Discussions with My Friend: An Introduction to the Gospel of Jesus Christ By David Stewart

Chapter 01: Is there a God? Does Science Disprove God?

Is there a God?
To understand our own place and purpose in the universe, we must first determine whether a higher power or supreme being exists. If human life is a chance event and mortality represents our entire conscious existence, life would lack greater purpose or meaning. Without a divine creator, there could be no absolute good or absolute evil, and there would be no accountability for evil or recompense for good beyond what is experienced in life.

Polls consistently show that approximately 96% of Americans believe in the existence of a Supreme Being. Notwithstanding secular philosophies and declining rates of religious participation, the percentage of Americans who claim to believe in God has not changed in over sixty years.[1] In nations like Russia and China where atheism was taught as a state religion, the number of atheists is higher, yet still most people believe in a supreme being or divine power.
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Until modern times, almost everyone believed in the existence of God or gods. In the age of high-yield agriculture, rapid transit, and modern medicine, many feel less dependent on God. We understand more about the world around us, and are less inclined to attribute to the divine that which is not fully understood.

Does Science Disprove God?
Many voices claim that there is no God and no reality beyond what the senses can perceive. In recent years, some celebrity scientists have engaged in a crusade to discredit the concept of God. Stephen J. Gould claimed: "whatever we think of God, his existence is not manifest in the products of nature."[2] Richard Dawkins has argued that "God is a delusion, religion is a virus," and that all forms of faith are "foolish nonsense." The beliefs of skeptics and atheists are often represented as being founded on unassailable evidence without any of the bias or preconception that are readily attributed to religious believers. Such scholars proclaim that scientific theory can explain all natural phenomena, relegating the need to invoke God as a rationale to superstitious primitives.

Multidisciplinary research has increasingly demonstrated the degree to which our own earth is uniquely fine-tuned for life.[3] The discovery only in 2009 of water on the moon and of a previously unnoticed ring around Saturn demonstrate how much about our own solar system remains unknown. The role of other planets in sustaining life on Earth continues to be delineated by astronomical discoveries. For instance, Jupiter acts as what has been termed the vacuum cleaner of the solar system, shielding earth from comet impacts by deflecting many from coming into the inner solar system.[4] The earth and the planets speed up and slow down on their axes without apparent explanation, and are never quite where theory would predict. The solar

system, and the universe in general, demonstrate dynamic properties of growth and self-regulation which contemporary astronomy has yet to fathom or explain. Thermodynamic theory would demand that minute inefficiencies and accumulated discrepancies tending toward greater disorder would lead to the solar system falling apart and the universe winding down and dying,[5] when in fact the universe is expanding and new star systems continue to be born while maintaining remarkable order. Modern theories surmise insist that between two-thirds and three-quarters of the mass and energy in the universe is invisible "dark matter" and "dark energy," the qualities and essence of which remain obscure, whereas some scholars doubt whether they exist at all. Discrepancies exist with putative dates, as Phillip Johnson observed: "new measurements seem to indicate that the universe as a whole is substantially younger than the oldest stars within it, a logical contradiction."[6]

Some scholars have claimed that our solar system is nothing special and have postulated that different types of life could develop with different universe constants such as "unusual life forms that, say, feed off black holes."[7] Yet the proponents of such theories acknowledge that they "don't know what it would look like or how it would work," demonstrating that their assertions that our universe is "nothing special" are mere speculation without evidentiary support. Astrophysicist and religion critic Steven Weinberg admits that he is unable to "explain why the laws of nature have to be precisely what they are, but acknowledges that task might be impossible," and notes that unconventional and unprovable hypotheses like "anthropic reasoning" may have to be invoked to provide a naturalistic explanation for man's existence.[8] After all of the talk of the need to ground one's beliefs in solid fact and proven logic that is invoked to contrast the "incontrovertible mandate of science" with religion, the advocates of natural philosophy ultimately rely on tenuous assumption and metaphysical speculation rather than documentary proof for the question of origins. When evidence and reason fall short, the rhetoric degenerates into hand-waving, inductive leaps, and polemics.

Naturalism's best attempts at explaining origins fall short of answering existential questions. Looking beyond the metaphysical leaps of the Big Bang theory to its conclusion that the universe began from a small mass of expanding matter, one is still left with the question of how that original matter came about. Was the first matter self-existent and eternal, or was it created and brought into being? Attempts to explain away any need for God reach beyond the limits of human knowledge and understanding. The best scholars and scientists acknowledge not only what is known, but also what they do not know. The ability to distinguishing between solid fact, logical deduction, and mere speculation, to assess the strengths and weaknesses of different pieces of evidence, and to recognize the limits of one's own understanding and the data at hand, are foundational prerequisites of solid scholarship. Although human knowledge has made vast strides in new information continues to be gathered rapidly, much about our universe still remains unknown, and science is still very much in the process of investigation and discovery. Observation, study, and scholarly analysis are worthy goals, yet those attempting to use learning to discredit the existence of God have gone far beyond the mandate of science. Our limited knowledge about that which is proximate to us would caution thoughtful individuals from drawing overextended conclusions about events remote in space and time about which we have little data.

Modern science, for all its accomplishments, has not made God obsolete. The annals of scientific accomplishment are filled with individuals from Aristotle to Newton to Einstein who believed deeply in God. Newton attributed his discoveries to God and devoted more time to the study of scriptures than science. Many believing scientists have found convergence between science and true religion on key points, while noting that most of the seeming contradictions arise from either bad science or untrue or misunderstood religion. Science and religion provide different types of information, and closer examination often allows reconciliation of diverse perspectives sometimes claimed to be in conflict. Religious believers have found various ways of reconciling supposed conflicts between the precepts of modern science and teachings of scripture. This does not mean that all such reconciliations are equally valid, but merely that our imperfect comprehension of peripheral questions should not be allowed to distract us from the primary question of whether God exists. Metaphysical beliefs regarding the existence of deity and the purpose of life are not conducive to laboratory attempts at proof or disproof. Existential questions remain matters of faith beyond the purview of contemporary science.

The Implications of Atheism

Let us consider the implications of the atheist's belief that there is no God in the universe. Without God, there can be no absolute standard of right or wrong, no sin, no accountability, and no need for an atonement. If one believes that "when a man was dead, that was the end thereof," it would seem to follow that "every man fared in this life according to the management of the creature; therefore every man prospered according to his genius, and that every man conquered according to his strength; and whatsoever a man did was no crime."[9] Most atheists have personal ethics, even if relativistic ones far displaced from scriptural morality. Yet the same naturalistic reasoning used to discredit religion would declare that even the ethics of atheists arise from vestigial mythology or selfish motives rather than from universal truth or altruistic good.

The natural philosophies provide rationalization for self-willed lifestyles. Yet most people find the necessary conclusion of atheism that life is a pointless no-win endeavor, with death representing the end of conscious existence, to be too depressing. Individuals' reason, conscience, and feelings tell them that spirituality is real and meaningful, and they desire spiritual fulfillment and appeasement of conscience. They want to have their cake and eat it too by living as they please on earth and then hoping to inherit eternal glory. The internal inconsistency of this hybrid of incompatible worldviews does not bother most people as if, in the words of C.S. Lewis, looking too closely might reveal some unpleasant chore.

Finding God's Hand in the Universe

Nearly three millennia ago, the Psalmist wrote: "The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God."[10] Many overlook or take for granted the daily miracles that surround us. Buddha taught: "If we could see the miracle of a single flower clearly, our whole life would change." Gandhi observed: "When I admire the wonders of a sunset or the beauty of the moon, my soul expands in the worship of the creator." The Book of Mormon prophet Alma's words echo today: "all things denote there is a God ... even the earth, and all things that are upon the face of it ... and its motion ... and also all the planets which move in their regular form do witness that there is a Supreme Creator."[11] In a book of modern revelation, the Doctrine and Covenants, the Lord declared: "their courses are fixed, even the courses of the heavens and the earth, which comprehend the earth and all the planets ... And they give light to each other in their times and in their seasons ... The earth rolls upon her wings, and the sun giveth his light by day, and the moon giveth her light by night, and the stars also give their light, as they roll upon their wings in their glory, in the midst of the power of God ... Any man who hath seen any or the least of these hath seen God moving in his majesty and

power."[12] The Book of Moses also teaches that all things bear record of God: "And behold, all things have their likeness, and all things are created and made to bear record of me, both things which are temporal, and things which are spiritual; things which are in the heavens above, and things which are on the earth, and things which are in the earth, and things which are under the earth, both above and beneath: all things bear record of me."[13] God has no obligation to prove himself to the skeptic. Nor would any divine manifestation be sufficient for those who deny evidence of God around them.[14]

The thoughtful person who steps into a room with a large prepared banquet understands that there must have been a cook or cooks, even if he does not see them. Most people do not see the mechanics or factory workers that build their cars and computers, but still understand the absurdity of thinking that their car or computer made itself. Similarly, the order of the universe attests to the existence of a divine creator, even if we do not see him. A blade of grass is more complex than the most sophisticated car or computer; thoughtful individuals can assess the prospects of the universe having "made itself" by random chance without the directing hand of the Creator. The Book of Mormon prophet the Brother of Jared observed that God is "able to show forth great power, which looks small unto the understanding of men."[15] That the remarkable order of the universe is taken for granted by many only demonstrates a lack of understanding of its intricacy. Francis Bacon observed that "It is true that a little philosophy inclineth man's mind to atheism, but depth in philosophy bringeth men's minds about to religion.""

God has not appeared on television with world leaders to make his will indisputably obvious to all. Yet this does not mean that he does not exist, any more than the fact that we do not see the banquet's chef means that the meal made itself. It is likely that God chooses to manifest himself through less obvious means for much the same reason that Jesus spoke in parables: so that those with eyes to see and ears to hear can receive the blessings of faith, but without forcing belief upon those who do not desire to perceive or understand. The fact that God's communications are not found without effort, as C.S. Lewis pointed out, suggests their importance and value.[16] If God were to step in to "prove" himself to skeptics, to impose immediate punishment for evil and reward for good, and to always save the innocent, man's choice between good and evil would be taken away. Keeping God's commands would be a matter of self-interest rather than of virtue. No faith would be developed and life would have little purpose.

Either God exists, or He does not. If God exists, then one must seek to learn about Him and to follow His will. If one concludes that God does not exist, then one must also accept that the end of life represents the end of conscious existence. One cannot have it both ways by living life in a self-willed fashion without seeking to know and follow the will of the supreme being, and then hope for a glorious afterlife as death draws near, or accept the tenets of atheism in rejecting the responsibilities and sacrifices of the faithful while hedging one's bets by accepting religious sacraments or attending religious services on holidays "just in case" God exists.

[1] National Public Radio 9/21/2008.
[2] The Case against Naturalism in Science, Law & Education, Phillip E. Johnson. Intervarsity Press, Downer's Grove, IL., 1995. 75.
[3] The Rare Earth, also Strobel, Lee. The Case for A Creator
[4] Strobel, Lee. The Case for A Creator, 173.
[5] Bros, Peter. At the Gates of the Citadel: The Subjugation of Modern Science, Financial Book Partners, 1994.
[6] Phillip E. Johnson**,** Reason in the Balance: The Case against Naturalism in Science, Law & Education, Intervarsity Press, Downer's Grove, IL., 1995. 94.
[7] Brooks, Michael. "Is our Universe Fine-tuned for Life." New Scientist, 2 August 2008. newscientist.com/article/mg19926673.900-is-our-universe-finetuned-for-life.html.
[8] Linder, Douglas. "Steven Weinberg on Religion and Science," www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/conlaw/weinberg.html.
[9] Alma 30:17-18
[10] Psalm 14:1
[11] Alma 30:44
[12] D&C 88:43-45, 47
[13] Moses 6:63
[14] Mark 8:12
[15] Ether 3:5
[16] C.S. Lewis, need reference