing is the simplest.

First, take a look at the negative phrasing, “The supernatural does not exist.” We have the subject (the supernatural), the negative 3rd person auxiliary (does not), and the verb (exist). Now this is pretty much bare bones. It is a clear, unambiguous statement about the subject not modified in any way. Now let’s look at the second phrasing, “The natural is all that exists.” There is the subject (the natural), the copula (is), and then a fairly complex adjectival phrase (all that exists). This is clearly not the simplest way to express this sentiment because the adjectival phrase is explicitly formulated to include the (simple) notion that the supernatural does not exist which is already stated in the first phrasing.

Perhaps what I am getting at can best be explained in the following way. “The natural is all that exists” is not just making a claim about the subject of the sentence, i.e. ‘the natural’, it is in fact making a secondary claim about another subject ‘the supernatural.’ It is claiming that the natural exists, but it is *also* claiming (through the complex phrase “all that exists”) that the supernatural does not exist. By contrast however, the first phrasing “the supernatural does not exist” is making only one claim; i.e. that the supernatural does not exist. It says nothing about the natural. This is what makes it a simple, and therefore the prior, phrasing.

It can even be said that the phrase “the natural is all that exists” is *primarily* making the indirect claim about the supernatural and only incidentally affirming the existence of the natural which again, brings us back to the negative phrasing.

This fact is made even more obvious when we think about why the speaker is claiming that “the natural is *all* that exists.” Why has she included the word “all” there? “The natural exists” is the ‘root’ or ‘simplest’ expression for this second phrasing, so what purpose does the word “all” serve? The only reason it is there is to address the *real*, but at the same time *hidden*, force of the statement; which is that there is no supernatural.

No matter which way you look at this second phrasing, it is clear that is a derivative of the prior, first phrasing. This is important because, as we have already seen, one *cannot* prove a negative statement. To this end we need to know whether an assertion is a negative statement in truth, or whether it has just been dressed up to look like a positive statement in order to drop an impossible burden of proof on its shoulders.

*Even if all the proofs for supernaturalism fail, this still does not prove that the conclusion (God exists) is false.*

This is 100% true but this weak argument is really nothing more than an admission that the believer has no reason to believe in God beyond things like faith and revelation, which the debaters I am discussing all claim they don’t need to rely on.

What it essentially means is that believers can’t claim their faith is rational or based on science, because it isn’t. In addition, it also gives us good reasons for *not* accepting their claims. Remember, the burden of proof is on the side making the larger (and positive) claim. I say that the material is all there is. We all know that there is a material world, I am simply denying that there is anything beyond it. The natural world needs no proofs (just look around you), the *super*natural on the other hand is anything but obvious and if we’re being honest with ourselves it is highly unlikely inasmuch as it violates all of our understandings about our universe[[1]](#footnote-1).

If all of your arguments for the existence of some non-physical world fail, then why should I believe it? Why should you believe it? That’s the *real* question.

*So, by your own admission, the atheist position can’t provide any evidence that there is no God. This makes you agnostic – you just “don’t know.”*

This argument rests on a misunderstanding of what atheism actually is. Atheists don’t go around saying “I know there is no God” as if it were a doctrine, because they know there can’t ever be 100% certitude regarding this question. And they don’t gather in laboratories all over the world, hold hands and chant “There is no God, we know there is no God”, because they know they don’t *need* this 100% certitude to have intelligent, well-thought out, reasoned opinions on the matter.

Atheists *argue* there is no God and *contend* that this is the only sensible conclusion to draw in light of the facts (and absence/weakness of evidence presented in favour of the proposition) but they don’t dogmatically pronounce that they *know* there is no God. It is only believers who are arrogant enough (or afraid enough of being sent to hell if they think God detects any chinks in their faith) to claim they *know* whether or not God exists.

The God hypothesis is not one that admits of 100% certainty one way or the other. We, as humans, will never have access to this kind of information, so we have to look at the situation, explore the universe around us, study the facts that we can discern and weigh the evidence. The atheist position simply concludes that after having done all of the above, it is so *un*likely that God exists that we can quite reasonably rule the positive hypothesis out.

Broadly speaking there are three reasons the atheist draws this conclusion. First, the paucity of decent rational *arguments* in favour of God’s existence. Second, the complete absence of *evidence* for God’s existence. The things that used to require God as a First Mover or Divine Intervener are steadily disappearing as science shows us that this universe is physical and operates quite as we would expect it to if there was no God. Third, given the nature of the God-hypothesis (as it is usually given in most religions) we would expect that there *should be* some evidence for His or Her existence and this evidence should be plainly obvious, but it isn’t. If it was, there wouldn’t be a need for this essay.

So the first point to make is that atheism doesn’t require absolute certitude to form a sensible opinion on the existence of God. We can come to our own conclusions based on the lack/absence of evidence just as confidently as believers come to their conclusions based on that same lack/absence of evidence.

Secondly, there is a misconception about agnosticism here as well. Agnostics don’t say, “Well, there’s no proof that God doesn’t exist, therefore I just don’t know”, any more than they say, “Well, there’s no proof that dragons don’t exist, therefore I just don’t know.” Agnostics are simply refusing to take a stand on the matter. Either they are torn between the respective sides[[2]](#footnote-2) or they see it as being unanswerable[[3]](#footnote-3). They are saying they don’t know, but they aren’t doing it for the simplistic reason that there is no evidence that God doesn’t exist.

The bottom line is that as the facts about our universe grow and we come to understand more and more about human existence, it can be reasonably shown that the God hypothesis looks less and less plausible. Of course, this kind of inductive process will never rule it out completely, but you can only keep believing in fairies without any real evidence for so long. Eventually, if you acquire enough facts and reach a sufficient level of understanding, absence of evidence does in fact become, evidence of absence.

The Cosmological Argument

This argument usually operates out of an appeal to causation, generally by arguing that every event has a cause but a causal chain cannot be infinite therefore there must have been a first cause. This we call God. Let’s start out by taking William Lane Craig’s outline of this argument. It consists of two premises and a conclusion:

1. Whatever begins to exist has a cause
2. The universe began to exist
3. Therefore the universe has a cause

Now, the argument (the two premises plus the conclusion) is valid which means that *if* the premises are true, the conclusion must follow. But are the premises true? Let’s look at the first one, “whatever begins to exist has a cause.” This is certainly true of every*thing* *in* the universe that we are aware of. Notice the emphasis I have placed on *thing* and *in*. The question we need to ask ourselves is can we consider the universe as a whole (taking a peek at the second premise) to be the same kind of thing as all of the *things* that are *in* it, i.e. do they have certain key attributes in common? When we see a car going past on the road, we naturally and justifiably infer that it had a cause. But is the universe the kind of thing that we should also justifiably infer this same predicate of? I don’t think it is clear that it is.

Now the believer might say that the whole (the universe) is nothing more than the sum of its parts (the things in the universe), therefore what we predicate of the parts we are justified in predicating of the whole. There are two problems with this.

The first is that the universe is not just the things which fill it. The universe includes more fundamental and mysterious concepts like time and space which are not a ‘part’ of the universe like the chairs and tables, but which characterise the universe in a more fundamental way. This reveals that the universe is a completely different ‘thing’ from any of the ‘things’ (tables, chairs, etc.) which populate it.

The second problem is that the fundamental ‘parts’ which make up the universe are not the macro-scale things we typically think about as populating our universe; chairs, tables, cars, etc. Rather, to the best of our current knowledge the universe is made up of subatomic particles; primarily quarks and leptons. Now it does seem obvious (and even trivial) to say that a table or chair had a cause, but is it so obvious to say that those amazingly tiny elements which make up that table and chair had a cause? It is not. In fact, we already know (thanks to quantum physics) that at the level of the very small, all of our common sense physical notions (including time and causality) completely break down. While we may not understand exactly what happens at this scale, this very fact guarantees that it is nothing like what happens at the macro-level, and that again tells us that the universe (considered as an entity) is nothing like the things we typically think of as making it up.

What this whole discussion boils down to is that Craig’s “whatever begins to exist has a cause” premise *is* valid but it’s only valid within a certain reference frame. It is, in fact, limited to *only* those things we can see and interact with. This is not normally a problem (just about everything we know falls into this category), but in a discussion like this which pushes right to the borders of current knowledge, this limitation becomes acutely important. Craig has attempted to make a sweeping statement that applies everywhere and at all times but quantum physics has already disproved it. Premise one is true but it can be considered true *only* for things we are familiar with, i.e. not necessarily for the very small (e.g. subatomic particles) or the very large (e.g. the universe).[[4]](#footnote-4)

Craig’s second premise, “the universe began to exist” seems fine according to current scientific knowledge. It is accepted that the universe (including space and time) began with the Big Bang.

Unfortunately, when Craig attempts to couple this premise with his first one to draw his conclusion we run into problems. Craig substitutes the “universe” in the second premise for the “whatever begins to exist” of the first premise, yielding “[the universe] had a cause”. Unfortunately, we have already seen that the first premise is only valid for everyday objects (like tables and chairs) and there are serious reservations about it including things like universes and subatomic particles. Craig has tried to slip the universe *as a whole* into his argument as being equivalent to just another ‘thing’ *in* the universe. This is obviously false and gives us sufficient reason to reject the conclusion.

*Out of Nothing, Nothing Comes*

Another expression Craig gets a lot of mileage out of to prove that *everything* must have a cause is, “out of nothing, nothing comes”. This is certainly true of everything we know, that is, everything *inside* the universe. Can we extend these kind of intuitions/knowledge to some time *pre*-Big Bang (whatever that means)? Of course not. Perhaps our universe resides on just one of any number of massive branes floating in higher dimensional space (this is called M-theory by the way), maybe whatever existed before the Big Bang has its own space-time framework which is just different and independent to that of our universe, or maybe it’s impossible for our human brains to even imagine answers to these types of questions (like trying to imagine a fourth spatial dimension; length, breadth, height, and… ‘x’th).

Regarding nothingness, physicists actually think such a state would be highly unstable and thanks to the vagaries of the quantum realm, if there truly ever was ‘nothing’, certain energy-filled quantum vacuums could ‘tunnel’ into existence thereby spontaneously creating something. Bizarre but true.

Naturally, Craig doesn’t like the implications these legitimate scientific forays have so he disregards them as nothing more than scientists trying to avoid the ‘truth’ (which fortunately for us, Craig has correctly divined). This is cherry picking at its finest. We usually associate this expression with fairly flexible interpretations of the Bible; here we see believers applying it to scientific theories as well. While resting his whole argument on the scientific theory of the Big Bang (in the second premise) he simultaneously rejects a host of other theories for no better reason than that they lead to conclusions he doesn’t want to admit.

*The Cause*

Even though we have debunked the cosmological argument, let’s accept the conclusion as if it were valid and see where Craig’s weird and wonderful rabbit hole goes from there. Having established that the universe had a cause, he then goes on to qualify this by saying that this cause must itself be uncaused, space-less, time-less, immaterial, and personal. The only things that qualify for this category are abstract objects or an intelligible mind. Since abstract objects (like numbers) can’t cause anything, Craig goes on to conclude that this cause of the universe must therefore be a transcendent, personal mind.

Now hold on. We just got bombarded with a number of wildly unsubstantiated claims that we had better slow down and take stock of. Craig claims that this cause of the universe must be uncaused, space-less, time-less, and immaterial. He doesn’t bother to back this up with any reasons in the debates I have seen but I think I can see why he believes these inferences are plausible. Craig is operating on the principle that the universe is all there is. Not just all there is for us, but all there is, full stop. Craig doesn’t think that there is nothing outside the universe; he thinks *there is no ‘outside the universe’*.

The problem of course is that Craig can’t possibly know this nor can he have any reasons for believing it to be true. What we *do* know is that space, time, and matter (for our universe) all started with the Big Bang. Time, as it exists for us, does not extend beyond our universe and this leads to the famous statement that it doesn’t make sense to ask what happened *before* the Big Bang because there was no time before the Big Bang. But does this mean that there was literally *nothing* (no space, no time, no*thing*)? No, it doesn’t. The truth is that no one knows how to describe reality prior to the Big Bang… no one except Christians, that is.

The biggest irony is that while maintaining that the universe is all there is and there can’t be anything or anywhere or anywhen *outside* it or *before* the Big Bang (in order to derive an uncaused, space-less, time-less, immaterial cause), Craig then shoots himself in the foot by trying to claim that, well actually there was one thing… God. Essentially, Craig is making the following argument:

There is *nothing* outside the universe - it doesn’t even make sense to talk of an ‘outside’ to the universe.

Therefore the cause of the universe cannot possess any of the characteristics the universe possesses. (*This secures Craig’s uncaused, space-less, time-less, and immaterial qualities.*)

This cause, God, is therefore outside (transcends) the universe. *(A proposition which obviously contradicts the first statement*.)

This line of inquiry leads us to a realisation which is even more damning to the cosmological argument. The notion of causality is central to the cosmological argument but it turns out that pre-Big Bang, we can’t be sure causality applied.

In keeping with the notion that there was absolutely nothing prior to the Big Bang, we are forced to conclude that the laws of physics therefore only came into existence with the Big Bang. Causality is a direct consequence of these laws of physics which means that if you nix the laws of physics, you nix causality. How can a principle which depends on the laws of physics, operate in a realm where they don’t exist?

Of course, I hope you have also noticed that, despite making these bold and grandiose claims, Craig doesn’t actually attempt to explain any of them in any detail. Exactly *how* is it possible for God to exist outside of space and time? There are many hairy questions that he has completely ducked, such as, if there is no time, how can God *do* anything? There is no time for him to do it in. Or if there is no space how can he be anywhere? Even being everywhere requires a ‘where’ which can be occupied in the first place. If He is immaterial, how can He affect the material?

So much for that. Craig’s claim that his cause must also be “personal” is an even bigger problem which he nowhere attempts to provide any justification for. I can’t even imagine how he could derive such a bold claim merely from the finding that the universe has a cause and so in the absence of anything to argue against, there is no further discussion possible regarding this.

*The Universe can’t be eternal. It must have a beginning.*

There is another easy refutation of the cosmological argument which this time involves a rejection of the second premise. The second premise says that the universe began to exist. We can simply make the counterclaim that the universe is eternal and be done with it. Now, the Christian soldier will immediately object on the grounds that the Big Bang (a theory almost every cosmologist agrees with) points to a beginning for our universe approximately 13.7 billion years ago.

Certainly this *current* iteration of the universe started at that time but who’s to say that was all there was? Maybe the universe was born out of the death of a prior universe of which the component pieces (the subatomic particles) are eternal. That is at least as likely as the alternative that Christians are pushing for here, namely, the creation of the entire universe out of nothing.[[5]](#footnote-5) Maybe this universe is just one member of a vast, eternal multiverse which is continually spawning new and culling old universes. Maybe we can’t answer this question any better at the moment than we could have properly understood how atoms worked before the discovery of quantum mechanics. It is way too early to be jumping to the premature conclusion that God did it.

*But there’s no evidence for any of the above – multiverses and the like are just attempts at avoiding the God hypothesis*

Sure there’s no direct evidence that the universe is eternal or a multiverse exists, but there’s no evidence for the God-hypothesis either. The Christian claim is that the God-hypothesis is the best explanation; which only means they can’t imagine how things could possibly have happened *without* a Divine Intervener. However, it’s interesting to remember that every time people have leapt to the God hypothesis in the past, they have been proven wrong. God doesn’t drive the sun across the sky each day, He doesn’t make crops fail or send storms if we don’t sacrifice the best cattle, and He doesn’t appear and put a baby in a woman’s womb (coincidentally after she has unprotected intercourse). At various times in our history, we couldn’t imagine how any of these things happened without God either, but I think it’s clear that we were no more justified in jumping to the God-hypothesis then to explain them, than we are now to explain the Big Bang.

If someone should claim that science is supposed to be based on evidence, I would point out that science only progresses when those whose vision reaches further than most people’s look *beyond* current knowledge and theorise bold new frameworks. This is of course completely different from saying “God did it”. These new theories are built on what came before them; they are not a complete abandoning of the scientific model. Saying “God did it” is like spitting in the face of scientific inquiry and spurning all of its successes over the past few centuries.

In this sense, these theories (multiverses, etc.) *are* ways of avoiding the God-hypothesis but not in the way Christians think they are. This is not some industry-wide attempt to suppress a rival theory[[6]](#footnote-6) nor is it some new form of discrimination ‘God-ism’, if you will. The God-hypothesis is not acceptable, not because scientists dislike religion but because it is not a realistic alternative. It never has been. All throughout history, we have turned to the God-hypothesis wherever our knowledge failed us and we have always had to correct ourselves later as we developed better theories. The God-hypothesis makes no predictions, doesn’t add to our knowledge base at all, creates many more problems than it solves, and more importantly doesn’t even explain anything.

It is worth pointing out here how disingenuous believers are when they tell us that they are invoking scientific principles in their ‘theorising’. “We accept the Big Bang”, they tell us, but then instead of carrying on with this scientific mind set and investigating plausible scenarios *beyond* what we already know, they make their wild leap to a Creator God, which is of course far less plausible than even the most outlandish scientific theories. They concede what is accepted (known[[7]](#footnote-7)) by most scientists in the field and then where the knowledge dries up, they slip in God. This is nothing more than the god of the gaps and is really what the entire cosmological argument boils down to; how did the universe come into being? We don’t know – therefore it must be God.

*The universe can’t be eternal because infinity is not a real-world concept – an infinite set of events into the past is impossible*

Craig claims nothing can be eternal because infinities are impossible. He attempts to prove this by saying that infinity subtracted from infinity yields infinity; a solution Craig claims is nonsensical when applied to real life.

But surely if an eternal universe is prohibited because infinites are impossible in real life then an eternal God is just as effectively prohibited. If God can be eternal then so can the universe – end of story.

*The universe can’t be eternal because it is contingent. On the other hand, God is necessary.*

The difference between contingent and necessary things is that contingent things did not have to exist; they may exist now but it need not have been the case that they do. Necessary things, on the other hand, MUST exist. They exist now and there is no possible way they could not exist; their existence is necessary.

Craig claims the universe is contingent. My first question would be how does he know this? I have already outlined a couple of different scenarios (multiverses, etc.) in which the universe could be considered necessary simply because it is eternal.

My second question would be how does Craig know God is necessary? The typical reason given is to say that God is necessary by definition, I mean, He is all-everything, the alpha and the omega. Of course, humans made these definitions in the first place so there isn’t much credibility to be found there.

*Christians were unique and right in asserting that the universe came from nothing when all other religions claimed that the universe was fashioned out of some pre-existing stuff*

I love this one. The Bible says that God made the universe from nothing, beating modern science to the punch by over 2,000 years. Of course, what the Christian fails to mention is that the Bible also tells us that God made man from dirt, He made woman later because man was lonely, a talking snake slithered into a paradise which existed on earth, etc. Not only that but it says that the creation from nothing took 7 days, at the end of which, Adam and Eve were running around naming animals. The scientific account is slightly different. Congratulation Christianity, you guessed one thing right – even if we ignore all the things you got wrong (or just reinterpret them (a ‘day’ for God is actually a billion years for us, didn’t you know?)) it still looks like what it is – a myth created by humans to try to explain a bewildering world.

The Argument from Fine-Tuning

There are certain fundamental physical constants that crop up in physicist’s equations which can’t be derived from any other quantities, i.e. they just seem to be ‘set’ at a certain level, there is no reason why they have the value they do. These constants are extremely important (things like the strength of the gravitational force relative to electromagnetism, the strength of the strong nuclear force, etc.) and if they were only slightly different, life wouldn’t be able to exist; stars and galaxies wouldn’t even be able to form. There seems to be no reason why these constants have the values they do and given the highly improbable explanation that out of all the possible values they could have taken, they arose by chance, some Christians have taken this to mean that they were ‘fine-tuned’ by a higher power so that atoms, stars, and ultimately life could form.

Perhaps the first thing that needs to be said about this is that physicists don’t *currently* know how these constants came to have the values they do. This doesn’t mean that there is no perfectly natural reason; all it means is we don’t know what that reason is at the moment. This is yet another version of the God of the gaps. Christians take a current unknown in scientific theory and throw God in there as an explanation.

Christians claim that it is wildly improbable that these constants each came to have the values they do by random chance. So how do they propose to resolve this issue? They invent an even *less* likely omnipotent Creator to tweak the dials of the universe making it hospitable for us. Clearly this isn’t much of a solution.

Is there another possibility? Of course there is. At this point however, believers turn their backs on the science that gave them the means of making their argument in the first place because it doesn’t yield answers they like. Perhaps we live in a multiverse. There is absolutely no reason why there couldn’t be a whole universe of universes out there in some higher dimensional space. Each of these universes might have different fundamental physical constants; many of them may be empty, having fundamental constants that don’t allow particles and atoms to clump together in ways that support molecules, planets, and stars; while some of them may be similar to ours. Is this amazing? Of course. Is it hard to believe? Definitely. But surely no harder to believe than the idea of some infinitely powerful, eternal Being who created all of this in the first place.

Do you remember back when we thought the earth was the only planet in the universe? Then we realised there were other planets but we thought our solar system was the whole universe. Once we learned that there were a whole host of other stars out there making up our galaxy, guess what, we thought our galaxy was all there was. We then discovered there are more galaxies in the universe than we can practically count. Is it such a surprise to speculate that our universe may not be the only one? Only religion, which (almost by definition) always looks to the past rather than the future, can foster such backward thinking.

Let’s also not forget that the multiverse theory has one clear advantage over the God hypothesis; we know for a fact that universes can exist because we are living in one; the jury is still out on our MIA God, despite the fact that He supposedly loves us all.

Another approach tackles the fine-tuning argument from a different perspective. Think about all of the events which had to take place so that your parents came together and conceived you. If your parents had sex just seconds earlier or later than they did that fateful night, you wouldn’t be sitting here now. That one individual spermatozoa (out of the tens or hundreds of millions of sperm that were lined up at the starting line) which successfully fertilised your mother’s egg would undoubtedly have been different from the one that was you in sperm form. What are the chances that ‘sperm-you’ would have made it across the finish line first? And think about all of the circumstances that had to happen in just the right way for your parents to be conceived, and their parents, and so on. The odds that you should have been born are vanishingly miniscule.

And yet, here you are.

Surely this should also qualify as evidence of God’s fine-tuning, shouldn’t it? The reason it is a poor argument for ‘fine-tuning’ is that looking back over the chain of events leading up to a completed event always results in a kind of distorted hindsight that compares the overwhelmingly vast numbers of things which *could* have happened to produce a different outcome compared to the one single path of events which could have led to what actually did happen.

The trick to dissolving this illusion is to stop looking at the event-chain from the point of view of a completed single event; instead look at each event in the chain *before* it happened. If you look backwards from a completed event then that event seems to acquire a special significance that it doesn’t necessarily have in reality. This perspective creates the illusion that everything *led up to* that fated event when in actual fact things merely took place after earlier events. When you consider events in history *with* the flow of time rather than *against* it, you realise the simple truth that out of all the things that *could* have happened at every point in the event-chain, *something* had to happen. The fact that one thing happened instead of another is not particularly important.

The apparent fine-tuning of the universe is the same. All we need is a non-zero possibility of a range of outcomes and we have no right to be surprised when one of them happens.

For the fine-tuning argument to work – we have to believe that the universe is actually fine-tuned in the first place. Physicists tell us that if certain fundamental constants were even slightly different, our universe would also be radically different. Christians tell us that for these constants to have the values they do, God must have fine-tuned them. Let’s see if this is a reasonable hypothesis.

If God fine-tuned this universe with us in mind, it has to be said he did a remarkably poor job. Our own home planet is remarkably hostile to us. Most of it is water, in which we can’t breathe. Large parts of it are too hot or too cold for us to comfortably inhabit and moving too far from sea level (either up or down) causes problems of its own. Not just this, we live almost constantly under the threat of aptly-named ‘acts of God’ (extreme weather, earthquakes, etc.) which routinely kill thousands of people. We also live in fear of an asteroid or comet impact which could potentially wipe out all life on Earth pretty much anytime.

If our own planet is not particularly hospitable to us then leaving it is positively deadly. Just getting off the planet is extremely difficult and even if we eventually manage this, we cannot survive in space without taking very expensive and complicated measures for protection. Even when we do insulate ourselves in cumbersome spaceships and spacesuits we are still exposed to intense radiation from cosmic rays and the absence of gravity causes many health problems that appear to make long distance space travel virtually impossible, at least with current technology.

The sun, which makes life on Earth possible, has a finite lifetime and in another 5 billion years or so will swell up to become a red giant, at which time, the Earth will become uninhabitable. But it’s even worse than this because most scientists agree that somewhere between 2 and 3 billion years from now the sun will heat up so much that life ceases to be possible on Earth.

If we manage to survive this by skipping to another planet somewhere we still have to face the end of the universe which it looks as if will come in what is called the Big Rip. Essentially, this holds that the universe will continue to expand at an ever accelerating rate, everything drifting further and further apart, until the pressure exerted on atoms themselves forces the nuclear bonds to break and the universe becomes what Christians tell us would exist if it hadn’t been ‘fine-tuned’ by God in the first place. The only option for survival of whatever life forms exist at that time is to somehow tunnel into another universe, although if William Lane Craig is right, there are no other universes for us to escape to.

One may argue that these events are so distant that they hardly bear thinking about, but surely God had the big picture in mind right from the start (and don’t forget that we are currently riding on the lip of a wave already 13.9 billion odd years in the making). Is this what all of His fine-tuning amounts to? Is this the best He could do?

Make no mistake, the universe is full of chaos. Everything hurtling around at thousands of miles a second, dying stars exploding and releasing in a matter of seconds more energy than the sun will expend over its entire 10 billion year lifespan, massive black holes destroying all that comes within their grasp with a gravitational strength we cannot even begin to fathom, deadly radiation zooming all through space. If this universe was fine-tuned for us why does it look so much like it wasn’t?

Sometimes Christians leap in here saying that we can’t hope to understand the mind of God; you may have heard this sentiment expressed in the classic, “God works in mysterious ways.” First of all, this is a cop out. If Christians want us to accept their claims beyond an appeal to faith (and they do – that is why they are engaging in these debates using ‘scientific’ reasoning) then they have to better than, “Because God said so.” Second, why is it that Christians seem to know all about God and His wishes when they preach about Him, but as soon as an inconsistency surfaces they retreat behind the “How can we know God” defence? Which is it – do you know God and His mind or not? You can’t have it both ways.

In defence of this I have even heard the argument that maybe God is a playful God, an artist; not a rigid lawmaker. Playful? Tornadoes sweep paths of destruction, earthquakes destroy buildings, tsunamis wreak untold havoc, the unimaginable raw violence and power the universe displays at every turn of the telescope; this is playful? If you believe that, you will believe anything.

Ultimately, the fine-tuning argument is identical in form to the argument believers used to put forward for creationism before evolution. Christians used to claim that creatures are so well-adapted to their environments that the only way this could have happened is if Someone designed them that way. Then Charles Darwin comes along and in one fell swoop shows us the mechanism that allows life to evolve in ways that increase their fitness; natural selection. Is it such a stretch to imagine that the same thing is at play at the greater level of the universe? Perhaps we are just waiting for the Darwin of astrophysics to lift Nature’s veil and outline the principle behind what we might call cosmic natural selection. Is it prudent to try to close the book on this subject with the God-hypothesis just when things are starting to get interesting?

The Argument from Design

The argument from design (also known as the teleological argument) holds that the design or order found in the universe implies a Designer. It is true that this universe is governed by ordered laws - the planets all dutifully follow their trajectories around the sun, all objects move in accordance to Newton’s laws of motion, atoms faithfully maintain their chemical bonds with other atoms and so on - and taking a wide angle glance at the universe, there is a majesty and beauty to it all.

But as we have already seen with the fine-tuning argument, a closer inspection reveals a wildly energetic and incredibly destructive scene. Not only this, but when we get down to the quantum realm, all order and symmetry and nice, neat laws completely break down, giving way to mind-boggling paradoxes and stupendous inconsistencies.

Nevertheless, I think we can agree with the believer when they say that the universe (the particles and forces that govern them) is incredibly complex. So, is this complexity and sophistication evidence for a sophisticated Designer?

Normally, this aligns with our intuitions regarding how we think about complexity. William Paley, in 1802, famously asked the question, if you were walking along the beach and saw a pocket watch, opened it and saw all the moving parts that went into it, would you think all of these pieces had spontaneously and randomly come together in such a way to make the watch work or would you automatically think a watchmaker was responsible?

The strength of the watchmaker analogy is that it seems obvious that something complex (a watch) can only have come about from something even more complex (a watchmaker). The weakness, and it is a fatal one, is that a watch is not a natural phenomenon; on the contrary, it is a *man-made* object. This means that Paley’s analogy begs the question (the conclusion is contained in one of the premises). It is like asking, “Would you think a man-made object was made by humans or formed naturally?” The answer is both obvious and unhelpful.

Why would we try to understand the creation of something as natural as the universe through an analogy to an artificial, *man-made* object? If we look at nature we see that complexity never emerges from things of greater complexity; instead the exact opposite turns out to be true. Think about a big oak tree. The roots absorb nutrients from the soil, the leaves convert sunlight into energy and carbon dioxide into oxygen, it produces acorns each of which contain one seed… all in all, a reasonably complex system. Where did it come from? Something *more* complex than the tree? No. It came from something as simple as a seed.

How about the act of conceiving a baby? A comparatively simple egg and spermatozoa get together and 9 months later, an incredibly complex little human emerges. But perhaps the most impressive evidence for complexity arising from simplicity is evolution itself. The fossil record provides undeniable evidence of how the simple naturally and spontaneously can organise itself into life forms of ever-increasing complexity.

So, while complexity never arises from simplicity when it comes to inanimate things like watch components, we see complexity arising from simplicity all the time when we look at nature.

But I don’t even have to prove that complexity can arise from simplicity because the argument from design falls over on its own standards. The argument claims that sophistication of the mechanism is evidence for the sophistication of the creator. So what about God? If God is real, He must easily be the most complex entity in existence. How could such staggering complexity arise without an even more complex Creator behind Him?

Christians invariably defend this by saying that God wasn’t created. First of all, just saying it doesn’t make it so. It isn’t enough just to claim God wasn’t created so that He can slip by the design argument on a technicality, as it were. Second, there is absolutely no evidence for God’s existence, let alone the additional ‘fact’ that He wasn’t created. And third, if an absentee God qualifies as an exception to the stipulation of the design argument (that complexity cannot arise from simplicity) then why not just allow that the universe and all the forces that operate within it weren’t created? After all, if we need something to be uncreated, isn’t it better to stop the chain at something we know exists rather than pushing back into rampant speculation?

The final bastion for the Christian here is to claim that the beginning of the universe is not a ‘natural’ act. This hinges on a natural act referring to something that takes place *within* the universe. It can then cash out by concluding that the beginning of the universe itself must therefore be a *super*natural event. This is another example of a Christian twist on words to try and overcome a genuine objection.

Restricting our definition of *natural* to something that takes place within the universe automatically secures the ultimate goal for the believer, i.e. without any actual positive deductive process we have somehow concluded that beginning of the universe necessarily has a supernatural explanation (which we immediately associate with non-worldly beings; ghosts, UFOs… gods).

This should serve as a red flag. Any conclusion achieved solely through a lexical move warrants a closer look. Isn’t a better definition of *natural*, anything which occurs without intelligent, third-party intervention? What could be more natural than the movement and interaction of particles according to *natural* laws, whether that takes place within our own universe (and therefore trapped within our space-time framework) or predates it (and therefore belongs to an extra-universal (not supernatural) reality)?

Without God There is no Moral Objectivity

For our purposes here, morality can simply be defined as the categorisation of intentions, thoughts, and especially actions, into the *good* and the *bad* or *right* and *wrong*. The age-old challenge in morality is to identify *objective* standards for good and bad that transcend individual concerns. The central thrust has been to establish principles or rules which we can apply to any situation in order to discern the *correct* course of action. Of course, this has proven to be an extremely difficult endeavour and one which has kept philosophy professors employed for centuries. Fortunately, we don’t need to go into specifics here because the religious claim is the more general one that without God there *cannot be* any moral objectivity at all. They aren’t posing the question, what is *good*? Rather, they are claiming that without God there isn’t any such thing as the *good* in the first place.[[8]](#footnote-8) They are saying that without a higher tribunal to refer our inquiries to, it is impossible to establish a universal moral framework that operates beyond mere individual human desires.

First of all, the believer is right. In denying that God exists, the atheist cannot point to any *extra*-human authority to give his morality a higher seal of approval. This means that there can be no *absolute* moral standards, that is, moral standards that exist completely independent of humans mandated by some higher power; moral standards that would exist in the universe even if there were no life forms to wonder about them. But it doesn’t mean that there can’t be *objective* moral standards. *Objective* moral standards are just those that are not *subjective*, i.e. moral standards that are not relative to individual desires. A subjective morality would change depending on who was asking the question. An objective morality does not consider the individual.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| SubjectiveIs it morally permissible *for me* to do X?*I* think it is okay, therefore *I* can do X. | ObjectiveIs it morally permissible to do X?It is not okay, therefore I can’t do X. |

Objective moral standards apply irrespective of the individual’s desires about them. If it is objectively wrong to steal then I shouldn’t steal, even if I really want to. If morality is merely subjective then I can make up my own mind about stealing and my decision will not necessarily apply to other individuals, hence I might decide it is morally permissible *for me* to steal, but not for others to steal from me.

So we do need a Creator God for the existence of *absolute* moral values but we don’t need one for *objective* moral values. The next question is what do we actually want from our morality? Well, of course it might be nice if there were a simple, clearly laid-out standard of the *good* from some higher authority that we could direct our local psychopath to; “Now see here; in section 3, clause 2, our Creator God has specifically mandated that rape and murder are unequivocally wrong. Cut it out!” But this is not an argument that there *is* a higher, absolute standard of the good; it is just an expression of our desires.

If there is no Creator God and therefore no absolute moral standards, what will we do? It’s no good just pleading, “We *need* absolute moral values therefore God *must* exist”. Clearly, this is both a weak argument and a pathetic attitude to have towards life. We didn’t make the universe the way it is but we do have to live within it. Fortunately, Dr. Craig gives us a more realistic argument:

1. Without God there are no objective (absolute)[[9]](#footnote-9) moral values.
2. There are objective (absolute) moral values.
3. Therefore God exists.

Now, again we are presented with a logically valid argument; if the premises are true, then the conclusion *must* logically follow. I have already conceded the first premise, i.e. we need God for absolute moral values, but I think there are very good reasons for doubting the second premise.

Craig claims that there are such things as absolute moral values. This is not as obvious as he would have us believe. What are these absolute values? How does he know they are absolute, i.e. they apply all through the universe and would apply even if there were no humans for them to apply to?

He can’t appeal to God here because that is precisely the conclusion he is trying to reach and would be an example of begging the question by slipping in what is known as a ‘hidden premise’:

1. Without God there are no objective (absolute) moral values.
2. There are objective (absolute) moral values.
3. **[Hidden premise] I know there are objective (absolute) moral values because God told me.**
4. Therefore God exists.

The conclusion loses all force because it was already inferred in one of the premises.

Craig actually claims that we know these objective (absolute) values by personal experience. Of course we do!! As we live, grow older, interact with each other, and realise that the world doesn’t revolve around us, *of course* we learn about morality… but throughout this entire learning curve there is no indication that these moral values are somehow absolute (as in transcending us mere humans) or that they have been objectively laid out by some ‘super-human’ Being.

One option open to Craig is to claim that the conscience is an indication that a higher authority has embedded an absolute morality into the fabric of our universe. After all, we all hear the voice of conscience at times and so even when we do wrong, on one level we know we are doing wrong because our conscience sparks up. We can only proceed with our *bad* act by ignoring the (sometimes unwanted) pokes of that little voice within.

If this was true and our consciences represented an infallible and unerring guide to this ‘absolute’ morality then morality should be easy because we would all have the same moral intuitions. But do we? Sure, everyone knows slavery is wrong... at least we figured it out last century. Before that it was totally fine, even good Biblical Christians owned slaves, and of course those good Christians of the U.S. South were among the last to finally realise this inborn, ‘absolute’ truth. But everyone knows racism is wrong. I mean, racism has been wrong for… oh, at least the last fifty years or so. Before that the ‘absolute’ ruling on it was that it was fine (at least according to the Bible). What about sexism? Have women been treated equally by all throughout history or does Craig really think St. Paul felt and went against some pangs of conscience when he proclaimed that women should keep their heads covered, say nothing in church, and make sure they obey their husbands? These are issues about which our unerring moral compasses (which supposedly point to absolute morality, remember) have been completely changed. How about gay marriage, euthanasia, abortion? We are still bitterly divided on these issues. How can my God-given conscience tell me that it is fine for homosexuals to get married while someone else’s is telling them it is not okay? There is nothing absolute about our consciences.

There is one further point I wish to make here regarding premise 2, the claim that there are absolute moral values. Even if you could point to uniformity of moral intuitions across all people and all times, how can you be sure they are *absolute*? They could just be guidelines that we have figured out work well. They could also be genetic or behavioural tendencies selected for (in an evolutionary sense) because those of our ancestors who cooperated survived and had more offspring than those who were more selfishly inclined. Either of those options are infinitely more likely than postulating some *absolute* moral standard imposed on the universe by an *absolute* Creator God.

So we might *want* there to be absolute moral values given from on high but it looks like there are abundant reasons for thinking that this is not the case. Where do we go from here? If there’s no absolute morality are we destined to forever wallow in moral ambiguity? Of course not. As I’ve already argued we can give ourselves *objective* moral values, i.e. rules/guidelines that apply to all individuals with equal force, without consideration for the individual.

To enact this, all we need is for sensible, thoughtful, sincere human beings to come together, pool their moral intuitions and decide on workable, objective standards that should apply to all of us. And unsurprisingly, that is precisely what we have been doing for centuries! We call them *laws* but they are essentially a codified moral system (and a far superior one to those given us in the Ten Commandments, I might add).

*But we can’t make our own morality! It’s not binding on anyone if it’s just our individual opinion on the subject!*

Of course we can make our own morality. But not only *can* we, we *have* to because no one else is going to do it for us. This is one of the problems with relying on a parental figure for too long; you eventually become unable to make decisions for yourself and when you realise that parental figure is AWOL then you are in trouble.

Will we always all agree on the morality that the majority endorse? Of course not. This is one of the problems with democracy against which Nietzsche vocally railed; the will of the few becomes subject to the will of the masses.[[10]](#footnote-10) Does this ‘absolute-moral vacuum’ create opportunities for the few in power to abuse that power and invent their own ‘morals’ like, if you don’t believe in our God, you will be stripped of all of your possessions and burned at the stake? Or, you must give 10% of your earnings to the church (gross, i.e. before tax) so that our priests don’t have to go out and get real jobs? Will there be arguments over what is *right*? Absolutely. The results of these arguments we call moral progress. This system may not be perfect, but it’s the only one we have.

So we make our own morality, but the Christian still wants to say that if there is no Divine lawgiver beyond us it is not binding. This is rubbish for two reasons. First, if we say it is binding, i.e. everyone has to follow it… then it is! This is what we created police and judges for – to enforce these rules. Second, even if God is real and is gleefully waiting to send miscreants off to hell for an eternity of torture, people can still determine not to follow these rules. The wilful ‘do-wronger’ is punished in both cases. Of course, he may escape punishment in the first case whereas this is presumably impossible in the second but the fact is that neither terrestrial nor afterlife punishments have successfully eliminated immorality (just look at the legions of paedophile Catholic priests or the many ‘neo-Christians’ out there who are ok with homosexuality or pre-marital sex or any one of a number of other acts God supposedly disdains (or used to disdain!)).

It is at this point that Christians often slip from Craig’s logically valid argument (even if it is wrong) to the logically warped, wish-based argument I outlined earlier:

1. We *need* absolute morality
2. Therefore God *must* exist to give it to us

Very clearly this conclusion does not follow from the single premise, a premise which amounts to nothing more than the expression of a desire. Since when did you get the impression that the universe is or should be fair? If there are no absolute morals then there are no absolute morals – bleating about how there should be won’t help or change anything.

The moral rules we make will be binding to all if we collectively decide that they are to be. There is nothing strange about this, in fact, we’ve been doing it for centuries. We have even set up institutions to police and enforce these rules (the police) who we can turn to if someone violates one of these rules. Has a single criminal ever stood up on trial and claimed that this morality is just comprised of some arbitrary rules that aren’t binding on him? Never. *That* would be the strange thing… except, apparently for Christians who seem to think this attitude naturally follows from and is justified by the absence of an absolute moral system bequeathed to us from on high.

Another thing is that even if Christians are right and God has decreed a moral code that we all must adhere to, He is sure pretty lax about enforcing it. Christians may feel happy that they can appeal to an absolute morality in their defence but this isn’t going to be worth a damn unless HUMAN institutions step in and force the criminal to follow that code. God sure as hell isn’t doing anything about making sure His precious commandments are being obeyed. Again, it falls on us to do something about it. And there’s nothing wrong with that.

*Atheists cannot claim that a psychopath does anything* wrong *when he rapes and kills a woman*

It is important to understand what the believer is saying here. She isn’t necessarily saying that an atheist can’t object to the psychopath or try to punish him for his actions. She is saying that the atheist can’t appeal to any moral standard that applies to all humans at all times which absolutely forbids rape and murder. The atheist can’t say anything more compelling than, “I don’t agree with rape and murder”, when what we really want to say is, “Rape and murder are categorically wrong”. Since for atheists there is no God, there are no rules or moral guidelines given ‘from on high’; no universal principles above and beyond mere individual human whims. The atheist says, “Rape is bad” and the psychopath says, “Rape is good”. Without a higher power to refer (and defer) to, there can be so resolution to this standoff.

As I’ve been arguing, this is right. There is nothing *categorically* or *absolutely* wrong about rape and murder. These actions don’t violate some fixed and determined moral code inherent in the universe. We therefore can’t appeal to a higher court than those we have established and claim that the murderer has broken some law that was already in place before we (humans) got here. But the question is, do we need to in order to justifiably claim that murder and rape are wrong?[[11]](#footnote-11)

As I said, if sensible people get together, pool their moral intuitions, and come up with an objective morality (this may take a long time, like, ‘generations’ long and may take even longer to become institutionalised), we can formulate our own moral code about these things against which we can measure someone’s behaviour and determine whether it is good or bad.

Is this somehow ‘less’ than if our morality had been dictated to us by a Dictator-God? In one sense, you might think so. But you would only think this if you had been indoctrinated to believe that humans are weak, petty, dirty, sinning creatures not worth the scraps of DNA their puny lives are encoded upon.

But in another sense, determining our own morality is one of the boldest acts of self-actualisation we can embark on. Which is more noble, the species that collectively, consciously, and autonomously decides how they will face the future or the one that does what they are told? Which is a greater expression of strength and solidarity, the dependent child or the independent adult? That’s what this whole topic comes down to, do we think of ourselves as children or adults?

Is it easy? No. Is it even the best system? Not necessarily. But there is no other option.

“Of course there is. We (Christians) are giving you one. God exists and gave us an absolute moral code.”

But He hasn’t. Just saying it doesn’t make it so. Just hoping and praying for it to be true doesn’t make it so. There is no reason to believe in the existence of any absolute morality and this absence is just another reason to disbelieve in a Creator God.

The central problem here is that the argument presented in this sub-heading is disingenuous. By very definition, the psychopath is not a sensible person. The Christian has smuggled in the criminal and is treating him as if he were a normal, sensible person with a valid moral compass. If someone stands up and says, “Murder is good! Rape is right!” and we can’t appeal to God in our defence, is it true that we therefore have no defence?

Of course not. Any Christian who tries to push this on you is more morally deficient than the murderer himself!

The criminal is not advocating an objective morality. What he is really saying is it is okay for *him* to steal from you and murder you and rape you (hopefully not in that order – sorry; inappropriate levity) but it’s not okay for you to do any of those things to him. That is how we know that he is not a worthy moral agent. That is what makes him unfit to take part in our objective moral-setting process. He’s just as bad as the Christian – all he is telling us is what he *wants* to be true; and there is absolutely no reason we have to listen to either of them.

*Who are you to tell me what is right and wrong?*

I am just another person. I am no better or worse than you. But what’s wrong with that? This is another major problem with religion – it teaches people to look somewhere outside themselves for answers. It teaches them that their own ideas (and those of others like them) are irrelevant or misguided or even flat out wrong. It teaches them that the source of the idea is more important than the idea itself.

The reason you should at least listen to my opinions about morality is because I am a sensible adult capable of abstracting concepts beyond my own limited viewpoint and formulating an objective moral intuition. I have reasons for why I think what I think and can express these to you. It is on the strength of these reasons that you should judge my moral outlook; not on my authority. Don’t accept what I say because I am a certain person; accept what I say because what I say makes sense.

Christians argue that according to the naturalistic viewpoint we are just advanced primates. We don’t have the power to make objective moral standards because there is nothing special about us. This opinion couldn’t be more wrong. We *are* just advanced primates but there are also a couple of special things about us that *do* allow us to make objective moral standards; our reasoning capacity and our ability to think abstractly. This is all that is needed to derive objective moral standards. Christians are setting the bar unrealistically and unnecessarily high in demanding that only some kind of ‘super-Being’ is qualified to set objective moral standards. Morality has never needed Divine sanction to be effective or valid.

*This makes morality arbitrary. The atheist therefore cannot object to the moral code in a society where murder and rape are considered right by the majority.*

There are two responses to be made to this accusation. The first is that of course the atheist can object to this morality. If she perceives something to be unfair, she can voice her objections. She is just as entitled to her opinion as anyone else. If she articulates herself well enough and is determined enough, she can make a big difference in this society. We have seen this happen a number of times in history. Slavery, racism, sexism. All ideals eventually toppled by a determined minority.

But in order to effect this change, she doesn’t need to be somehow ‘higher’ than everyone else. People shouldn’t be swayed by her status (as a God, for instance) but by her reasoning. If we are influenced by the argument from authority (you should do what I say because it is *me* who is telling you to do it), we are vulnerable to being led around by the nose like good little sheep.

Of course, the people don’t have to listen to her because she is not espousing *eternal, absolute* moral truths[[12]](#footnote-12) and she can’t demand that they should because no one has more *rights* than anyone else. This isn’t a dictatorship (i.e. it isn’t a religion). But that doesn’t make morality weak and meaningless. It just makes it human-centred, not God-centred.

The second point is that even if she doesn’t object, this kind of society is likely to be unstable. Imagine a society where murder and rape are considered right. What will life in this society be like? Violent, oppressive, scary. First, the members of the society will be constantly killing each other off making it hard to ensure any kind of group longevity and second, the cohesiveness of the group as a whole will be very low, meaning that they will be unlikely to survive in the long run. Other societies that are more close-knit and that treat their own members well will fare much better and ultimately out-perform our imaginary cut-throat one. Natural selection will weed out such inefficient societies.

There is one more point that needs to be addressed in this objection. The issue of the arbitrariness of morality. In one sense the Christian is right, morality is arbitrary in the sense that we are making it up ourselves and it could change at any moment if we collectively decide that it should (ideally that group of sensible, thoughtful, sincere individuals; which is ideally the whole of a society anyway). This is a consequence of the absence of any absolute moral truths we can turn to.

But it is not arbitrary in the sense that any old morality will do. If we give up on the idea of accessing absolute moral truths laid down by a Creator God then we are not at mercy of random moral forces yanking us in first one direction and then another. ‘Love your neighbour’ does not become morally indiscernible from ‘kill your neighbour’. Only an idiot or a Christian could proclaim this.

We are guided by reason in our moral deliberations and it is this that gives our conclusions their force, not the fact that they supposedly come from some Being in the sky. Ironically enough, it is getting our morals from a big Being in the sky that’s the arbitrary thing here. Why do you act like this? Because God told you to? That’s not a good reason. Blindly following the will of someone else, even someone you happen to trust, but especially someone you’ve never met, seen, or heard is a recipe for disaster.

This opinion that an action is good just because God says it is, is known as the Divine command theory. God created everything right? Nothing is above God. It stands to reason that God created goodness as well. The problem is that having the foundation for our morality rest on a “because X says it is”, even if X = God, makes our morality completely arbitrary. The Christians who spearhead this morality argument (and many atheists who also value ethical correctness and moral integrity) believe that morality is not something arbitrary; that is, there are good *reasons* (there’s that word again) for preferring action A over action B. ‘Because X said so’ will never qualify as a good reason.

Now, the Christian can claim that God declares action A to be right, not for arbitrary reasons but because it is in fact *good*. However, this creates another problem for the believer in that God is no longer the supreme authority. There is something even God is subject to… the good; just like the rest of us. Because Christians hold that their God is unreasonably supreme, they can’t allow that He operate under any limitations but if God favours certain actions because they are good independent of His wishes (not because He just wills that they be good, which we have already discussed is arbitrary) then there are moral rules that even God has to bow to.

The Christian might say that God doesn’t have to “bow to” anything because He is incapable of doing anything but the good. This, of course, doesn’t escape the fact that the good act is good, independent of God. Get rid of God and the good is still the good. Few Christians would accept this notion and this whole section is devoted to precisely the opposite, i.e. without God there cannot be any absolute morality.

In one final last ditch effort the Christian might claim that it doesn’t make sense to even talk about God as separate from the good because God *is* the good. This kind of senseless pseudo-philosophical drivel is often heard from believers who have never stopped to think about what these words even mean. God is love. God is good. What do these statements mean? God is an emotion? God is a concept? God is an emotion *and* a concept? These are empty statements.

*Morality can’t be explained by Darwinism*

Of course it can. The version of Darwinism being presented here is a weak parody of the truth, a *bona fide* Darwinian straw-man. Christians like to paint evolution as a fierce, bitter, selfish struggle where everyone is out for him or herself and the only thing that matters is having as many offspring to get as many of your genes into the next generation as possible. If it doesn’t further the interests of your genes, it can’t happen. Evolution is selfish, morality is other-minded, therefore ne’er the twain shall meet.

Pursuing this theme, Christians tells us that the only reasons evolution can provide for helping anyone else are genetic kinship or reciprocity. We might save someone in trouble if they are related to us (and therefore carry our genes) or if we can expect to get something in return from them. Selfless acts performed for the benefit of people not related to us are inexplicable within a naturalistic framework.

Now, it is true that the mechanism for evolution, natural selection, operates through genes and each individual member of a species is ‘programmed’ to survive and reproduce to ensure the continuation of the species and their particular genes but this does not exclude unselfish behaviour for two reasons.

First, humans have evolved fairly impressive cognitive tools which allow us to think ‘above’ our genes, as it were. All too often when we think of evolution, we (by ‘we’ I primarily mean religious believers) think of animals, which typically don’t display particularly ‘evolved’ behaviour or show much consideration for others. Their world is very much the epitome of savage selfishness often attributed to evolution; eat or be eaten, beat off your challenger or be beaten off yourself and starve, lose a mate, etc.

The much misunderstood catch cry of natural selection, ‘survival of the fittest’, turns us all into selfish enemies. Survival of the fittest doesn’t mean that the strongest, biggest, or fastest individuals can overpower and therefore outcompete their competitors, thereby ‘winning’ the survival game. What it means is that those individuals of a species who carry genes which ensure they are the better adapted to the environment will survive longer, have more offspring, and thereby pass their genes into the next generation. This isn’t necessarily the dog eat dog world that evolution often gets characterised as.

Thinking of evolution as something that happens in nature amongst animals also presents it in its basest form because these animals are largely incapable of higher cognition and are ruled completely by instinct. Evolution then becomes seen as an instinctive, animalistic process when it is nothing more than a natural outcome of the imperfect copying of genetic information during sexual reproduction and varying environmental factors.

Evolution has given us complex brains which we can use in novel ways, e.g. to empathise with other creatures, to conceive of abstract concepts such as fairness or compassion, etc. and then to alter our behaviour in ways that bring us into alignment with the values we have come to see as important. There is nothing contradictory in any of this.

Second, it is entirely possible that altruistic behaviour can serve to further the evolutionary agenda through such things as strength and safety in numbers, closer group bonds, sexual selection (females are more attracted to stable, kind males who are likely to be a reliable and supportive parent), etc. In fact, as humans began to live in larger groups, it is hard to see how acting virtuously could *not* have become important and therefore selected for, both genetically and through education (i.e. nature and nurture).

Those who were genetically predisposed to what we think of as ‘moralistic’ behaviour would automatically fall into groups which would then have an evolutionary advantage over the ‘bad’ selfish individuals (through being able to pool resources, divide tasks, fend off attackers, etc.). And even if you were ‘bad’ by nature, being ‘good’ would become important because if you went around lying, stealing, and killing, you would be cast out and therefore lose the protection of the group. It would have become in each individual’s best interest to learn to be ‘good’.[[13]](#footnote-13)

The two previous points go a long way towards answering the question of why we should “care about the other guy” but we can push a little further in this direction before we finish. So, in the absence of any overarching, absolute morality that compels us to do the right thing, why should we care about the other guy?

Well, in light of what has already been said, I think the more appropriate question would be, why shouldn’t we care about the other guy? We are desperately social animals that have been outfitted with quite sophisticated mental machinery. Although there is obviously a strong individual, ‘what’s in it for me’ drive within each of us, given these facts I would be very surprised if we didn’t develop a sense of compassion for other living beings whose existence we realise is so crucial for our own.

We can abstractly reflect on our lives (what makes us feel good, what makes us feel bad, what we are scared of, what we desire, etc.) and therefore instinctively understand what others desire. This, coupled with our strong need for social bonds almost guarantees that we will develop a fairly powerful sense of concern for ‘the other guy’, whom we recognise (thanks to this mental ‘machinery’) as a being just like us (with the same desires, fears, hopes, etc.) and someone we literally cannot live without.

In addition to this, our mental machinery has come equipped with things called mirror neurons. Mirror neurons are special nerve cells in the brain which automatically fire both when we act *and* when we see this same act performed by another animal. This means that an action performed by another animal affects us in a similar way as if we had performed it ourselves.

Empathy stems from one consequence of having these mirror neurons. Essentially what happens is that seeing someone else smile makes us happy, seeing them grimace makes us feel bad. It is called ‘emotion contagion’ and, in a sense *automatically* predisposes us to wanting to see other people happy.

Another compelling piece of evidence that supports the idea that our morality evolved naturally (as opposed to Divine mandate) is the fact that we see the beginnings of morally inclined behaviour in other animals as well. And the closer to humans one gets, the more startling this behaviour becomes. Bonobos (a type of primate as closely related to us as chimpanzees) in particular, have demonstrated quite astonishing acts of kindness towards others in their group, that seem to be totally motivated by a sense of empathy (as opposed to the selfish interpretation of ‘survival of the fittest’). Did God give morals to bonobos as well as humans?

The obvious objection to this is that bonobos don’t perform their moral acts with the same conscious awareness that we do. They don’t reason out what would be the ‘right’ thing to do and then consciously act accordingly. Rather, they merely act instinctively, without any deliberate moral reasoning, i.e. their actions are devoid of moral content.

Now, the first point to make is that we can’t be sure of this. Bonobos certainly don’t reason their actions out anywhere near the way a human does, but we can’t be certain they don’t perform at least some kind of rudimentary cognitive analysis of their actions.

The second and more important point is that if Bonobo’s actions are merely instinctive, this fact serves to strengthen the claim that evolution can lead to morality. Without any interference from a Divine Creator God, Bonobos have demonstrated the beginnings of moral inclinations which arose in the form of instincts from purely natural forces. It is eminently plausible that this is the first step to a fully-fledged sense of morality which would only be completed when / if Bonobos develop the cognitive faculties to think abstractly and engage in higher reasoning. When / if this happens, those early (pre-conscious) instincts might be transformed into what we call a ‘conscience’ and this is probably the best explanation for our conscious *instincts* that I have heard.

*Without God as the measure of good how do you measure evil?*

God *isn’t* the measure of good. We know what is good for ourselves and we therefore know what is good for other people as well (because we are capable of abstract reasoning). But this leads nicely into our next challenge…

*So what is morality?*

I have already defined morality as the categorisation of intentions, thoughts, and especially actions, into the *good* and the *bad* or *right* and *wrong*. But I purposefully steered clear of what *good* actually means. We will unpack this term a little bit here.

As we have seen, Christians tend to see the good as some absolute and lofty standard mandated by a Creator God. I have tried to argue that this is false but I haven’t really substituted it with anything until now.

Let me start out by clarifying my position. **There is no Divine standard of the *good* that stands alone in the universe as a perspective-less construct.** What I mean by this is that all *good* is ‘good for’ someone or something. If there are no conscious creatures in the universe then there is no good or bad because there is no one for any act to be good or bad for. Imagine that there is no life on Earth. A huge asteroid smashes into the Pacific Ocean sending massive tsunamis sweeping into North and South America and the east coast of China destroying Japan and Korea in the process. Is this good or bad? It’s neither, because no *one* was affected. It’s just something that happened.

So morality is about conscious creatures and specifically it would seem to be about their well-being and flourishing. You consider a certain act good if it is one that makes you happy or that you desired. This is where believers typically throw up the ‘psychopath objection’ from earlier. But if the psychopath *likes* murder then murder is ‘good for’ him; therefore moral.

But that isn’t the end of the matter. We also said that morality should be *objective*; that is to say, not merely concerned with individual, subjective desires. There is therefore absolutely nothing preventing us from, or contradictory about, saying that in determining whether an action is ‘good’ we must concern ourselves with more than just one party. We can use our reason to abstract the problem from the personal, selfish interests of the individual and consider the ‘goodness’ of an act based on what we know we ourselves would like to experience or what would be beneficial for society as a whole.

Now, in doing this we obviously can’t appeal to any *absolute* morality or to a Creator God for our ethical foundation but do we need to? We have already seen that morality is concerned with the well-being of conscious creatures – no conscious creatures, no morality. There is absolutely nothing in anything I have said to indicate that the conscious creature must be a Divine one for morality to be meaningful.

Moreover, since morality is about the conscious creature itself, there is absolutely nothing preventing the creature from determining what is conducive to its well-being on its own. Maybe God says the same thing, maybe not. It doesn’t matter. The conscious creature can easily figure this out for herself because she knows what is conducive to her own well-being and she has a brain she can use to understand what is conducive to the well-being of others. Obviously these functions are impaired in the psychopath and that is why we do not consider psychopaths to be capable of forming correct moral intuitions (although the Christians who take part in these debates seem to think they are excellent candidates for this role). Incidentally, this is also the same reason we don’t ask children to help us make moral decisions.

So is there something unintuitive or contradictory about saying, it is wrong to torture because someone is being harmed against their will? Of course not. We collectively agree that it is wrong to harm another person (the only people who can’t seem to make their way to this secular truth are psychopaths and Christians, which doesn’t say much for the latter) and so we collectively mandate that this moral truth be encoded in our societal laws.

*Christians do good because they believe God mandated it*

I have two comments to make in response to this statement. First, if this is true then any good deed performed by a Christian has no moral worth at all. A moral deed, if it is to truly be moral, should be performed out of genuine compassion for the other person. Helping a friend because someone told you to (even if that someone is God) doesn’t make you a good person, it makes you a loyal servant.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Not only did God order you to be nice, but He set up a reward / punishment system to ensure His will be done. If you are a ‘good Christian’ you go to heaven but if you are ‘bad’ you will be sent to hell. How can any action performed under these conditions ever be even remotely considered moral?

But more importantly, how much *more* moral worth does the same act performed by an atheist have? The atheist doesn’t believe in any Divine reward/punishment system and yet he still does the right thing. Why? Christians must be baffled by this. In one debate William Lane Craig exhorts, “But you have no *reason* to do good”. He just can’t imagine doing good for the sake of someone else unless God is watching over him with His carrot and stick. Is this what passes for morality at church? This is a twisted perversion of morality.

Around this time, Dinesh D’Souza often brings up a story about Mother Theresa that he doesn’t seem to realise hammers another nail in the coffin of the shrivelled up corpse that used to be religious morality. Mother Theresa saw a leper on the side of the road and she went over to him and hugged him. A man riding by looked down and said, “I wouldn’t do that for all the money in the world.” Mother Theresa looks up and replies, “Neither would I, I do it for Jesus.” As soon as Mother Theresa says this, her good deed becomes a sham. If I was the leper I would feel cheated. I thought this woman was being nice to me because perhaps she saw I had had a hard life and needed a little affection, but it turns out she was just following orders. Where is the love in that? Where is the humanity?

Speaking of this, the very fact that there are nice, honest, moral atheists (and also some pretty dastardly Christians) out there is all we need to see that we don’t need a Creator God watching over us in order to do the right thing. While Christians are revelling in their argument that without a God there’s no reason to be moral, atheists are out there providing evidence to the contrary by helping sick people, being good neighbours, and helping grannies cross the street.

My second and final point is that, at least most of the time, I am virtually certain that Christians actually *don’t* do good because God mandates it. The reason for this is astonishingly simple. Imagine that while reading this essay, you hear a news report which says that incontrovertible evidence has surfaced which proves beyond a shadow of a doubt that God does not exist… and you believe it. If you were a believer and (after your shock wears off) your first instinct is not to immediately start lying, cheating, stealing, and having extra-marital relations, then you have proven my point and determined that you are a normal, rational, sensible, human being. Congratulations!

If the above should happen, almost every single believer on the planet would find that they can see their own way to making clear, rational, moral decisions based on other people’s feelings down here on Earth instead of lofty, absolute principles set by a Being in a different realm. They would find that even though there is no heaven waiting for them after they die, they would still feel good helping other people. They would be shocked to learn that even without the otherworldly threat of hell, they would feel bad if they lied to and deceived other people just like them.

They would discover that when they really look at another human being, they realise that person, carrying around the same hopes and fears as them, is just trying to make their way in a sometimes unfair world they don’t really understand. In short, they would discover that they are human and that is more than enough reason to smile and extend a hand when one is needed.

The Ontological Argument

An ontological argument for the existence of God is any argument which appeals to ontology (being) for its force. There have been a number of different ontological approaches over the years which have attempted to prove God’s existence. The only variation I will be concerning myself with here is the one favoured by William Lane Craig. It is modelled on a version of the ontological argument based on modal logic devised by the analytic philosopher, Alvin Plantinga and looks like this:

1. It’s possible that a maximally great being exists
2. If it’s possible that a maximally great being exists, then a maximally great being exists in some possible world
3. If a maximally great being exists in some possible world then it exists in every possible world
4. If a maximally great being exists in every possible world then it exists in the actual world
5. Therefore a maximally great being exists in the actual world
6. Therefore a maximally great being exits
7. Therefore God exists

A cursory glance at this argument reveals that all of the action happens in the second and third steps and the wool which slips over your eyes comes out in the form of all the “possibles” which abound. I will run through the argument step by step to attempt to uncover the sophistry that lies at the base of this futile exercise in wordplay.

First, let’s get rid of all this “maximally great being” nonsense which only serves to deflect us from the fact that we’re talking about religion and is designed to make the argument sound more legitimate than it really is. I will use ‘God’ instead; that is what we’re talking about after all. Now, the first step is uncontroversial – it’s possible that God exists (unlikely, but possible). Now step two:

*If it’s possible that God exists, then He exists in some possible world*.

Now, let’s unpack the term “possible world”. What is a “possible world”? Well, “world” seems to be referring to the universe so a “possible world” is simply ‘a way the universe could be’. This could refer to either (1) an *actual* universe (since if it is actual then it must be possible); of which we only know one – ours; or (2) a universe that isn’t actual (i.e. doesn’t exist) but *could* possibly exist (there are presumably a great, perhaps infinite, number of these).

The problem in this step is that saying “it’s possible that God exists” is **not** the same as saying that “God exists in some possible world”. That latter clause is in fact nonsensical. It is saying that ‘God exists in a world that could be’. God **exists** in a world that **could** be? What does that mean? Remember that there are two ways to think about a world that could be; as an actual world or a world that is only possible.

In the first case, we have, ‘God exists in an actual universe’ but this can’t be right because we *don’t* know that God exists in an actual universe. That is exactly what this argument is trying to conclude. As such, it can’t include this statement in its premises or it becomes what is known as ‘begging the question’; something we have encountered more than once in Christian arguments in this essay.

In the second case we have, ‘God exists in a universe that doesn’t exist, but is possible’. You read that right; ‘God **exists** in a universe that **doesn’t exist**’! And, ladies and gentlemen, we have now reached the heights of madness. This is clearly nonsense.

But Craig hasn’t finished. Let’s assume for a minute that step 2 is not meaningless garbage. Step 3 suggests that “if God exists in some possible world then He exists in every possible world”. I am extremely unconvinced by this leap. ‘If flying pigs exist in some possible world then they exist in every possible world’… but we know this is false because one possible world is our actual universe and there are no flying pigs here.

The only possible recourse open to Craig to refute this is to claim that God (as a “maximally great being”) is somehow ontologically different from a flying pig. So, what is there about a “maximally great being” that distinguishes it from a flying pig? Well, the only thing I can think of is that a “maximally great being” is “maximally great”, which perhaps means that it is perfect and it *necessarily exists*.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Briefly, in theology there are two ‘kinds’ of beings; those that are *contingent* (things that exist but didn’t have to, or in Craig’s parlance, things that exist in some possible worlds but not in others) and those that are *necessary* (things that *must* exist, or things that exist in all possible worlds). Theologians typically believe that God is a necessary being.

Now there are two possible routes to get to the conclusion in step 3; via *necessary* existence and via perfection. If a “maximally great being” (which means one that is *necessary* and perfect) exists in some possible world, then according to the definition of a “maximally great being” (i.e. it is *necessary* and perfect), it must also exist in every other possible world because (1) if a *necessary* being does exist in at least one world (which Craig believes he secured in step 2) then it must exist in all worlds and (2) it is more perfect to exist in all worlds than only in some.

There is of course, one glaring problem with all of this sophistry. Pre-defining God as a being which n*ecessarily* exists and is perfect (which also supposedly implies existence) defeats the whole purpose of the argument, which is to prove that God exists. Without already having a God that *necessarily* exists, step 3 falls apart. This is called ‘begging the question’ because the conclusion (God exists) has already been smuggled into the argument at the beginning; in which case the argument becomes nothing more than a smokescreen to conceal this logical sleight of hand.

The historical fact of Jesus’ resurrection

If you’re anything like me you did a double take when you came across the sub-heading of this section. As one mainstay argument in his debates, Craig amazingly asserts that Jesus’ resurrection was a historical fact. All through this part of Craig’s speech (as in much of everything else he says), he appeals to anonymous experts and makes wild, rampant generalisations about “scholars” when he claims that the “majority of historians” accept Jesus’ resurrection as a fact. Clearly, this is rubbish. **No** historians in actual history departments accept Jesus’ resurrection as a scientific fact based on evidence – some of them might believe it when they go to church on Sunday mornings from a position of faith as Christians, but none of them hold it to be true as historians. So, how on earth can Craig make such a bold claim? What are his reasons?

1. Jesus’ tomb was found empty
2. A number of different people saw Jesus after his death, including believers, sceptics, and unbelievers
3. Believers came to believe in Jesus’ resurrection without any precedents, i.e. the whole notion of a resurrection was unheard of before Jesus. The only thing which could explain such a radically new idea is that it is true.

Honestly, this is almost laughable and it is a travesty that Craig includes this in a debate that ostensibly is supposed to be logical/scientific. There is absolutely no evidence outside the Gospels for either 1 or 2. The central problem with this is that the Gospels, like the Bible, are completely unreliable. They mention Jesus’ resurrection but this is not the only outlandish claim in them; they also claim that Jesus healed the sick, raised the dead, and talked to the devil. Oh, Jesus was also born to a woman who was impregnated by God without having sex. Any one of these claims would be enough to render anything else as complete rubbish… but stick them all together and Christians claim they must be true. This is the height of backwards and fallacious reasoning. One unlikely event is impossible but as more unlikely events are compiled together they somehow become increasingly plausible.

So, what about the authors themselves? Perhaps they are astonishingly credible sources. Alas, we aren’t even sure who the authors were although many scholars are united in doubting that they were actually written by the people whose names they carry (i.e. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John). Even worse, few scholars believe the earliest of them was written earlier than 70A.D. and perhaps as late as 100A.D., that is forty to seventy years *after* Jesus died! This means that it is extremely doubtful that any of the authors were eyewitnesses to anything they wrote about, which in turn means that they were relying on hearsay and rumour for their accounts. These are very poor sources for any ‘factual’ account written today let alone 2,000 years ago.

*But the Gospels all support each other. We don’t just have one account of Jesus’ life, we have four! That must count for something.*

Yes, there are four accounts, but are they independent? They were all written by people (presumably) living in the same area, within forty years of each other, who all subscribed to the same faith and were therefore exposed and subject to the same contemporary myths contrived by a group who had traumatically just seen their God executed.

In addition, each of the four Gospels tells a slightly different resurrection story. They differ in small but interesting ways, from who actually first went to Jesus’ tomb, to the condition of the tomb when they got there, to what Jesus did after being resurrected. All of these little inconsistencies serve to illustrate exactly what the Gospels were; summaries of popular rumour.

*But although they differ in small, unimportant ways, they agree on the central, big theme suggesting that this kernel at the heart is true.*

This is ridiculous. Of course they all agree on the central kernel (that Jesus was resurrected), that was the whole point of their ‘message’. They wrote about what they believed happened based on the belief system of other people in their religion. The myth that Jesus had been resurrected offered a salve to a group of people who had suffered a terrible shock to their faith and probably spread among the willing believers (who I imagine were all too eager to lap it up) like wildfire. The significance of the differing details reminds us that each of these authors was writing based on hearsay and rumour, not fact.

Translate this situation into the modern age and see if it still stands up. Imagine there is a report of a UFO sighting witnessed by many people. Four intrepid reporters, working for four different magazines, head out to write the story up. They all interview the witnesses and compile the individual accounts into their independent stories.

How convinced would you be if, in reading the stories you noticed that, each of the reporter’s accounts differed in small ways. Perhaps one said the UFO hovered over a group of trees for a minute while others didn’t mention this at all, or some claimed the UFO had red flashing lights while someone else said they were blue and didn’t flash at all. Whatever the inconsistencies are, the more of them that appear, the less reliable the whole story becomes. Or, as Christians seem to interpret the Bible, do these inconsistencies become irrelevant because since all the reports agree on the crucial point at the heart of the story, i.e. the UFO, it must have been real?

I love Craig’s second point; even sceptics and unbelievers saw Jesus after his death therefore it must be true! Quick question, how do you know unbelievers saw the resurrected Jesus? Quick answer, believers told you. Craig is attempting to create the impression that even unbelievers offered their testimony of Jesus’ resurrection but we are only told unbelievers and sceptics saw Jesus and were amazed, second hand, by… you guessed it, believers. And where does this ‘historical evidence’ come from… the Bible no less, the pre-eminent Christian text. What this boils down to is that Christians are telling us Christianity is true. No surprises there and no evidence either.

After all, doesn’t Craig know that thousands of unbelievers have also seen UFOs, ghosts, and the Loch Ness Monster? Craig must believe all of these as well since they easily pass his ridiculously low standard for ‘historical fact’.

Now, Craig’s third point is a double header. He makes one blatantly false claim and leaps to one wildly unjustified (and quite bizarre) conclusion.

His false claim is that the resurrection has no precedent. There are so many gods that have been resurrected in religious history in all cultures that not only do we have ample precedents, but we also have some strong indications that many other aspects of the Jesus myth were directly copied. Here are three prominent pre-Christian gods who were resurrected (along with some other suspiciously familiar traits):

* Dionysius (rose from the dead on March 25)
	+ Born on Dec 25 and placed in a manger as a Holy Child
	+ Was a travelling teacher who performed miracles
	+ Was identified with the Lamb or Ram
	+ Was also called the “Only Begotten Son”, “Saviour”, and the “Alpha and Omega”
* Attis of Phrygia (resurrected after three days)
	+ Born on Dec 25 to a virgin
	+ Was considered a saviour who was slain for the salvation of mankind
	+ His body was eaten as bread by his worshippers
* Horus (resurrected after three days)
	+ Born of a virgin, the only begotten son of the god Osiris
	+ Birth was heralded by the star Sirius
	+ Death threat during infancy from Herut
	+ No data between the ages of 12 and 30
	+ Baptised at 30
	+ Walked on water, cast out demons, healed the sick, and restored sight to the blind
	+ Was crucified

Now to Craig’s surprising conclusion from his (erroneous) premise. Since the resurrection story had no precedents the *only* thing that explains its acceptance by the Christians is that it must be true. Well, if you’re convinced by that, I have some magic beans I would like to sell to you.

First of all, the people of the time were hardly the discerning, sceptical people that many of us are today (even Christians who are remarkably sceptical of every religion except one). Everyone believed in any number of impossible miracles, gods, goddesses, and a score of other religious mumbo-jumbo. Plus, we have seen that resurrection was hardly a new theme in pagan and pre-Christian mythology.

Second, is this really the *only* or even the *best* explanation for the Christians’ acceptance of this fantasy? How about the fact that Jesus’ followers just saw their leader and Messiah executed? Following this trauma, everything they believed in must have come into question (how can our God be killed by a human?) and they must have felt rudderless. Imagine then that someone tells them that Jesus didn’t actually die, just last week he was seen by not just his disciples but by a whole host of other people including “sceptics and unbelievers”. How hard do you think they would they have resisted this tempting delusion?

Third, if Craig’s reasoning holds true then the *best* explanation for the first alien abductions must also be that they were true. After all, there was absolutely no precedent for this bizarre phenomenon and yet it almost instantly spawned whole rafts of believers who genuinely believe half of the aliens are running around abducting the most unimportant people they can find (in a political sense, that is, i.e. people with absolutely no power to actually effect change) to deliver their messages of global peace to, and the other half are sticking probes into orifices of yet more anonymous people.

The resurrection of Jesus is anything but “historical fact”. To throw around a heavily used quote in this context, extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence. Why is it then that extraordinary claims are more often than not those supported by nothing more than hearsay, rumour, and wishful thinking?

Presupposing God explains so much

This is a common misunderstanding among Christians who have never bothered to think about the religion they base their lives around. Scientists and philosophers are struggling to understand problems but they have only permitted themselves access to half of the data. Pre-emptively excluding any spiritual explanations, they have prevented themselves from ever comprehending the universe’s mysteries in all their splendour.

This could not be more false. The God hypothesis not only explains nothing but it leaves us with more unanswered questions than we started with. Let’s take an example, how did the universe come into existence? Science has no confident answer for this at the moment – there are some theories but not much certainty. On the other hand, Christians know how it happened – God did it. Unfortunately, if you think about it for just a second more, you will realise that just saying, “God did it” doesn’t actually explain anything. We still don’t know anything more about how the universe was created than we did before our Christian friend enlightened us. But that’s not all. Now, in addition to still knowing nothing about the Big Bang, we also have to grapple with a Being outside of space and time, uncaused, and eternal.

How about our moral values? I have defended an evolutionary model whereby our morality evolved over time. Some Christians say we got them ready-made from God and that we are impelled towards them by our conscience. But what does that mean? God gave us moral values? What, did he manipulate our DNA so that we would know them? How did he give us all consciences? What is a conscience (don’t say a little voice – that explains nothing either)? Now, not only do we not know anything about the origin of our moral values (except God did it), we also have a far more mysterious universe to explain than we did before; one that includes things called consciences as well as moral values.

In actual fact, the God hypothesis is a black box of an explanation. It doesn’t tell us anything… except that God did it. This reveals all of these arguments (once more) for what they really are, God of the gaps explanations (we don’t know (yet) therefore it must have been God) and simple mystery-mongering as a way of defending the faith.

Reason/Science vs. Faith

The tension between reason and faith is still palpable although some ‘neo-believers’ attempt to defuse this by claiming the two are not in fact incompatible. This is the foundation on which most of the debates I am discussing here are based. In general, the side of faith tries to argue for the truth of its claim appealing to reason and science. However, in making my counter-arguments I have attempted to show that regarding religious reasoning and the theological use of science, the former is significantly less than reasonable and the latter nothing more than ‘psuedo-science’.

*Science sets the parameters within which it will accept ‘valid’ knowledge and these parameters rule out anything non-material. This means science is ‘begging the question’.*

OK. This argument is essentially suggesting that science has ‘stacked the deck’ so that everything which we call knowledge conforms to materialism. “Look,” scientists say, “All the knowledge we have is physical – we have no knowledge of any ‘non-material’ things, therefore there are none”. The believer is saying that it is no surprise all the knowledge we have is physical, because that’s the only kind of knowledge science accepts.

Well, this is partly true. It is true that science only deals with the physical but this is anything but the result of ‘stacking the deck’. Scientists didn’t get together at the beginning of the scientific revolution and decide that they were only going to include materialistic causes in their work or discriminate against non-materialistic elements. What happened is that there has never been convincing evidence that non-materialistic things (prayer, ghosts, an afterlife, *God*, etc.) influence anything in any way or even that they exist in the first place. Despite the fervent prayers of good Christians, tragedies still (regularly) happen… to those same Christians no less! How can we include heaven in a rational account of the universe when no one can know it exists without first dying? It is not that science pre-emptively defines knowledge in materialist terms, rather materialist causes are the only ones that there is any evidence for or that produce any effects.

What scientists *did* decide at the outset was that for anything to be counted as knowledge it first had to conform to the scientific method, which isn’t an exclusive principle holding that knowledge can’t be non-physical or spiritual or anything else, it only means that to be considered eligible for contributing to our knowledgebase a hypothesis must be testable, reproducible, its effects measurable, and it must enable predictions to be made.

An eager anti-science campaigner might object here that this is basically the same thing as saying new knowledge must be physical, but this is not true. For example, prayer easily meets these four requirements; it is testable (we can easily devise a test scenario including a control group), reproducible (no problems getting good Christians to pray again), its effects are measurable (does a sick person prayed for get better than a sick person not prayed for?), and it would enable predictions to me made (the prayed-for patient should improve faster). The only problem is it has continually failed to deliver any results over and above what could be expected if chance was the only factor at play.

So, why is the scientific method the golden standard for knowledge? Why not some religious/spiritual standard instead, i.e. the theory accords with our intuition? Because without rigorous, objective standards in place, any old fantastical and implausible explanation is just as good as a sensible one, but clearly only the former leads to advances in knowledge. The latter only leads to intellectual stagnation, as we saw in the Middle Ages when all intellectual thought (medicine, astronomy, philosophy, etc.) failed to progress from what the Greeks and Romans had achieved.

The scientific method demands that a hypothesis *actually* explain the phenomenon in question, not merely replace it with a ‘black box’ God we (conveniently) can’t see or hear. It doesn’t demand a physical explanation necessarily but the explanation must be subject to scrutiny; it must be *falsifiable*. This is another important word in knowledge accumulation. It means that a theory can be proven to be false. If your theory can’t be proven to be false then, while it might be true, we have no way of ever knowing if it actually is or not. Take the ‘hypothesis’ that God created everything. First of all, note how it doesn’t actually explain anything. The ‘explanation’ is a mysterious Entity *less* explicable than the first problem was. But what’s of interest to us here is that there is no way to prove this hypothesis false. If there’s a problem (say, the poor physical adaptations we observe which seem like strange occurrences if they were actually created by even a semi-capable Creator, e.g. the human appendix) then the proponent can just say, “That’s the way God wanted it; it reminds us of our mortality while on Earth”. No matter what test we devise or evidence we uncover, the believer can always explain it away with the ‘God hypothesis’ but these ‘iterative’ explanations[[16]](#footnote-16) explain even less than the initial one did. “That’s the way God wanted it” doesn’t give us a reason, and “it reminds us of our mortality” is contrived and just someone’s opinion, i.e. it’s not backed by any evidence. It could be true, but it could also be complete drivel dreamed up by some lunatic.

There’s one more point to be made here. I have said that science doesn’t discriminate between the physical and the non-physical; it only discriminates between what *actually works* and what doesn’t, a perfect example of this is the discovery of magnetic fields. No one knew what these were when they were first observed. All we knew was that metallic objects could be affected at a distance by certain other objects.

This is about as good a non-physical effect as you could ask for. One object affects other objects without touching them. And yet no scientist leapt up and refused to acknowledge this phenomenon, even though no one had a theory to explain it at that time. Why? Because the ‘magnet’ worked, and it worked every time. So what happened? Magnetic fields *became* a part of physical scientific theory.

This is a point that Michael Shermer (an atheist debater) makes; it is almost a misnomer to call something ‘non-physical’ because even though it starts out that way (mysterious, unknown, affecting things without touching them, not using any material we are familiar with, etc.), if it is a genuine phenomenon, once scientists get a hold of it and understand it, it will just be added to physical theories we have about the world.

What this means for us is that scientists don’t really care about the physical/non-physical debate. They only care whether the phenomenon is real or not. If it is, they are all over it; if it isn’t… well, that’s just too bad for the believer advocating it.

*There’s a ‘God-shaped’ hole in every human spirit.*

This claim rests on the fact that people have some kind of ‘natural’ longing or yearning to know God which therefore somehow proves, or at least indicates, that God must be true.

This is backwards thinking at its finest and is actually another subtle form of begging the question. We can see this best if I set the argument out properly:

1. Many humans naturally feel a ‘yearning’ to find/know God
2. Therefore God exists

Now, I hope you can see that as this argument stands it’s no good. The conclusion just doesn’t follow from the single premise. In order for this argument to be logically valid, we need another premise:

1. Many humans naturally feel a ‘yearning’ to find/know God
2. People never feel yearnings for things that do not exist
3. Therefore God exists

Now this argument is logical (the conclusion follows from the premises), unfortunately it is also begging the question. How? The second premise (in step 2) which says that people’s yearnings are always capable of being fulfilled (although it’s certainly not the case that all yearnings *will* be fulfilled) implies that there is some order to, or plan behind, the universe; as in the kind of plan a Creator God would provide. In this way, the conclusion (the existence of God) is implied in the premises which make it circular (begging the question).

Another point which can be made against this argument is that this ‘yearning’ experienced by many people could be at least as well explained by a couple of other reasons. Off the top of my head, one is that humans are naturally pattern-seeking animals who are to some extent designed by evolution to infer agency, even where there is none. The explanation for this typically goes something along the lines that our ancestors who were overly anxious and so jumped to the conclusion that that rustling in the bushes was a predator, were more likely to survive than those of our ancestors who continued to relax around the campfire thinking it was just the wind.

As an extension of this, we look for causes for everything and when one is lacking (as in at the fringes of our understanding) it doesn’t take long for us to hypothesise an agent behind it. Hence, we believe in ghosts, spirits, UFOs, and all manner of weird and wonderful things to explain that sound (“didn’t it sound like a voice?”) or that shape we think we saw out of the corner of our eye.

A second possible explanation for this yearning could come from *existential* sources. Who hasn’t thought about their life and wondered why they are here or where they come from or what it all means. The same brain which allows us to formulate objective morals (arguably a good thing) also creates this existential anxiety which gnaws at our (excuse me for using the word) souls (arguably a bad thing).

Couple this with the fact that we are completely dependent on our parents for well over a decade (an astonishingly long time in the animal kingdom) and you have a recipe for dependency which often carries over into adulthood. (Is it a coincidence we call God, our Father?).

And we’re still not finished. Add to this the fact that during these years of complete dependency most of us are indoctrinated into one particular religion (usually the religion of our parents) and you’re almost guaranteed to get an adult who at least believes in something, even if he or she can’t define exactly what it is, “I just feel something is missing…”.

*Almost every person in history has believed in God – therefore the atheist is claiming that every single person in history was wrong.*

Almost every person in history has believed in God. So what? They also believed that the Earth was the centre of (not the solar system but) the universe. Was every single person in history wrong about that? Absolutely! Just because many people believe something is absolutely no comment on its truth or falsity.

Far more people in history believed that spirits animated every living thing than ever believed in a monotheistic Deity; is that any kind of argument for animism? Is the Christian claiming that every single person who believed in some kind of polytheism, thousands of years before monotheism arrived on the scene, was wrong? Of course they are, but they don’t care. And neither should they. The only people who think a set of beliefs or opinions are right just because people have held them for a long time are Christians. It’s known as the argument from authority and if we all subscribed to it, we would still be using candles to read (handwritten books) once the sun goes down each evening because no one would challenge the opinions and beliefs of their ‘elders’.

This is an extremely positive thing about the Enlightenment – we can challenge the ideas of those who came before us. Most of us probably take this liberty for granted, but this is a relatively recent freedom. Imagine living under the totalitarian Christian regime of the Middle Ages and trying to think something (that’s right, *think*, not even write or teach) that contradicted church doctrine. At various times in the church’s chequered past, you could be fined, stripped of your possessions, forced into some ‘penance’ that saw you unable to work for your family for months at a time, or even killed. This is one reason why the Christian faith has such high numbers – for much of Western history, it was *illegal* not to follow the faith!

So, pretty much every culture we know of from history has believed in (at least some form of) a Deity, but investigating this very fact just a little more reveals that it is actually more of a problem for the believer in any one particular religion than for the atheist. Why? Because the sheer number of different faiths that have abounded throughout history testify to humanity’s collective confusion about the subject.

Not only have we been unable to come to even the semblance of an agreement regarding this, but we have attacked each other when our respective faiths have disagreed. Most people throughout history have believed in God but they haven’t believed in the same one. Which means, as I noted briefly in passing above, that every believer in one particular religion automatically rejects the faith of every other believer in every other religion.

To argue that the atheist is doing something wrong in claiming that every religious believer is incorrect is blatantly hypocritical. The Christian holds this exact same attitude towards every other religion that exists or has ever existed on the planet. In the words of John Shook, Christians are just atheistic towards one less religion than atheists.

*It takes much more faith to* not *believe in God than to believe*

This has become a popular refrain amongst neo-Christians who try to turn the tables on atheists and throw the faith card in their face. “You believe that all of this,” they exclaim with their hands spread open, “came about by chance? I just don’t have the faith to believe that.”

This is a cunning ploy for sure but it is nothing more than that. First, it rests on a misunderstanding of the term ‘faith’. ‘Faith’, as it applies to religion, means believing in something *even though there is no proof*. This makes sense because if you have proof that something is true, you don’t need faith; if the conclusion follows logically from the evidence, you believe it based on reason, not faith.

Christians, in particular, make a great deal out of faith. It is one of their seven virtues. Having faith that God will look after you, faith that all things happen according to God’s Divine purpose, and of course, faith that God exists and loves you; these are all important to Christians but if faith is nothing more than believing in a conclusion which follows logically from a set of premises, the concept loses all meaning and it is somewhat of a puzzle why Christians prize it so much. It is precisely because there is no evidence that God exists, that we need faith.

This is exactly why Christians gather and sing, “I believe in God, I have faith in God”, because it goes against everything that we see and know, i.e. the physical. And it is also exactly why scientists don’t gather and sing, “I believe in gravity, I have faith in gravity”, because if they are unsure they need only drop an apple and see if it falls to the ground, i.e. perform an experiment.[[17]](#footnote-17)

We have so much evidence around us that the physical world is real that this belief isn’t even seriously up for discussion (except in certain philosophical contexts). We don’t need faith that this world is physical because we have so much evidence in favour of this hypothesis. To make the leap from here to the existence of some ‘non-physical’ realm, however, *does* require faith, because there is just no evidence that any such realm exists.

Second, the Christian belief in God only pushes the explanation for our universe back one step (and it’s a doozy at that) to a mysterious and necessarily complex Being that is much, much harder to account for than the rule-governed universe we see around us. Even allowing that it is right to call the scientist’s belief that the universe and everything in it can be explained by materialistic forces, is ‘faith’, (which I have argued in the first point above is incorrect) the ‘faith’ will always pale in comparison to the faith shown by the Christian whose belief includes a Being much more complex (and much less apparent) than the universe.

*Examples of principles that must be taken on faith according to the scientific/materialist worldview*

1. *We live in a rational universe*

This is another example of a basic misunderstanding and misuse of terminology. ‘Rational’ means acting and making decisions according to reason and not ‘irrational’ impulses such as emotion. Clarifying this, it becomes apparent that the universe can’t be ‘rational’. This is an adjective that can only be applied to human beings.

1. *The universe is presumed to be lawful (and describable by mathematics)*

Now, this is a more interesting argument. Straight off the bat we can see that it is not a faith-based principle though because it is derived from the fact that all of the observations we have made conform to laws which can be described mathematically, i.e. there is ample evidence that it is true. Another way to verify this is to ask why we presume the universe is lawful? Did scientists get together and decide that they should assume this to be true before they started making discoveries? Of course not. That’s ludicrous. Instead, the opposite happened, in the course of making discoveries we realised that certain principles operate infallibly in the universe and these principles are describable by mathematics. No need for faith here.

Secondly, why wouldn’t we expect the universe to be lawful and consistent? If the universe was a purely natural phenomenon this is exactly what we would expect. Is it faith to assume that the laws of physics are the same in the far reaches of the universe as they are here on Earth? We have discovered certain laws that apply at this time and place; it is not a wild leap of faith to suppose that they also apply at other places and other times. This is an inference made based on objective scientific discoveries.

The knowledge which comes from this kind of reasoning is known as *inductive knowledge* and it will be worth our while to anticipate another possible objection and briefly discuss this here.

*Inductive reasoning can never be proven*

This is true. Inductive knowledge is contrasted with deductive knowledge, which comes in the form of formal arguments built up from premises resulting in a conclusion. This is the most certain kind of knowledge. Inductive knowledge on the other hand, basically uses current knowledge to infer something about some as yet unknown thing. A classic example of inductive reasoning says that all swans that have been observed are white therefore there are no black swans. We can obviously never be completely certain that there are no black swans and this is what the religious objection highlights.

Now here, the believer is making the mistake of thinking science is like religion. It is religions which proclaim that they know the Truth, the whole Truth, and nothing but the Truth as it is to be known forever more. Only religions have claimed that their beliefs come straight from God and are therefore absolute and unchanging.

Science doesn’t need to proclaim that its current hypotheses are the final word on the subject; in fact, most scientists would be quite disappointed if this ever happened in their lifetime. Science formulates the best theories it can from the latest knowledge and then sets about preparing for these to change in the future. It is not perfect and infallible. But it isn’t pretending that it is. Inductive knowledge, inasmuch as it works is completely acceptable. Current opinions are fine as they are until new ones based on new knowledge come along; at which point the theories are eagerly revised. In other words, all swans are white… until a black one is found.

1. *The rationality of the universe is mirrored in our minds*

This is basically saying that science assumes the human mind is capable and sufficient to understand the mysteries of the universe. There is no reason to assume this and so scientists are forced to accept this on faith.

But are they? Again, this argument has things backwards. Scientists didn’t sit down before anybody conducted any experiments and decide that the human mind is capable of understanding the universe. It may be or it may not be (this is a hot topic of debate at the time of writing), but this is largely irrelevant to the scientist. Whatever the answer to this question, the scientist will keep on adhering to the scientific method to try to learn whatever can be known.

Our minds are the only tools we have for thinking about and therefore coming to any understanding of anything in the universe. We use them because we have no other options, but also because they work. Look at the secrets we have already unravelled and the benefits this knowledge has bestowed on us. We don’t need faith that our rationality is sufficient for understanding at least some things in the universe, because we’ve already used it for this purpose, quite successfully.

*Science tells us that we should only believe that which can be scientifically proven (i.e. adheres to the scientific method) but this statement itself cannot be scientifically proven*

Again, this argument is appealing to a certitude that only religions value. We use the scientific method because it works. Following the scientific method provides knowledge that is reliable and useful. Religion doesn’t like this because it leaves their main method (appeal to a book written two thousand years ago) out in the cold. Unfortunately, attacking the scientific method still doesn’t help, because following the Bible is completely impractical and counter-productive all on its own (i.e. without trying to malign the competition), as anyone who has actually read the thing will agree.

*Faith comes in where reason can’t go. It’s not irrational to take a leap of faith and in fact we have to because these questions are the most important in life.*

So the questions ‘beyond reason’ are things like, who am I? Where did I come from? Where am I going?, etc. Now it is true that these are some of the most important questions we can ask ourselves and I do believe we should make honest attempts to answer them, but I don’t think faith can find the refuge it is seeking ‘beyond reason’ like this.

It is not entirely true that when we go ‘beyond reason’ all evidence gathered earlier is out the window. The reasonable conclusions we were able to draw from science can assist us in answering these questions that science can’t directly address. For example, “where did I come from?” is a question about which science (via evolution) has a lot to say; now, how you choose to let this information impact on your life is up to you and science doesn’t intrude on this. But it is plainly false to say that science has no input in this inquiry.

Likewise, the question “where am I going?” has been answered by all religions by postulating a wondrous, eternal afterlife where we presumably live in bliss forever. This is truly a faith position to adopt because there is absolutely no evidence for it and we can only hold to it by ignoring all science tells us in this life. However, taking science as our starting point and looking at the natural world, we see that *all* life has a start and an end point. The cycle of birth and death is inherent in all life we observe on the planet and of course, there is a continuation of life in the next generation but nowhere do we see the eternal, continued existence of the individual that religions typically affirm. Now, knowing this, we can make an intelligent decision about what death means to us and live in a way that reflects this.

So what we see is that even when science breaks down (at the ‘meaning of life’-type questions), it still provides us with a physical model which we can use as a springboard. From there we can extrapolate beyond what science has uncovered and determine what the conclusion means to us. This final step may partly involve rationality and partly irrationality because no human is a robot (or a Vulcan), but there is absolutely no cause to abandon reason in the preliminary steps that get us to that point. Faith ignores all scientific knowledge and reason in probing the limits of our knowledge and delving into deeper philosophical questions about life and it is in this rational no-mans-land where gods, devils, miracles, Spirit, etc. are born. The intelligent questioner reasonably lets science guide and inform his forays into the realms these questions lead us, even if he ultimately rejects the cold, rational, objective determination that better applies to robots than humans.

I agree that it is not irrational to postulate beyond what science/reason can tell us but what is irrational is to abandon all scientific thought as soon as we start asking deep philosophical questions. Religion is not irrational because it goes beyond science but because it invents fictions that are simplistic, childish, and which contradict all science/reason has taught us. Reason can, in fact, get us much of the way in answering these questions but perhaps should take a back seat when we come to the really interesting question that underlies all of the others, “What does this mean for me?”

*But atheists are still in a position of faith regarding these “deep philosophical” questions because there is no evidence to back them up*

This is false. We can’t apply scientific knowledge to these questions to determine, for example, what happens when you die, but we can use that scientific knowledge to make reasonable inferences, rather than postulating things that have absolutely no basis in reality, like eternal life or thirty dark-eyes virgins, or other such nonsense. Inasmuch as we are still using reason to inform our conclusions about these questions we are not forced into a “position of faith”.

The other thing is that it seems quite odd to claim that atheists are in a “position of faith” when they don’t actually believe anything! Atheists think there is no God, no heaven, no hell; it is quite an abuse of the English language (and sensible thought) to claim that atheists have “faith” in these negative statements the same way the believer has faith in them.

Typically we say someone has faith in… something. The Christian has faith in God, or faith in heaven, or some other positive notion. The atheist has faith in…. no God?, or faith in the absence of heaven? This is just more wordplay which believers trot out in vain attempts to justify their beliefs.

*Science can’t refute God because it can’t go beyond empirical evidence*

Well, as discussed earlier, nothing can *refute* God because you can’t prove a negative. But the bigger issue here is that science only measures the physical and therefore has no say in anything non-physical.

We have already seen that science doesn’t go beyond the ‘physical’, not out of any bias or limit to its reach, but because the physical is the only thing that actually produces any effects in the world. We have also seen though that anything (even something ‘non-physical’), if it is real, can be studied by science using the scientific method. At which point it would become subject to scientific data collection and hypotheses about what it is and how it works. Perhaps the best way to make this clear is to say that science doesn’t measure the physical, it measures effects. And it doesn’t matter whether those effects come in a physical form or some kind of ‘mental’ form (like prayer, telekinesis, or precognition, etc.). The problem is not that those things are non-physical; it is that they don’t work!!

In this way, it is actually the universe or reality which refutes God and it does this simply by being physical in nature. Science merely follows reality, which has increasingly bowed before the advances of science and its tremendous explanatory powers. God *should* appear in reality because He supposedly acts in the world and this is precisely what science measures. In the end, science refutes God by explaining more and more, probing further and further and in the course of doing so never once running into God.

*Science uses a lot of ‘mights’ and ‘coulds’. Suggesting an alternative to the God hypothesis doesn’t refute it.*

Science does use a lot of ‘mights’ and ‘coulds’ but this is because they it not arrogant enough to assert that they (and only they) know the Truth. They know that they can be proven wrong one day. But what’s more important is that this is fine. This is progress. One cannot learn without making mistakes. The problem is religious believers *don’t* use these terms. Instead their arrogance blinds them to any other (much more) plausible explanations and keeps them locked in their outdated dogma for centuries.

One other comment about this objection is that it assumes the God hypothesis is a valid hypothesis in the first place. We have already seen that it is a ‘hypothesis’ that doesn’t actually explain anything and therefore doesn’t deserve the name in the first place. So while suggesting a reasonable explanation for some phenomenon doesn’t prove God doesn’t exist, it does adequately demonstrate that God is not the explanation for that phenomenon. And as more and more of these ‘alternative’ explanations pan out, the God ‘hypothesis’ steadily erodes away.

*All of the uncertainties of science weaken its case and make it far less likely than the theological alternative*

Really? The heliocentric hypothesis used to be uncertain. Does that make it weak? We weren’t sure that the world was spherical in the past. Is the case for that still ‘weak’?

The central problem here is that the question assumes the God hypothesis is the default one. Until we can come up with an alternative explanation then God is in. This is ridiculous. Believers need to do more to support their hypothesis than just write a book whose conclusion is “God did it”. If a scientist dared to say something as inane as that in support of his theory, while pointing out that no one else knows the answer so he is right by default, not only would believers (rightly) dismiss him as a crackpot, but his own peers would disown him. Believers betray their true opinions on the matter when dismissing the ‘myths’ of other religions that offer stories and weak circumstantial evidence in support of them. Stories that are, by the way, no different from those of the believer’s own religion.

Outrageously someone in the debates I watched claimed that science was showing a double standard by appealing to speculative evidence itself while demanding conclusive evidence from religion. This is a reversal of the truth. Science is one of the least speculative endeavours humans can undertake. The scientific method and the importance of peer review virtually guarantee this. Religion on the other hand is nothing but speculation.

Uthman Badar claims that quantum science in particular, is just an attempt to avoid theology. Well, of course it is. The question is *why* do scientists avoid theology? The answer is because it doesn’t explain anything and would only herald a second ‘Middle Ages’ stagnation of intellectual and scientific progress on us. “Why are you doing trying to get a better image of the cosmic microwave background radiation? We already told you God made the universe.” Science is following the clues left behind by nature whereas religion ignores all of nature and continues to make foolish remarks with its head stuck in the clouds.

Uncertainties are exactly what we should expect in theories we are forced to infer from nothing more than experiment and observation. These uncertainties are unavoidable but each time we find a problem and correct it, we move closer to the truth. It is a modest advance but just take a look around you to see what has resulted from all of this ‘speculation’ and ‘uncertainty’. On the other hand, it is precisely those who purport to be in possession of Absolute Truth that one should be most wary of. Hundred per cent certainties are extremely hard to come by so if someone comes peddling wares like this, check the details because more often than not, you will find the certainty is only a cover for a half-baked myth that came to the possessor in a dream.

One last point regarding the fact that the uncertainties of science make it less likely than the theological alternative. Let me be clear about this; **nothing is less likely than the theological proposal**. No matter how outrageous our science becomes, nothing is less plausible than the existence of some eternal, space-less, time-less, omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient Being. Surely this goes without saying.

*Religion and science need not be opposed, e.g. Islamic science*

This is not a straightforward opinion to dissect. Technically it’s correct, but we need to be wary about how we define both ‘religion’ and ‘science’. For religious thought and science to co-exist in a synergistic way the religion must not make any predictions that can be falsified by science; like the earth is the centre of the universe or God made the universe 4,000 odd years ago. Science also has to be willing to concede that its laws can be broken on occasion by God when He performs miracles.

If these two conditions are fulfilled, religion and science could in theory work together harmoniously. Religion would be concerned only with the non-physical and science only the physical. Of course, so far, we haven’t seen a religion that is content to make no claims that science could eventually show to be false – probably the best efforts in that direction come from the new age movement, which has watched religions get tripped up by their own doctrines and learnt to steer clear of easily falsifiable beliefs. Of course, to truly believe in their tenets still requires a fairly low level of scientific motivation and a willingness to ignore certain inconvenient facts. We also haven’t seen any indication that science can tolerate a Deity that intervenes in the world at will.

However, the biggest problem is that the mind-set behind the two doctrines is necessarily completely different. One sees God everywhere and in everything, the other sees an unbiased unfolding of physical events. These different world views just can’t exist harmoniously together because in reality, they don’t operate in completely different realms. Religion is never *solely* concerned with the non-physical. How could it be? Everyone wants a God who will look after and help them in *this* life, right now; not just after they die. Science must also eventually intrude on the non-physical by denying that it exists. Science, virtually by definition, resists the mystery-mongering that religion thrives in.

As for Islamic science, it is true that the Arabic world underwent a period of growth between the 8th and the 16th centuries which saw it well and truly at the forefront of scientific progress. Of course, we see Muslims cherry-picking the Qur’an to find exhortations for the believer to learn and praising knowledge, but as usual, what they ignore is at least as telling as what they focus on.

It is also highly doubtful that Arabic science owed its success to religious faith (hence my hesitation in calling it ‘Islamic’ as if it was religiously motivated). The argument at the head of this section doesn’t make this claim but it is leaning in this direction. Arabic science was primarily driven by its willingness to absorb Greek thought and its central position which made it an extremely dynamic place where many different cultures could meet and find stimulation.

Ultimately however and quite ironically, the most convincing argument that science and religion can’t survive together, is Arabic science itself. Specifically, the fact that Arabic science didn’t stay the course. It died out, just as it did in China and India before that. Of course, the fading of the scientific drive is the norm and not the exception in history, and there were many diverse factors that contributed to the eventual Western dominance in this area, but it has to be noted that it was only in the West that science truly divorced itself from religious thought early on. In no other country on the planet could the words be thought (let alone uttered), “I had no need of that hypothesis”, in response to a question about why God wasn’t mentioned in a book.

*Religion and science both have important roles in assessing truth. Religion deals with questions of ethics, morality, metaphysics, and purpose.*

I agree that science doesn’t have complete jurisdiction in these areas, although I have argued that it still informs our decisions to a certain (and important) extent. The fundamental problem with the argument here is that it assumes there are only two methods of interpreting the world around us, scientific and religious, i.e. if science doesn’t get us all the way then we must embrace religion. This is false.

This whole essay is nothing if not a testament to how poorly religion operates in all of these areas. Throughout our history, we have seen religious slave owners, religious wars, religious motivated persecution, torture, and ritual killings. Almost all religions are extremely divisive and elitist and encourage wilful disregard for physical realities if they contradict the religious doctrine and myths. They also tend to advocate complete subservience to an authoritarian Deity and therefore discourage the independent thought of the individual. If religion truly deals with these questions then one can only conclude that it doesn’t do so very well.

Religion is not the only alternative to science. For dealing with these issues that push science to its limits, we would be better advised to turn to philosophy which eagerly investigates questions like this while preserving a healthy respect for reason and a willingness to engage in open discussion about anything.

If you really want answers to questions and you don’t mind thinking for yourself, philosophy is the perfect avenue for approaching these issues. If, on the other hand, you want to be spoon fed myths and half-truths which need to be taken on faith, all polished up with a veneer of pseudo-science, then perhaps you might enjoy religious affiliation.

*Atheism/materialism undercuts the scientific endeavour. If my theories are the results of atoms in my brain produced by a random, unguided process, why should I believe them?*

This is a curious, very anti-physical thing to say. Religious believers are typically very defensive about the claim that they denigrate the physical in favour of the ‘spiritual’. But here we see this metaphysical discrimination perfectly exemplified. It says that the thoughts of a brain that is purely physical are meaningless. But the processes that same brain operates by also hold sway in everything else you can experience from the tiniest microbe to the largest supermassive black hole.

Again, we can see that this is the desperate struggle for certainty that lies at the core of most religions. I want there to be something Absolute, something bigger and more reliable than me, something that can be a solid, supra-human foundation for me to build my tinny shelter on.

So our thoughts arise from a physical organ in an evolutionary fashion, designed to preserve homeostasis in the body that encases it. So what? Why should this be a problem? Why should we question their (our thoughts’) reliability based on this? After all, we live in a physical universe (this holds true whether or not you believe in a non-physical realm by the way), governed by physical laws (a handful of which our brains have proven sufficient to uncover), which seemingly evolved in a similar fashion.

I really recoil back from this weak, helpless attitude that infests much religion. *I’m just a puny mortal. I can’t trust my own thoughts if there isn’t a Divine Architect behind them.* This is an infantile attitude and we should all be ashamed that we let people like this share stages and engage in debates with *real* thinkers.

Sure, we could all imagine a different, non-physical brain (some might call it a ‘soul’) that was perfectly adapted to think about the deepest mysteries of the cosmos; that somehow operates at a ‘higher’ level (whatever that might mean). But this doesn’t mean that such a brain must exist. Look at how successful and how complex the thoughts coming from some of our physical brains have been. To question all of this is a slap in the face for the scientific endeavour and for all of humanity’s achievements to date. Anybody who truly holds this opinion should return any item of technology that the “random, unguided” human brain has developed and go back to living in a wooden shack in the woods. Very few people, with the possible exception of the Amish, have the courage of their convictions to follow through with all that such an anti-progress, anti-physical, anti-human attitude entails.

Christianity is/was a force for good

This section is focused specifically on Christianity but hopefully you will find that many of the discussions which ensue can easily be applied to religion in general. The arguments here all appeal to the fundamental notion that Christianity was or is a force for good and the world would be worse off if Christianity were to disappear or had never been at all.

*Why did movements like the Enlightenment/the Renaissance/the scientific revolution occur in the West?*

This is a very interesting question. Christians like to think that the only difference that mattered between the West and other cultures was Christianity, but this is of course, complete rubbish. For over a thousand years Western civilisation stultified under the influence of the church which exerted an admittedly varying, but in general, strong control over the people.

The church actively fought to stifle all of these movements as is evidenced by the Index of Forbidden Books maintained by the church until the middle of the 20th century. Virtually every thinker of import to all of the above movements had their works banned by the church. And now, Christianity claims they were the difference that ushered in the modern age? Unbelievable.

A better question than the one which heads this section is, if Christianity was the key, why did those movements take so long to get started? Christianity had over a thousand years to bring about social change for the better, yet it didn’t. Not only did Western civilisation stagnate, but other cultures, notably the Arabs, advanced well ahead of anything happening in the West.

So can we answer this question? Why did it take so long for the scientific revolution to get started? Well, the reasons for this are many and varied. It was definitely not one or two things alone which propelled the West into the modern age. All cultures had thinkers who could have sparked the flame which would ignite a revolution, but didn’t. The precise answer to this question lies a little beyond the scope of this essay but we can definitely answer it as it applies to our topic; Christianity.

The timing of these events alone (over a thousand years after Christianity acquired its significant position of power) suggests that Christianity had very little to do with any of them. Couple this with the facts that the Christian powers fought tooth and nail against these movements… (but thankfully lost) and that the transition from the Middle to the modern age happened at a time when the church was *losing* influence, and it is almost impossible to reasonably assert that Christianity had anything to do with any progressive forces that bloomed in the West.

Rather, when we look at the facts, what we clearly see is that Christianity obstructed Western advancement for as long as it could and, if anything, the difference that mattered between the West and other cultures was that we were the first to advance purely secular ideals and restrict the pervasive influence religion had over society.

*Christianity believed that God created a strict and rigorously lawful universe which allowed enterprising Christians to ask scientific questions and look for the answers*

Did it really? Was Christianity the first institution to believe that the universe obeyed certain laws? Of course not. In fact, the exact opposite is true. Early Christians (and many of their contemporary descendants, in fact) attributed all good things to God and everything else to Lucifer. Statues of the Virgin Mary would weep blood, statues of Jesus on the cross would leak blood, people could be possessed by evil spirits and had to be exorcised by your local Catholic ghostbuster, witches placed curses on people, bread and wine literally become the flesh and blood of Christ, virgin births, rising from the dead, talking snakes… are we at the lawful universe yet?

*Most early scientists were Christians*

I really consider this to be such a dirty and dishonest argument that it disgusts me whenever I hear it. No institution resisted scientific progress more than Christianity and now they want to claim that they started the whole thing!! Talk about revisionism!

Let’s clarify exactly who these early scientists were. Presumably the list would go something like; Copernicus, Galileo, Kepler, and Newton. Did you know that the first three of these thinkers had their works placed on the Index of Prohibited Books and their theories declared heretical by the church. And, of course, everyone knows how Galileo fell afoul of the Inquisition and was finally placed under house arrest[[18]](#footnote-18). Copernicus’ heliocentric theory even directly contradicts a couple of passages in the Bible (the cornerstone of Christianity) but modern Christians want us to believe that Christianity bequeathed us science?!

So, the church went to great lengths to distance itself from these revolutionary men (and rightly so, they were railing directly *against* the faith!). What can we conclude from this? Very clearly, they were Christians only in the most minimal sense of the word and certainly did not represent the religion in any way, shape, or form. To claim otherwise is an outrageous distortion of the facts.

Most early scientists were Christians. Well, of course they were! It was damned near illegal to be anything else! Even Jews (who had the same faith before Christians took it from them) were persecuted wildly by Christians all throughout the Middle Ages. What does this mean? It means that butchers, bakers and candlestick makers were all Christian too. Does Christianity want to claim that it also developed and advanced butchery, baking, and candlestick making? What a magnificently versatile institution this religion was. How did they ever find time for theology?

So, most early scientists were Christian. So what? Does the work of the individuals then somehow get credited to the religion they are affiliated with? This is what the argument is claiming:

1. Newton was a Christian
2. Newton advanced science
3. Therefore, we owe Christianity for the advances in science Newton provided

Is this logically valid? I don’t think so. In fact, if we substitute a couple of terms, we will see how untenable it is:

1. The Indians invented the concept of zero
2. The Indians were Hindu
3. Therefore, we owe Hinduism for the concept of zero

This is clearly nonsense. No one, including Christians (and Indians), attributes the concept of zero (or any of the other mathematical advances made by Indians) to Hinduism despite the fact that the argument is exactly the same as the one given above about Newton. So why is it rubbish?

It is almost always a mistake to attribute the work of individuals to any other separate affiliations/beliefs/interests they may have. Why? Because they seldom make advances in one field *because* of other different fields they may have some relation to or interest in. Taking Newton, he didn’t make his discoveries in science as a Christian. He made them as a scientist. How do we know? Because Christianity *was never* and *is not* a scientific institution. (The very same apologists advancing this argument say as much when they find themselves defending against a probing atheist, “The bible is not a scientific text”) In exactly the same way, Hinduism is not about mathematics and so we can’t impute an individual’s work in mathematics to the religious faith of the mathematician.

Now, if Newton had advanced a revolutionary way of thinking about man’s relationship with God, then we would automatically and quite happily credit this to the Christian religion because the two are directly related to each other. In other words, Newton would have had his insights into Christianity as a Christian.

There is only one sense in which Christianity was relevant to Newton’s work as a scientist (it seems I am going to focus on Newton in this section which is relevant because he was deeply religious), and it is that Newton probably did want to understand the mind of God and saw his work as doing just that. Unfortunately, that is not going to get Christians what they want. The leap from there to Christianity being responsible for his scientific insights is just too far to reasonably make. Did Newton refer to the Bible and attend church when he was attempting to understand gravity or did he look to Galileo, Copernicus, and other contemporary scientists or mathematicians? This amounts to nothing more than a basic category mistake.

It also seems more than a little underhanded to recruit the few Christians throughout Christian history who boosted free thought and reason while the far greater majority of Christians deliberately and specifically denounced rationality and secular learning. All the church Fathers and a number of Popes deliberately acted to curtail freedom of inquiry and suppress any thought which contradicted doctrine or threatened the absolute, God-given, importance of the faith.

We therefore have a situation where some Christians happened to be talented scientists, while many other Christians were intellectual bigots and opposed to any non faith-based thought. Not only that, the Christian scientists did not appeal to any religious motivation to justify their theories; instead they used mathematics and reason, not the Bible and faith. While on the other hand, the Christian bigots appealed directly to faith-based teachings in defence of their anti-intellectualism. The sensible person would conclude from this that Christianity (as both a faith and an institution) did not further science but rather hindered it. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Christians prefer to reverse this common sense conclusion.

There are also some other interesting facts about Newton that make it virtually impossible for Christians to take the credit for his work. Did you know that Newton was also very interested in alchemy? In fact, he wrote much more about this subject than he ever did about mathematics or mechanics. Since it is reasonable to infer the same thing here (i.e. Newton saw this as another way to understand the work of God), surely Christianity must also want to take the credit for any advances made in alchemy. Funny that they don’t.

A couple of other interesting facts about Newton that no Christian will tell you:

* He is not known to have ever had a romantic relationship
* He believed that the doctrine of the Trinity was false and had corrupted Christianity right from the beginning. In other words, he denied that Christ was God.
* He believed that God mediated the gravitational force and resisted any mechanistic interpretations to his work because that would reduce the importance of God.

That’s right. Newton did not accept that Christ was God. Is he even a Christian then? How can Christians take the credit for Newton’s work when he rejected a fundamental tenet of the religion? He also believed that God mediated all physical actions (and was therefore central in the world). Isn’t this exactly the opposite of what actually happens? In that case, wouldn’t this have even impeded his understanding thereby proving that Christianity was an impediment to scientific progress?

Now presumably no Christian will want to attribute any of the above to Christianity, yet how can they justify only taking credit for just one aspect of the man (his scientific discoveries) while ignoring all of his others (which were in some cases heretical)? Obviously they can’t, but just as obviously this won’t stop them from trying to.

In the final analysis we have two or three Christians who struggled against other Christians (particularly those in powerful positions) to get their ideas promulgated and despite this religious resistance, eventually succeed because not everyone at the time was as bigoted as the church was. And today Christians want us to believe that the scientific revolution came from their pulpits and flowed out the doors of their churches.

Right.

*Universities were first built by Christians*

This is another argument we can immediately respond to by pointing out that everyone was a Christian, at least nominally; after being forced to convert or forfeit their possessions or even their lives.

Naturally, the two main counter-arguments I just trotted out in the preceding section are both equally applicable here too. I will only briefly review them again here. (1) The church was extremely hostile to free inquiry and at various times in its reign of terror sought to crush all worldly learning in favour of (heavily restricted) religious inquiry and contemplation alone. (2) Christianity is not and never was an education or learning institution. Education is actually detrimental to the goal of religion because it will always be easier to get ignorant folk to buy into the idea of eternal salvation and a big wish-granter in the sky, if people don’t or can’t think for themselves too much. Christianity is at bottom a system of salvation and don’t let anyone tell you otherwise.

In addition to the above, we also need to be aware that there is a subtle deception going on here. When we hear the word ‘university’ we think of dynamic hubs of intellectual activity where stimulating and boundary-pushing research is constantly taking place. Medieval universities, while offering a reasonable curriculum including arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, music theory, grammar, logic, and rhetoric, were obviously still heavily constrained by church doctrine regarding how progressive they could be.

Having said this though, it does seem fair to me to admit that inasmuch as Christianity did take steps to further learning (even if that learning did have to conform to doctrine), it does deserve some credit. Certainly not as much as Christians want to take though. No matter how you slice it, intellectual achievements never even threatened to pour in until society started to pry the fingers of God from its throat.

The other big problem is that Christianity is also responsible for some of the most anti-intellectual, anti-scientific, anti-rational, and anti-physical sentiments that have surfaced in our history. Ultimately, the little that they gave in return for what they destroyed seems like a raw deal no matter how you look at it.

*Invention and progress started in the Middle Ages*

This is a relatively recent claim championed by some very creative historical revisionists who have apparently honed their skills reinterpreting the Bible so that God comes out looking like the good guy. It basically says that nothing leaps into being fully formed, like the scientific revolution appeared to do, and that there therefore must have been some supporting foundations laid prior by… those good ol’ Christians.

This is absolute nonsense. Were there intelligent priests? Of course. And some of them even had some interesting ideas, but when Christianity had the power that it did to enforce its doctrines (like God made the universe in six days, wafers can turn into flesh, God is the mediator that enables physical causes to have effects, etc.) and those doctrines were in general accepted by an uneducated, ignorant populace that didn’t know better, those ideas were necessarily constrained and impotent. Hence nothing of note happened for over a thousand years in Western history.

Sure, some advances were made in metalworking, some efficiencies created in farming implements, and Christian architecture was impressive, but to suggest that these relatively minor feats in any way helped pave the way for the advances and intellectually stimulating climate the scientific revolution ushered in is truly a well-aimed kick in the crotch for everything scientific and rational.

*Christianity introduces forgiveness to the world*

This is outrageous and based on a twisted, religious myth where forgiveness is warped into something barely recognisable as such.

First of all, Christianity hardly *introduced* forgiveness into the world. Virtually all religions embraced notions like ‘turn the other cheek’ and ‘love thy enemy’ well before Christianity, including Christianity’s immediate predecessor, Judaism. Naturally, any kind of civilised society or familial relations wouldn’t have even been possible had the notion of forgiveness not been part and parcel of daily life.[[19]](#footnote-19)

What this argument is getting at it is that Christianity is the first religion which is largely centred around forgiveness. This seems to be the case because the whole point to Christianity is Jesus dying so that we can obtain God’s forgiveness and receive salvation. Everything else in the religion is just an add-on. I have said it before, Christianity is a salvation system, and it is one that to take advantage of one has to first be forgiven by God.

I have three big problems with the notion of ‘forgiveness’ promoted in this system though. First, guilt and sin are transferrable in Christianity. We are essentially all paying the price for Eve’s sin in the Garden of Eden. This is known as Original Sin and afflicts all of us before we are even born so that even if we were to live complete sin-free lives we would still need God’s forgiveness to be saved. Do you notice what the concept of Original Sin does? It ensures that *everyone*, even the nicest, gentlest, most loving among us, has to follow Christianity to get into heaven. St. Augustine declared that Original Sin was transmitted at conception by the father’s semen, so unless you are conceived immaculately (like… Horus) you need Christianity just like the rest of us.

My second problem is a two-parter and it starts like this; not only does Christianity hold that guilt/sin can be transferred from one person to another, it also relies on a bizarre system of forgiveness by proxy. You see, what happens in Christianity is not that you ask God for forgiveness and He absolves you (that would be too easy and would mean you could obtain salvation on your own), you have to ‘accept’ Jesus Christ into your life and then you are somehow able to ‘partake’ in the forgiveness that he ‘earned’.

Now we *do* accept the transferability of something like a monetary debt by proxy. If person A owes person B money, person C can repay the debt on person A’s behalf and person B will be completely satisfied. But person A’s character has been marred and he has, perhaps permanently, lost person C’s trust, i.e. this system of repayment by proxy, although it may cancel a financial debt, doesn’t actually earn him any trust from the lender. Person B will never lend money to person A again.

This system actually has the tendency to make a person think that every time he gets into financial difficulties, someone else will bail him out. We see this in the Catholic who wilfully commits a sin, after accepting the ‘price’ of admitting it in confession booth that Sunday and doing, say, a handful of Hail Mary’s. No problem. Slate cleared. This is hardly the way to cultivate strong moral character.

Repaying a loan is not a good analogy for the Christian story so let’s switch analogies. Even if a borrower desperately *wanted* to repay the lender but literally couldn’t (maybe because they are bankrupt), this kind of strain could very easily end the relationship between the two. But in the case where one person aggrieves another and desperately wants to apologise but can’t (perhaps they have moved to a country without cell phone or internet coverage (and with no postal service either!)), we might be more inclined to accept a sincere apology given by proxy (from say, a friend who visited the ‘aggriever’ in this remote country). This is closer to what Christianity asks us to believe. Of course, this would only be acceptable if two conditions were met; (1) the ‘aggriever’ really was sincere and (2) the reason he didn’t apologise himself is legitimate.

Let’s see if these conditions are met in the Christian framework. Christians tell us the ‘aggriever’ really does need to be sincere to receive forgiveness so the first condition is sorted. At first glance, the second condition also seems fulfilled. Christians tell us that we can’t meet the requirement of forgiveness on our own because none of us can live a sin-free existence and even if we could we are still afflicted by Original Sin which has been passed on since the time of Adam and Eve. This certainly seems like a legitimate reason why we can’t ‘apologise’ for ourselves. However, it is this ‘reason’ which leads me to the second part of this problem…

You may have noticed that there is a big difference between my earlier example of the friend who can’t apologise because he is in a bizarre isolated country and the tale told by Christianity. The difference is that my friend in the first case wants to apologise but can’t; in Christianity however, an apology is not required. So what is it that God wants?

Blood. And not just any old blood, the blood of His only begotten son.[[20]](#footnote-20)

That’s right. God won’t accept an apology, no matter how sincere you are, no matter how keenly you feel the sins of Eve lying on your soul, no matter how much you regret your sins. God will not forgive you your transgressions until you pay for them with the blood of Christ. Is this forgiveness? Of course not.

Forgiveness doesn’t require any payment. If someone pays for something then there is nothing to forgive; that’s the point of paying. In our earlier financial case, *forgiving* a debt means the same as cancelling it without receiving payment. If payment is received there is nothing to forgive. In the case of someone who aggrieves someone else, forgiveness often comes with an apology although it can also be given without one. But the notion of *demanding a blood sacrifice in order to receive forgiveness* should be repulsive and absolutely heinous to every single person on the face of the planet. If any human in history had demanded something similar before forgiving any transgression against him or her, we would condemn that individual as a monster; yet when God does it some of us call it Divine forgiveness.

Naturally, it does nothing to say that it is unfair to compare humans to God because God should be the exemplar of perfection in every way. If we recognise some human actions as highly immoral, those same actions should be absolutely unthinkable in God. True forgiveness *never* requires a blood sacrifice. If this is truly what Christians think forgiveness is, I pray to God that I never offend one of them and need to ask for their forgiveness!

Third, why does the Creator of everything, the most Magnificent, Magnanimous, Loving Being you can imagine need to forgive us in the first place? Forgiveness implies… no, *requires* an aggrieved party. Now, as I understand the concept of God, He is supposedly perfect in every imaginable way. He not just does not, He *cannot* experience anything negative. He is the polar opposite of negativity. He is love, joy, happiness, light… and yet He can be aggrieved so much that he requires a blood sacrifice to forgive me for having sex before getting married? Something is seriously wrong with this story. If this is the God Christians worship, then I think they have got the wrong guy…

*Christianity gave us compassion (Aristotle didn’t value this) and the sanctity of the individual (the Spartans used to leave weak babies outside to die)*

This claim is as ridiculous as it is arrogant as it is false. Aristotle *did* value compassion. He explicitly mentions it in his list of five social virtues along with things like courage and forgiveness (something we have already seen Christians seem to have no understanding of). I have no idea what D’Souza (I think it was D’Souza) was thinking when he spouted this.

It is also an unbelievably arrogant claim to make. Does D’Souza really believe that no other movement in human history contained any elements of compassion. Is he really so anti-humanity that he thinks nobody on the planet came up with a reason to be nice to each other until Christianity told us to? (Hint: I have already mentioned that at least one person did, i.e.Aristotle)

And speaking of that, did Christianity, which is responsible for atrocities like the Crusades, the Inquisition, and all manner of persecutions in the name of Christ, and which features as the pinnacle of goodness a Deity who sentences those of us who don’t follow His rules to *an eternity of suffering*, really teach us anything about compassion?

Claiming that we got our sense of compassion from a religion with as much blood on its hands as Christianity has and that has such a decidedly *un*compassionate Sovereign is absolutely outlandish. Isn’t it ironic that I, an atheist, think more of human nature than a ‘compassionate’ Christian inasmuch as I believe that we can and did find reasons to be nice to each other without expecting a reward in an afterlife?

*In response to international disasters the West helps while other countries stand by. Why? Because of Christian values.*

This is the same twisted logic that we have just seen in Christian claims about forgiveness and compassion. I won’t spend much more time on it here.

Why are Western countries at the fore of international aid? Is Christianity the only difference? I think it is relatively easy to show that current Western values emerged from concepts like humanism and movements like the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, all of which took place in the West and created changes that directly contributed to the direction our civilisation has taken over the past two hundred years or so. Moreover, as I argued in an earlier section, these movements were only possible because a secular wedge of society emerged and distanced itself from religious oppression, and it is *this* which created the difference between the West and other countries. Freedom from religion opened the doorway to modern civilisation. Christianity was a hurdle on our path and in a very real sense, derailed the Greek and Roman train for over a thousand years which is why none of us would like to have been born in the Middle Ages (including Christians).

The West received a boost over other civilisations by breaking away from religion and this led to the scientific and industrial revolutions, eliminated slavery, allowed notions like equality, individual rights, and freedom of speech to gain ascendance, and although it isn’t perfect, it did in general make our world a better place. I am growing tired of Christianity trying to take credit for these things, all of which were utterly impossible during its watch.

*Without religion we wouldn’t have some of the magnificent art, music, and architecture that we have*

I find this argument quite funny because everyone knows Christianity is first and foremost about the arts. I’ll say it again; Christianity is a religion and specifically a religion of salvation. It is not a museum or a fancy type of architecture. This argument is so irrelevant to the discussion at hand (i.e. that Christianity (i.e. a religion) has been a force for good in the world (i.e. *as* a religion) that when our misguided Christian puts it forward it almost seems like she is admitting that Christianity *hasn’t* actually been that good but at least we got some nice music out of it. Still, let’s grant the argument a hearing just because we are nice atheists.

The first and most obvious point to make is that artists work for money. During the Middle Ages, guess who had all of it. That’s right, while the average person was struggling to make ends meet, the Church was raking it in amassing vast wealth. So it only stands to reason that the best artists were all commissioned by the Church to produce works which would become masterpieces. The same holds for architecture. The Church had more than enough money to invest in magnificent examples of architecture to catch the eye and inspire the imagination. So what did they build? Churches, of course. Hence, the legacy.

You might argue that the reason why Christian art is so spectacular is beside the point. However it came about, we have it and if Christianity had never been we would have lost that. We wouldn’t have the magnificent churches, Da Vinci’s *The Virgin and Child with St. Anne*, the Sistine Chapel, or the moving musical compositions that Christianity has spawned.

Unfortunately, this argument has completely missed the point. The point was that any group or age is capable of producing great art. If Christianity had never existed we would have other paintings, music, and architecture to move and inspire us. Certainly, the plays, art, and architecture of the Greeks were equally magnificent, and people travel halfway around the world to see what is left of them. Not only that, but non-Western countries have also produced equally impressive art, music, and architecture. Sure, Christianity produced some good art, but the world is hardly dependent on it for that.

It is true that the religious theme can evoke moving and awe-inspiring emotions that perhaps ease our insecurities and comfort us in our fears but non-transcendental topics are equally able to arouse the same emotions. Take a look at the Hubble Deep Field image and tell me that it doesn’t strike something that resonates inside of you. Paintings and photos of nature and landscapes all have the power to affect us in deep ways. The exact same thing can be said for music, architecture, and any other creative endeavour you would like to single out.

This argument is basically grasping at straws. Christianity has inspired some nice creative works but at bottom, this is completely irrelevant to whether Christianity has been a force for good or not. Certainly a few nice pictures don’t make up for centuries of oppression and persecution.

*Religious groups do a lot of good in the world. Without religion, we would lose all the good that these groups do.*

Now, this is one argument, you might be surprised to hear, that I think does have some merit. It can’t be denied that some religious organisations are quite proactive when it comes to helping those less fortunate than others. Many religious people devote considerable time and effort to directly helping those in need or raising money for charities and so on. Some missionary work, in particular, does do a lot of good.

Of course, much of this aid is often given with an eye to ‘recruiting’ for the church. Christians would probably call it ‘saving lost souls’ or something less duplicitous-sounding, but it amounts to the same thing.

Still, to be fair, without religion we would lose the good these organisations perform and it isn’t obvious that secular organisations would be able to fill the vacuum left behind. The reason for this is simple. The Christians who give so much of themselves believe they are doing the work of God and this gives their acts a meaning (even if it is a false one) that they would struggle to find without their faith.

Of course, many non-Christians and even many Christians would and do, do the same just because they genuinely care about other people and enjoy helping when it is needed. Still, religion does provide additional motivation to many others who might not have it otherwise.

The biggest problem with this argument is that it is a one-sided take on religion. International aid and charities are not the only things (or even the main things) that Christianity[[21]](#footnote-21) is about. Christianity is… [all together now] a system of salvation, not a humanitarian organisation. As such, international aid is not the only consequence of Christianity. The price we pay for having these good things come from religious sources instead of secular ones is the sacrifice of reason, loss of individual empowerment and responsibility, and the embracing of inauthenticity. It might seem to you like I am being picky here but if it does I think your intuitions are somewhat distorted because we are talking about religion. An analogy will serve to highlight this.

Imagine a person who donated a lot of money to charities, travelled far and wide to offer humanitarian aid, and was an all-around good guy. Now, when asked why he did all these good deeds he admitted that he believed in Santa Claus and was being good because he believed that is what Santa wanted him to do.[[22]](#footnote-22) Would we be as quick to say that it is too ‘picky’ to complain that reason is being sacrificed to irrelevant that our believer is living an inauthentic life?

What if he starts to tell us that Santa speaks to him ‘in his heart’ and guides him in his daily life?[[23]](#footnote-23) We know Santa doesn’t exist and we also know that the capacity of the human brain for self-deception is almost limitless. We therefore know he is making all of this up… but he doesn’t. That’s the problem. Would we encourage him in his madness just because he seems to be a nicer guy with his belief than we fear he would be if he didn’t have it?

I think it is clear that the good effects of his belief are clearly outweighed by his delusion (and he didn’t even shut down independent thought for more than a thousand years and burn suspected witches at the stake!).

*But God is real! That’s the difference!*

That is what our believer in Santa Claus would say about Santa too!

As far as religious organisations do good in the world without any ‘recruitment’ strings attached, they do deserve credit. Although it perhaps isn’t easy to substitute this faith-motivated (“I do it for God”) behaviour with secular, humanist motivations (“I do it because that person is just like me”), I do think it is possible[[24]](#footnote-24). And to the extent that this is successful it is far, far superior because it doesn’t come with all of the metaphysical baggage and restrictive dogma that religion does.

My final analysis? Yes, religion does deserve props for the good they do, but this isn’t enough to get them into the black as far as being a thing we are better off with than without.

*Religion is useful. It gives us explanations, exhortations (right and wrong), inspiration, consolation, and hope.*

Religion does give us explanations, but they are facile ones. Why is childbirth so difficult? It’s a punishment from God for Eve eating the apple in the Garden of Eden. Why do we suffer? God is testing you. How did life arise? God made it. And so on.

These explanations are bogus and devoid of any real meaning. I have already noted that they don’t actually explain anything (saying “God did it” tells us nothing) but they are also childish ways of looking at the world that impede real understanding. How many Christians refuse to believe in evolution solely because it puts their faith into question?[[25]](#footnote-25) This is a striking example of how religion prevents scientific progress. Anything that contradicts received dogma must be false. And back to the Middle Ages we go.

Religion does provide a source of inspiration. It is easy to see how life can be viewed as meaningful in the context of God’s greater plan for you personally as well as His careful orchestration of everything else He has created. The problem is it’s false and full of childish sentiments that amount to a turning away from reality.

“God loves you”

“Trust in God’s plan”

We don’t need to believe in a mystical Being to get inspiration. The wonders of science are far more inspirational than any overgrown fairy in the sky. Philosophy asks the daring questions that give meaning to our lives much more honestly and rigorously than religion ever could. Don’t discount what we can do under our own steam just because we are mortal humans. Just because something doesn’t originate from an Almighty God doesn’t lessen its value.

Religion also offers consolation and hope. “Don’t worry, if you are a good faithful Christian now, you will go to heaven when you die.” Again though, this is consolation for children. “Don’t worry about your pet dog. He is running around in doggy heaven now.” We are no longer children to be pacified with delusions and fantasies. We don’t need empty promises from absent Deities to make us feel good about life.

Perhaps the reality is not as rosy as we might like but there is something noble and empowering about facing it as we find it instead of sugar-coating things with fictions and fantasies to make them more pleasing to us. The seas may be rough and even dangerous but cowering below deck pretending you are on a tropical beach doesn’t make it less rough or less dangerous. Acting like this just means you hand over control of your ship to someone else; someone less afraid to stand up and take responsibility for their own lives instead of forcing an M.I.A. God to.

As for the morality religion offers; this is one area I don’t think religion provides any guidance at all. Religions have always been ambivalent about right and wrong for a couple of reasons. (1) They crystallise their guidelines for all time in relatively primitive societies (compared to any future civilisation) and so fail to account for any modern developments. Hence many Christians still think homosexuality is wrong and Jews think it a sin to eat certain kinds of meat on certain days. (2) Their religious texts are always unclear and contradictory meaning adherents must cherry pick to get a working moral system. God tells us in the Old Testament morality is based on the principle “an eye for an eye”, but Jesus says “turn the other cheek”. Which is it fellas? (3) The parts of religious moral systems that *are* clear tend to be obvious, i.e. the Ten Commandments. Don’t murder. Don’t steal. Umm, thanks God but we already figured those out centuries ago, hence they are against the law (and were so long before Christianity revealed these startling moral Truths to us). (4) Religions base their morality on a false worldview which means that the moral conclusions they draw from this are also false, i.e. abortion is wrong because you don’t have the right to take away life (even when that ‘life’ is nothing more than a bunch of cells without any functioning nervous system) or the use of condoms is a sin because it is thwarting God’s plan.

I have already discussed other aspects of religious morality in some detail and rather than go into it all again here, I will simply refer you back to that section.

*Most religious people don’t think about their faith like that. It’s more about how they act than what they believe. Belief matters less than how you live your life. Some days people pray with faith and believe more; other days, they pray out of habit and believe less.*

I was surprised to hear this comment come from the religious side. It is an argument I have levelled at them before. How can anybody be so lacklustre about something this important (at least they claim it is important)? Faith (belief) is the key to the whole religious enterprise! To water this concept down by saying, “Ah, some days I believe more than other days” strips religion of the only thing that gives it even a semblance of legitimacy, because it sure can’t fall back on logic and reason for that.

First of all, the Christian God is quite clear. Believers are required to believe with their whole hearts and follow His rules without exception. Half measures are flirting with an eternity in hell. If you think God is real then you better be damn sure to pray with full belief every time! And why wouldn’t you? If you really think God is real, why would you sometimes pray out of habit?

But even disregarding the consequences of adopting this kind of limp faith, if you really believe in all this stuff then you have to take it seriously, or you are as good as admitting that your faith actually *isn’t* that important to you after all. Choosing a religion shouldn’t be like choosing which outfit to wear, i.e. once you decide, you can forget about it. This should underpin your entire attitude towards life. If it doesn’t, you probably shouldn’t be religious at all. You should just sit on the fence with all the other ‘lite’ agnostics and not take a stand on anything.

Finally, I actually think the basic premise of the argument is wrong. “Belief matters less than how you live your life.” Actually, belief *determines* how you live your life. If you have a weak belief then your actions will reflect this. If on some days you do just ‘go through the motions’, and you happen to be tempted on one of those days, there is a much higher chance that you will succumb to that temptation.

Ultimately, religion lets you think about the world without being inconveniently constrained by reality, but now you don’t even want the responsibility of *believing* in your faith all the time!? This is beginning to sound more and more like a child who believes in an imaginary friend only when they don’t have a real friend to play with.

*Sure the extremists and fundamentalists aren’t so good but what about the moderates? They are just good people doing good things.*

The moderates are the best examples we have, what every atheist should appeal to, to prove that religion is rotten at its core. So, what exactly is a moderate? A religious moderate is someone who believes in the religion but doesn’t subscribe to a literal interpretation of holy texts or doctrines. In other words, it is someone who tempers religious beliefs with a little bit of common sense. The opposite of this are religious fundamentalists who *do* advocate literal interpretations of doctrine and therefore tend to find themselves defending extremist positions.

Moderates (and the existence of their opposites) are the best proof of how poisonous religion is because they demonstrate that religion can’t be accepted as it is. To make the religion make sense the moderates are forced to cherry pick doctrines and texts filtering out all the rubbish and contradictions that are inherent in any religious system. Fundamentalists, who do take the religion seriously and literally, accepting all of the nonsense along with the common sense, show, through this authentic and faithful embodiment of its principles, just how terrible religion really is. If religion really was the Truth, it wouldn’t be possible to divide believers into moderates and fundamentalists because the Word of God would just be the Word of God; it wouldn’t have to be ‘interpreted’ through moderate filters to clean it up and make it presentable.

As far as moderates are just good people doing good things they are relatively harmless. Of course, since they are just good people doing good things, they would in all likelihood be doing good things even if the religion didn’t exist.

The bigger problem however, is that moderates make religions acceptable to the wider public by ‘de-fanging’ it and thereby promote and engender stultifying attitudes like valuing myths over reality, disregarding reason in favour of blind faith, accepting arguments from authority, guilt, sin, etc… Moderates facilitate the acceptance of these poisonous, anti-progressive, anti-humanist constructs by forcing a veneer of respectability over the otherwise unacceptable and irrational doctrines that lie beneath. In short, they make religion seem harmless… until enough people buy into enough of it that myths like creationism start to seep into the public mind and edge out established scientific facts like evolution. Before you know it, creationism is being taught in schools as legitimate science and we have started on a slippery slope back to the Middle Ages where just the fact that they contradict religious doctrine was enough for theories to be un-pursuable.

*Religion is like love. Love often leads to pain, suffering and fighting; but should we get rid of love?*

This is a false analogy. Religion is nothing like love. Love is a human emotion. As such, love is a natural part of a normal, healthy human life. We sometimes suffer pain because of love but most people accept this experience as something which makes us more complete as a person and in the end wiser.

Religion, on the other hand, is a set of doctrines about how the world is and the principles it operates by unencumbered by the burden of providing evidence for these speculations. It is therefore artificial, unreliable and certainly not intrinsic or even helpful to human life.

In the end, love just doesn’t come with all of the unwanted and potentially harmful baggage that religion does which is why we can be in favour of getting rid of religion while keeping love around.

*What about atheist regimes (Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot, etc.) which have committed more crimes against human rights than religion ever has?*

The first thing to note about this argument is that it in no way absolves Christianity for its own significant crimes against humanity nor does it in any way ameliorate them by comparison. Is this what Christianity has come to; no longer arguing that it is good in and of itself, only attempting to infer goodness by inviting comparison to some of the most terrible dictators human history has ever seen?

The second thing is that the term “atheist regime” is a complete misnomer. It doesn’t even make sense. What the believer is trying to get at with this is a government (regime) that is built on atheistic principles. The problem, as we saw way back in the first section, is that atheism is a negative position which means, by definition, it doesn’t have any principles. Atheism is the *absence* of a belief in God. That’s all. It’s not materialism, it’s not science, it’s not humanism.[[26]](#footnote-26) It’s just the lack of a belief in a Deity. How can a regime be built on the lack of a belief? It can’t. What an atheistic position *does* do is free us from the restrictions of religious thinking and open the door for other things such as materialism, humanism, enlightenment values, and scientific insights to take precedence.

The implied connotation, of course, is that atheists are Godless villains without any morals who don’t care about anyone except themselves. They would have us believe that a ‘regime’ instigated by such people will naturally lead to genocides and wanton violence. Of course, the typical atheist is nothing like this. We have seen time and time again throughout human history that belief in a Deity does not ensure a loving, generous, kind believer. There is absolutely nothing in atheism which says that since there’s no heaven and your neighbour has a better stereo than you, you should beat him up and take it. Atheism says there is no God. That’s all. You just can’t get from that to the idea that inflicting bodily harm on others is okay. Atheism is not about morality. The Christians who comment on atheism invariably put too much into it, giving it, for example, a moral standpoint that says, ‘everything is permitted’ and which therefore can lead to shocking crimes. Atheism is silent on morality, but it has more than enough scope to allow progressive, humanist thought traction in our lives. As proven by the many atheists toady who, even though they don’t believe in God, somehow manage to overcome what many Christians seem to think is an instinctive atheist drive to become murderers and rapists.

My third point is that the “atheist regimes” that often get quoted as examples of what happens when Christianity is no longer the dominant political player are actually not what the arguing believer thinks they are. The believer wants to show how terribly off course everything drifted when modernity forced Christianity from its pedestal and took off on its path of Enlightenment. “Look at the horrors that befall humanity when Christianity wasn’t holding the reins” they say.

None of the dictators of these “atheist regimes” ever quoted by the over-zealous believer embraced Enlightenment values or secular humanism in any way, shape or form. Germany was a hub of scientific enquiry and discovery before Hitler but afterwards it had forfeited its place at the forefront of scientific progress. These dictators all waged anti-individual, anti-rational, and anti-freedom campaigns that sought to establish dominance and create power for a select few. These are not the modern secular principles that the believer wants to show up as inferior to Christianity and which led to the tyranny and oppression we saw so much of in the early 20th century. And… I am going to go one step further and suggest that not only were these regimes nothing to do with modernity or secularism, they were in fact, only a modified form of religion.

These dictators stood for a regime that was totalitarian and bordered on the Messianic. All these individuals imagined a vertical political structure with them at the top. They demanded absolute obedience and rewarded, even imagined, dissent or resistance with death. They were also often elitist in a way which manifested as extreme xenophobia and the privileging or superiority of a single race over others. Does this sound like anything else we have discussed at length in this essay? All of those qualities perfectly fit Christianity.

God is at the top. He demands ‘love’ from his faithful followers and if He doesn’t get it, He casts the wayward individual into hell for all eternity. Finally, Christianity is inherently elitist and it used to be even more so as Jesus repeatedly affirmed, “Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel”[[27]](#footnote-27) and God Himself made quite clear in the Old Testament with His sole concern going out to His people, the Israelites.

If these regimes had continued, there is every chance that two or three generations afterwards the founding dictators would have been venerated as gods. We see the most striking example of this in North Korea where the Kim family have more or less successfully brainwashed (or coerced, which almost amounts to the same thing given enough time) an entire country into regarding them as at least semi-divine and associated with various miraculous happenings.

So it turns out that these horrific regimes which shock us all so much today and which Christians point to as examples of what happens when modern secular values (founded on the Enlightenment, humanism, the scientific method, etc.) are advanced ahead of religious faith (and by ‘religious’ they mean Christian because, like atheists, they don’t believe in any other religion remember), are actually only thinly veiled variations on the basic religious model. Ironically, Christians in (rightly) criticising these totalitarian regimes wind up lambasting their own warped model for society.

Final comments

The bottom line is that religion had more than a thousand years to give us health, prosperity, and wellbeing but it failed on all counts. Religion is inherently divisive, dividing the world into those people who will go to heaven and those headed for hell. Believers proudly display this divisiveness when they denounce the beliefs/doctrines of other religions as myths, while simultaneously proclaiming the truth of their own myths.

Religion is a monolithic, top-down, one-size fits all structure that declares it has the one True answer that you had better believe… or else. They maintain their Truth even (and sometimes *especially*) when it flies in the face of scientific fact and reason, evidence is disparaged in favour of faith, and logical arguments are replaced by arguments from authority.

In this section, we have seen Christians repeatedly appeal to the good deeds good Christians do as evidence that Christianity is a force for good. And yet religion is not about relief agencies and international aid. Take away these things and the religion would remain, completely unaffected. The Christian arguments have all focused on the ‘good’ believer who just wants to do good things, but this sounds more like a secular humanist to me. The debaters for the motion, in claiming that religion has been a force for good, have strangely ignored the things that lie at the heart of religion; i.e. the belief in a supernatural divinity, heaven, hell, sin, salvation, etc. Ignore these things and the religious aspect completely disappears. You are just left with nice people doing nice things, which have nothing to do with religion.

Personal Experience

*I’m rational and I’ve had a personal experience of God, therefore personal experiences are valid as evidence for the existence of God*

This is an attempt to bring a fundamentally subjective and notoriously unreliable event into repute by claiming that it was experienced by a ‘rational’ individual. The problem of course, is that even ‘rational’ people aren’t rational all the time. A scientist may be highly rational when at work, working through issues in a methodical and logical fashion, but then drop all of that the minute she enters a church. Many situations arise in which people fail to act rationally, e.g. anytime emotion is heightened, anytime hopes or bias cloud our better judgement, desire to conform to opinions of those around us, etc. Just because a typically rational individual has a personal experience of God doesn’t mean the person was thinking rationally at that time nor does it mean that the experience itself was somehow ‘rational’.

There is also another just as compelling reason why we should disregard personal experiences like this; believers from all religions have had them. A Muslim will tell you Allah spoke to him, a Hindu will talk of how Vishnu appeared in his dream, a Christian will recount crying tears of joy in church one day for no reason, and a new ager will reveal how he felt his consciousness merge with the oneness of Being while meditating.

That these experiences are powerful, I have no doubt. I also have no doubt that these people actually did experience something; I just don’t think it was what they think it was. If we accept one as being valid then we have to accept all as being valid, but this goes against the ‘atheism of all religions except mine’ prejudice that ironically prevails in every believer’s mind. The only recourse for the believer is to say that everyone else is deluded about their experience and theirs alone is true, but this is obviously hypocritical, and just as obviously false.

The only other option is to consider that God has many faces and all religions are perhaps merely different perspectives on the same underlying Truth. This might be possible but the differences among the different religions make this kind of theory very hard to make stick. Even religions that are closely related, like Chrisitanity and Judaism, offer very different accounts of the Truth and the way to achieve salvation.

The Problem of Evil

This is the only positive argument I will raise against religion in the body of this essay because it is a powerful one and one which was raised in a few of the debates I watched. The problem of evil basically says that there is so much suffering and badness in the world that this is impossible to reconcile with a loving, all powerful Creator God who has our best interests at heart. *If* there is a Divine Creator, He must either be evil since He allows so much suffering to continue unabated or He must be powerless to stop it. I should point out that ‘evil’ in this sense is just suffering or bad things that happen; don’t confuse this with some kind of personification of evil (i.e. a devil) or some ‘Evil’ concept that has an independent existence beyond being a mere descriptor of events. The remainder of this section will look at religious attempts to explain the problem of evil.

*Evil points to the existence of good*

First, this is a trivial claim. There is evil so there is good as well. Well, of course! No one is debating that! Evil things (defined as things which conflict with and oppose my desires or well-being) happen and good things (defined as things which help me achieve my desires and further my well-being) happen, but this doesn’t get us beyond humans to some capital G ‘Good’ that can be thought of as God.

The problem, as I mentioned in the introduction to this section, is when you confuse the existence of evil (as bad things) and good (as good things) with the existence of Evil and Good as concepts existing independently of the humans who experience and define them as such. The problem of evil references the suffering that happens in the world, not some supra-human, Absolute, Evil that actually exists somewhere. The former is a real-world phenomenon while the latter is a mythical/religious concept invented by humans.

Second, even if we grant that ‘the good’ is something more than just mundane, real-world good things, this claim still fails to address the actual problem raised by the objection. The Good/Divine Creator, supposedly inferred by the argument, seems unable or unwilling to prevent the suffering we see in the world.

*Evil is just the privation of good*

This attempts to explain away the reality of evil, not by denying that bad things happen but by rendering evil ontologically empty. It is saying that evil has no positive existence of its own. Evil is only the absence of good. The first argument (that evil points to the existence of good) admitted both evil and good; this argument however, denies that evil exists while maintaining that good does.

The first problem you may have noticed is that this argument has again confused good and evil with Good and Evil. It assumes that the Good is something more than an adjective used by humans to describe events that happen in their lives. We know this for sure because it doesn’t make sense to say that evil (as in suffering) is just the absence of good (as in good events). The absence of good events does not necessarily mean that one is suffering.

The confusion is also revealed when we realise that merely defining evil as the privation of good does nothing to lessen our suffering or explain it. It claims evil (suffering) is ontologically empty… and yet we still suffer while God is supposedly lounging around in heaven.

Second, even if we allow this substantial error, there is absolutely no reason to believe that evil is just the privation of good. Perhaps, as Schopenhauer thought, the opposite is true and happiness is actually nothing more than the absence of suffering.

All in all, this argument is a weak attempt to drop evil out of existence, but even if it made logical sense, we would still be left wondering why we suffer.

*Evil exists in the world because God gave us freewill*

This is a classic answer and seems pretty sturdy on the face of things but as we will see quickly breaks down with just a little prodding.

First, this explanation doesn’t explain natural disasters (aptly nicknamed ‘acts of God’ and more recently termed ‘natural suffering’) and deadly diseases/viruses. Maybe we’ve been given enough rope to hang ourselves but we are definitely getting some help from things beyond our control. One Christian reply is to say that *in the Bible miracles are never to prevent suffering but for a “spiritual purpose”*.

This is doubtful. Am I to believe that God makes a statue bleed but won’t help one of His flock drowning in the sea? Not only that, the problem of evil still remains unsolved; the wording has just changed. Why does God only prevent suffering for a “spiritual purpose” (whatever that is) while His people needlessly suffer?

How about this then, *natural suffering only arises because of natural laws but God created natural laws so that the universe would be orderly and predictable. If there were no natural laws the universe would be ‘whimsical’ and unpredictable.*

Natural suffering only arises because of natural laws?! This is ridiculous logic. Surely a universe where effects happened without causes would result in much more natural suffering than an ordered universe we could predict to some extent.

Not only that, this argument still hasn’t answered why God doesn’t intervene when those natural laws cause events that threaten His chosen ones or His faithful followers. It just tries to get God off the hook for directly causing them but He is still responsible for the carnage that those natural laws sometimes wreck the same way that although Hitler probably never pulled a trigger, no one would pretend that he wasn’t completely responsible for what happened in Nazi Germany.

This line of reasoning is also dangerously heretical. God *had to* create natural laws to make an ordered universe which allowed human beings to flourish but in doing so He couldn’t avoid the suffering that those natural laws sometimes caused. Any sentence that begins, “God had to…” is skating on thin ice because it supposes that God’s power is limited. This is not the omnipotent God Christians pray to every Sunday.

Second, you might still maintain that freewill at least accounts for the suffering we inflict on each other, something which has been called ‘moral evil’. But then we have to wonder why Christians/innocents are just as likely to be caught in the firing line as us ‘dirty atheists’. A typical Christian reply to this is that *if God intervened He would be interfering with the freewill of the criminal and therefore thwarting this cherished freewill*.

Okay, we know that God supposedly values freewill a lot, but do you really expect me to believe that He values the freewill of a sinner breaking all of His rules and destined for hell over the safety and well-being of one of His flock? You might be able to argue that God didn’t cause the holocaust (of course, He didn’t stop it either) but surely 6 million of His people calling out to Him would have at least piqued His interest and incurred a little of His infamous wrath?

Third, we will presumably have freewill in heaven. Heaven will also presumably be free of suffering. So, if it turns out that we can have freewill without suffering after all then this argument falls flat on its face.

Finally, my last objection targets this supposed freewill we have been given. Our choices are follow God’s rules and go to heaven or do what we want and spend an eternity in hell. In New Zealand we call this a Clayton’s free choice, i.e. a fake one. This makes a mockery of freewill. It sounds like God’s so-called unconditional love, which is in fact perfectly conditional on whether or not you love and obey Him and accept Jesus Christ as your personal saviour.

*The problem of evil is too short-sighted. Compared to an eternity of bliss in heaven any suffering we have to endure on earth is insignificant.*

This is absolute rubbish. Tell that to the woman who is gang-raped by thugs. This is such an insensitive and insincere answer to the problem of evil. And like all of the Christian responses in this section still hasn’t answered the question. Why does God allow suffering? I guess this response is attempting to say that when viewed from a Divine perspective our mortal lives are so short and unimportant that our suffering can’t even be called suffering at all. The only problem with this is that none of us are Gods so from *our* perspectives the suffering can be almost unbearable. If God loves us and knows this wouldn’t He bother to take our feelings into consideration?

*The Fall. Human beings used to live under God’s rule but we rejected this and God gave us the world we wanted; a world in which we have full control. This world is then a trial in which we decide whether we want to live in His world or this one.*

So all this suffering is *our* fault. It’s like God is teaching us a lesson. He let us have control of our own destiny so we could see how poorly we would do. This sounds like what a good parent might do at times; letting a child learn from his or her own mistakes. But would we let our children suffer to the extent that the human race has suffered for however long you think it has been since the Fall? This little incident has gone way beyond a lesson. Essentially God has abandoned us… at least until we die, that is. Can we still maintain He loves and wants a personal relationship with us even as He continues to stick it to us for that one fatal mistake of our great, great, great… grandmother, Eve? Not even God could be that malicious.

*Who are we to judge God? We aren’t even in possession of all the facts so we shouldn’t pretend to be able to judge God for what He does.*

Who are we? We are intelligent creatures, created by God (no less!), who are suffering! In the Book of Job, Job asks God to appear and answer why He has visited so much suffering upon him. God answers in exactly this way. He rants for pages and pages about how such an insignificant, puny creature like Job can dare question why God does what He does, until Job is finally broken and repents and apologises to the supremely powerful God for even asking the question. Is this our model of Perfection and Love?

This response is an appeal to the unknowable nature of God. I have never liked this ‘fall-back’ card for anything Christians can’t explain, especially since they usually pretend to be so confident about what God wants and expects from us in so many other areas e.g. His supposed love of freewill.

At bottom, this response, which basically says we can’t know the mind of God, doesn’t explain anything. It admits the problem and then dodges it in quite an inadequate fashion.

*For most of us the good far outweigh the bad*

I have to confess I’m not exactly sure what this response is getting at. Is it claiming that there isn’t that much suffering in the world? Surely not, because we all know this to be absolutely false. Even for those of us lucky enough to be in developed countries, there is a lot of unnecessary suffering going on all the time.

Even if this ridiculous statement were true and, say for 80% of people the good did outweigh the bad, this doesn’t make it right that 20% are suffering at such high levels. Nor does it explain why there is any suffering for the 80%. A person who gets assaulted may experience more good than bad events in his life but that assault might have a very long negative effect. Is happiness just having more good events than bad ones in a life? I doubt it.

This response is so inadequate that it is hard to believe and so stupid that I only included it for completeness. I can’t imagine someone genuinely proposing this as a solution to the problem of evil (except the debater I heard).

Final Arguments for Christianity

*Evolution can’t account for the depth of human evil. This is evidence of something greater than evolution.*

You have to love this one. We heard earlier that evolution couldn’t account for human kindness, now we learn that it can’t account for human evil either…

However, I do think that evolution can account for the depth of human evil. Why would it not be able to? Evolution is just a word which describes the way living organisms change over time. And when it comes down to it, human evil is nothing more than the actions of one of those living organisms.

I propose that evolution (through natural selection) gave us the complexity of our brains and our genetics plus our environmental influences give us our personalities which in turn determine how good/evil we are. I don’t think this is an unbelievable story, if you accept evolution, which most of these religious debaters do.

Although even if we allow that this statement is true and accept that evolution can’t account for the depth of human evil, what must we conclude from this? We can only postulate some kind of evil God who enjoys suffering and misery. This doesn’t get us any closer to the Christian God.

The only way I can think of getting from an evil God (say, the devil) to a good God from this starting point is to propose that some kind of balance must exist in the universe. Unfortunately, we don’t have any reason to believe this to be true. The existence of a devil in no way affirms the existence of God, and vice versa.

*Christianity is not wishful thinking because it also postulates a hell and a devil*

I agree... with one small amendment. Christianity is not *only* wishful thinking. It is also coercive. Christianity operates with both a carrot and a stick. One way of thinking about Christianity is that it is wishful thinking in as far as it postulates the existence of a parent God who loves you and is looking out for your best interests and is coercive in that it also tells us God’s opposite is always waiting in the wings to collect those who break the rules and whisk them away for an eternity of torment and torture.

We have to remember that the doctrines and myths of Christianity weren’t handed down in a single afternoon in a big meeting between God, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and St. Paul. Of course, Christianity doesn’t *only* represent wishful thinking. It is an institution that developed over the course of hundreds of years in response to a variety of forces which moulded it in ways that produced both positive and negative aspects. All in all, Christianity looks exactly the way we would expect it to if it was made by humans.

Another way of thinking about Christianity though is that people don’t just wish for a loving parent God who rewards them with an eternity in heaven. They also wish for a devil who can punish their enemies. In other words, they *want* the bad that comes with the good because anything else would seem unfair. Imagine if God had opened the gates of heaven to Hitler. Does this seem right? Does it seem fair? Is it the kind of universe you would wish for? If not, then luckily, if you believe in Christianity your wish will be fulfilled and there is no way Hitler made it to heaven.

*Thinking has always been a part of Christianity*

This is partly true… but mostly false. Another amendment will correct things for us. Thinking, within strictly prescribed and heavily enforced limits, has always been a part of Christianity. One only has to look as far as St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas to see that thinking could be embraced by the church. However, there is a condition. You must not contradict doctrine. In case you are unclear about how seriously the church took this crime, they gave it a name, ‘heresy’, and punished it to the full extent of the law. If you want to speculate on *how* God can hear every prayer at once, all power to you, but if you want to speculate on *whether* God can hear every prayer at once… be careful.

A Couple of Final Arguments Against Christianity

* A person’s faith is based primarily on where they are born. If you are born in India to Indian parents, you are likely to believe in Hinduism. If you are born in America, you are more likely to believe in Christianity. This makes your religion dependent on something as random as what your parents believed.

Christians generally invoke *the genetic fallacy* here which says that the truth or falsity of an idea is completely unrelated to the source of that idea. This is generally true but the religious case is a little unique. When considered in light of the fact that God is supposed to care about everyone, it seems odd that we get out faith from as mundane a source as our family and environment. Some people may spend their whole lives without even hearing about Christianity. These people then have no chance of salvation; they didn’t even have a choice (via freewill which God so loves) and this was through no fault of their own. This system seems horrendously unfair and as such stands as a problem that every religion needs to explain.

* The whole history of God’s ‘favoured’ animal seems strange in light of a loving God (Warning: if you don’t believe in evolution this point will be moot). Consider; for over two hundred thousand years homosapiens eked out a painful, short life and then finally two thousand years ago God took pity on us and came down revealing Himself to a single illiterate tribe in the Middle East and offered them salvation.

Two questions immediately demand answers from this. (1) Why did God wait so long before appearing to us? (2) Why did he only appear to one tiny, insignificant tribe in the Middle East, especially when China was thriving just over the border? If you’re anything like me you can’t help drawing the comparison between this story and modern stories of UFOs who only reveal themselves to unknown, politically unimportant people in the countryside.

* There is a natural, logical path from religion to violence because its central tenet is that faith is more important than reason. While this doesn’t mean that every believer will become a fundamentalist aeroplane hijacker, it does show that faith has the power to make people do things they would *never* do otherwise. How many secular criminals would strap a bomb to their chests or self-immolate? The danger here, as I said, is not that religion *necessarily* leads to violence but that it devalues reason which is our best method for avoiding violence. If you truly believe your God wants you to shoot an abortion doctor then all the reasoning in the world won’t help.

Of course, I am not saying that all violence comes from religion, or even that most violence does; all I’m saying is that religion gives us one more reason to fight amongst ourselves. And it’s an especially dangerous one because the role of reason is downplayed.

* Religion has forged for itself some kind of privileged status in our minds so that it isn’t subject to the same standards we impose on everything else. I will only mention one example of this here.

The Catholic Church is still alive and kicking after all of the child rape scandals that have come to light. This is absolutely obscene. If such widespread, pervasive, criminal, and immoral (by any standards) behaviour had been discovered in any other institution, that institution would be embroiled in legal cases for decades, people would be going to jail left, right, and centre, and certainly, absolutely, unequivocally, *never* survive to continue its business. However, the Pope stands up to offer an apology and everyone moves on like nothing happened!! This is astonishing! Countless priests all over the world have been molesting children for decades if not longer!! Does this not indicate that something is fundamentally wrong with the Church and its practices!? These people are supposed to be the representatives of God. If God’s representatives molesting your children won’t make you at least question your faith, I guess nothing will. (See the point above about the abandonment of reason)

* Science is genuine in its quest for understanding; this modern, pseudo-scientific strand of religion isn’t. Currently, the Christians spearheading this ‘religion is scientific’ trend are all on board with the Big Bang theory because it (kind of) fits in nicely with their doctrine. But what would happen if it was found to be untenable or a better theory was worked out?

Scientists would argue about it, test it, debate it, and then if it passed through all these automatic checks and balances they would accept it and get to work re-working their cosmological models.

Religious believers would first call it rubbish designed just to avoid the (alleged) ‘close-fit’ with the Bible. Then, after the theory has become mainstream science, they would find a way to accommodate it with their doctrine. Finally, they would argue that their religious texts espoused the theory first, two thousand years ago!

You may or may not agree with my portrayal above, but it doesn’t matter. The key point is that religion is non-falsifiable. Even when it throws its lot in with a particular theory, if that theory is later proven to be false, religion just rolls with the punches and pops out the other side unscathed. Another way to put it is that *every* scientific theory proves religion, which of course means that none of them do. Bottom line: religion has nothing to do with science. This is why it annoys me when believers claim that their faith is based on or ‘proven’ by science.

Conclusion

This essay has focused on the arguments offered in debates by religious speakers who all claim that their faith is or can be founded on reason, logic, and science. As someone who respects reason, logic, and science, I take offence at this claim and have tried to demonstrate that this religious reasoning is false, its logic is flawed, and the science is ‘pseudo-’. Christianity’s greatest legacy is that it has made irrationality and muddle-headed thinking respectable.

Christianity has been an important part in the development of Western civilisation although I have argued that it has been more of a hindrance than a help. Our thinking has been forever changed thanks to Christianity and it has left a couple of indelible scars on our collective conscience. With the Pope condemning the use of condoms in Africa, pastors blaming earthquakes on God’s wrath, priests molesting children, prominent American politicians suggesting that women can somehow avoid becoming pregnant after being raped (hence abortion even in rape cases is unacceptable), and misguided Christians continuing to lobby against potential life-saving advances like stem-cell treatment, Christianity is promising it has a few more scars left to inflict on us yet.

1. These are admittedly based on materialistic principles (the universe is physical after all) but to argue that materialistic laws *can’t*, by definition, go beyond the physical still doesn’t help. We are still left with a physical universe and no reason for believing in anything more. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This is what I have called the ‘lite’ version. I see this as a failure to fully perceive just how weak the arguments for the motion really are. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This is what I have called the ‘strong’ version. This seems a little bit of a cop out to me because there are many important things in life that we can’t *know* (things concerning morality or any one of a number of crucial decisions we have to make throughout our lives) and yet we don’t sit on the fence regarding them. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Note that it may be turn out to be true that even these things (subatomic particles and the universe, which actually turn out to be very similar) do have causes, but we certainly can’t make this claim at the moment. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. And let’s not forget it wasn’t that long ago that Christians were telling us God made the universe in seven days. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Some Christians actually do think like this. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. I put ‘known’ in inverted commas because science (as a discipline), unlike religion, is characterised by its willingness to revise previous ‘truths’ when new evidence is discovered. A prominent example of this is afforded by Einstein’s general theory of relativity superseding Newton’s theory of gravity. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Note that this is not *good* as in, good for us, or what makes us happy. This is a more objective, absolute standard of *good* that applies above human desires or wishes. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. I have argued that we can in fact have ‘objective’ moral values without God so in the future I will substitute this for ‘absolute’ moral values which we cannot produce ourselves. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. It’s also why God doesn’t run a democracy, His is a totalitarian regime all the way through. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Wrong for us – as opposed to *absolutely* wrong. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. And even if she were, the people *still* don’t have to listen to her. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. A Christian might exclaim that this can hardly be considered true morality. It is nothing more than self-interest dressed up in ‘right’ actions. Self-interest is the opposite of true moral behavior which should always be other-oriented first. This argument takes us a little beyond the scope of this essay however it will suffice to silence our Christian detractor if we merely point out that Christian morality based on rules given by God (adherence to which will be rewarded with an eternity in heaven and failure to comply with will be punished by an eternity in hell) offers an even flimsier basis for a ‘true’ morality. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Astonishingly this is something many Christians actually take pride in. We have fought so hard to rid ourselves of servitude on Earth, but as soon as we have done so they willingly and even gratefully place this mantle over their own heads in an afterlife! [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. For those of you who are interested, this is the common thread that connects this version to every other version of the ontological argument from Anselm and Descartes right up to the modern age. They all hinge on God’s perfection requiring that He exist by nature. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. I.e. extra explanations that follow after the first ‘explanation’ is made. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Don’t be misled by common expressions such as, “I have faith that if I throw this ball in the air, it will be drawn back down by gravity”. In these situations, we clearly aren’t using the word ‘faith’ in accordance with its strict meaning. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Some Christian commentators have sought to play this down but this amounts to nothing more than more revisionist nonsense. I examine this claim in more detail in another essay and won’t spend any more time on it here. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Christian appeals to extreme cultures like the Spartans, as examples of a culture where ‘soft’ notions like forgiveness were discouraged, are meaningless here because they were exactly that, extreme. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. This is twice as ridiculous when you consider that Jesus was actually God in the first place, but this is not the place for that discussion. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. I apologise for switching between using the words ‘religion’ and ‘Christianity’ so freely. This really does serve to illustrate how everything I am saying here applies not just to Christianity but to all religions as well. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. You might think that the analogy is flawed because our believer would be promptly disabused of his childish notion at Christmas when no presents magically appear under his Christmas tree on Christmas Eve. This is completely irrelevant. One might think that Christians would be equally disabused of their faith when God continuously fails to answer their prayers. Instead they conjure up reasons to explain this; from they didn’t have enough faith to their hope was not what was actually best for them (“God sent me what I needed, not what I wanted”). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. This can happen very easily because the authority figure is absent… because he doesn’t exist. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. And of course there are a lot of secular aid organisations helping a lot of people in the world. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Their disbelief does not arise because evolution is so hard to believe (“we came from monkeys?!”) because every Christian believes that atoms are 99% empty space and it is the earth that moves, not the sun, even though these are virtually impossible to believe based on physical evidence. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Atheism often leads to the adoption of these principles but it doesn’t necessarily have to. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Matthew 10:5-6. By the way ‘Gentile’ means non-Jewish. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)