EXCURSUS ON NATURAL THEOLOGY

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Lecture 1: Reformed Epistemology

Today we are turning to a new section in our survey of Christian doctrine. We are in the midst of the study of the doctrine of God. We have completed our subsection on the attributes of God. Now I want to turn to an excursus on natural theology. We are going to leave our doctrinal outline and take an excursus into the subject of natural theology.

What is natural theology? Natural theology can be defined as that branch of Christian theology which seeks to explore the justification of Christianity's truth claims apart from the resources of authoritative divine revelation. It explores what warrant there is for Christian truth claims without appealing to authoritative inspired Scripture. Scripture might still be appealed to as simply human historical documents for historical information, but they will not be taken as authoritative or revelation from God. Natural theology, as the name suggests, is what we can learn about the existence of God apart from the resources of authoritative divine revelation.

One might ask how are the arguments of natural theology to be related to general revelation? You will remember in our study of the doctrine of revelation we saw that God has revealed himself both generally in nature and conscience as well as specially in his Word and in Jesus Christ. Through God’s general revelation in nature and conscience we can have a general knowledge of God as the Creator and Sustainer of the universe.

Are the arguments of natural theology the same as general revelation? I don’t think so. God’s general revelation is his self-disclosure in the created world that he has made. They are, as it were, the fingerprints of the potter in the clay or the telltale traits of the artist in the painting he has made. It is his self-disclosure to us in the created order.

Natural theology is the result of human reflection upon the created order and upon God’s general revelation. The arguments of natural theology are human constructs. These are not divinely given. Therefore, they are fallible and could well be unsound. Every generation will be called upon to refurbish and update and develop arguments for God’s existence based upon the knowledge that they have. So natural theology is not static. It is an evolving project that is constantly renewed.

Therefore, you can feel free to disagree with any of the arguments that are shared in this section on natural theology. These are not divinely given. If you think that these are weak or poor arguments, feel free to reject them. But I hope that you will think that at least some of these arguments are pretty good arguments for God’s existence.

There has been a renaissance of interest in the subject of natural theology over the last half century or so in Anglo-American philosophy. As a result of the renaissance in Christian philosophy that has been taking place over the last several decades, there has also been renewed interest in the project of natural theology – of developing arguments for God’s existence. In fact, I see here on the shelf one such manifestation of that interest.
This is the *Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology* published by Wiley-Blackwell in Oxford in the UK. This is a volume as you can see of considerable size that contains essays by some eleven different philosophers on different arguments for God’s existence. This is some of the most sophisticated natural theology that is available today. This is not a book for beginners.¹ If you are a beginner, you can start with something like *On Guard.* But this is one for professional philosophers, theologians, and scientists.

In our study in this class, we are going to study principally five arguments for God’s existence that I have worked upon personally and have defended and find especially interesting. But as the *Blackwell Companion* indicates, there are many more as well.

In studying natural theology I want to emphasize the importance of developing a cumulative case for the existence of God. We shouldn’t think that the existence of God depends upon the force of any single argument. Rather we ought to think of the arguments as providing cumulative evidence. Each argument reinforces the others so that the cumulative case for God’s existence, I think, is very strong. This is important because even if an argument taken in isolation is not a very strong argument, nevertheless, it could be part of a cumulative case for God’s existence that would warrant belief in God. I think the perfect analogy here will be a case built in a court of law where the prosecution will bring all manner of evidence to try to show that the accused is guilty. Any single piece of evidence might not be convincing. The fingerprint evidence could be explained away. The eyewitness testimony may not be decisive. Perhaps they can identify a motivation that would have led the person to commit the crime but that alone wouldn’t serve to convict. Nevertheless, taken together the cumulative force of all of these considerations could make it beyond a reasonable doubt that the accused is guilty.

In exactly the same way, these arguments should not be just considered in isolation but rather as part of a cumulative case. For example, the ontological argument may strike you as based upon a premise that is reasonable and plausible but it is not one you might think for which you have a compelling reason to believe. You could just as easily perhaps deny it. Or you might think that the cosmological argument from the beginning of the universe taken alone wouldn’t prove that God exists but perhaps taken in conjunction with the argument from the fine-tuning of the universe, the combination of the beginning of the universe and its incredible fine-tuning would lead you to think that it is more plausible than not that a personal creator and designer of the universe exists. You might think that the moral argument alone might not make it sufficient to believe in God, but you might think that the moral argument taken in conjunction with the argument from contingency and the ontological argument present a good case for belief in God.

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¹ 5:00
So don’t think of the arguments of natural theology as links in a chain. A chain is only as strong as its weakest link. Rather, think of the arguments of natural theology as a coat of chain mail where the coat of mail is stronger than any single link because all of the links reinforce each other so that the coat of mail can be very strong even if there are individual links in it that are weaker.

Nevertheless, in presenting these arguments, it seems to me that if each argument can be shown in isolation to be a good argument for God’s existence then your cumulative case is going to be all the more powerful. Right? If the DNA evidence is decisive for the guilt of the accused and you’ve also got independent eyewitness testimony from people who were in a position to see what happened and you’ve got, say, video evidence from the recorder of the person actually committing the crime, any one of these would be sufficient for conviction. Taken together, they make a really overwhelming cumulative case.

What I’ve tried to do in defending these arguments is to consider them in isolation and show how each one, even taken alone, is a good argument.\(^2\) Then so much the stronger when part of a cumulative case.

I formulate the arguments deductively for the case of simplicity and clarity. That is to say, I formulate them in terms of some simple premises which then lead logically to a conclusion. The advantage of doing it this way is, as I say, it makes them very simple to grasp, makes them easy to memorize and use, and it makes them very clear. You can ask the person who is skeptical of them which premise he rejects and why because if he can’t identify a false premise then if the argument is logically valid he has got to agree to the conclusion.

In these deductive arguments, what we have to do is to formulate arguments that will meet a number of conditions for being a good argument.

First of all, the argument needs to be logically valid. That is to say, the conclusion needs to follow from the premises according to the rules of logic. There are only about nine basic rules of inference that govern all reasoning. We can construct arguments for God’s existence using these rules of logic to derive conclusions. A good deductive argument would need to obey the rules of logic – it needs to be logically valid.

In addition to that, the argument also needs to be sound. That is to say, the premises of the argument need to be true. It is not enough just to have a logically valid argument; it also needs to have true premises. If you have an argument which obeys the rules of logic and has true premises then it is guaranteed that the conclusion is true. The conclusion necessarily follows by the rules of logic from the true premises and therefore is also true.
But it is not enough just to have a valid, sound argument. The premises also need to have some sort of warrant for us or some sort of evidence for us whereby we know that they are true. Otherwise, it is trivially easy to formulate arguments for God’s existence. For example, you could have an argument like this:

1. Either the moon is made of green cheese or God exists.
2. The moon is not made of green cheese.
3. Therefore God exists.

That is a sound deductive argument. Each of the premises are true. Either the moon is made of green cheese or God exists. Since God does exist that premise is true. For a disjunction to be true only one of the either-or statements need to be true. The second statement is true – the moon is not made of green cheese. Therefore it follows logically that God exists. So is this a good argument for God’s existence? I don’t think you will find it in any apologetics textbook. Why? Because the only reason you would believe the first premise is because you already believe the conclusion. The only reason you believe that either the moon is made of green cheese or God exists is because you believe the conclusion “God exists.” You are reasoning in a circle. This is called “begging the question” or “circular reasoning.”

The reason for believing the premises cannot be that you believe the conclusion, or you are guilty of begging the question. You need to have some sort of evidence for the truth of the premises (for thinking them to be true).

Here is where it gets controversial. How much evidence do you need in order to believe the premises to be true? Many times atheists will demand that you have compelling evidence for the truth of the premises. If it is even rational not to believe the premise then the argument is a failure. For an argument to be successful (they claim) the evidence must compel belief in the premises. But I think that the vast, vast majority of philosophers would say that that sets the bar for success far too high. In that case there are no successful arguments for anything of significance or importance. In order for the belief in the premises to be justified or warranted they don’t need to be certain or the evidence doesn’t need to be compelling.³

How strong does the evidence have to be for the premises? This is controversial. It is hard to say. Some people would say as long as the evidence is just sufficient to give you permission to believe the premises – that is enough for you to have a good argument and for your belief to be rational. If the evidence is such that you are permitted to believe that by the evidence then that is enough. I am inclined to a somewhat stronger view to say that the evidence should make the premises more plausible than their negations. If the

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³ 15:07
evidence makes the premises more plausible than their contradictories then the rational person should believe the premises rather than the contradictories. They don’t need to be certain. They don’t need to be highly plausible. They just need to be more plausible than their opposites. Some will say that is not sufficient for a good argument because perhaps each premise taken individually is more plausible than its negation but nevertheless when you consider the premises collectively maybe they are not more plausible than the negation of all of them. That could be the case but I think that you’ll find in the arguments that I present we will also meet that somewhat higher standard. For example, in the *kalam* cosmological argument that states:

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

It seems to me that that first premise “Whatever begins to exist has a cause” is virtually certain so that the real crux of the argument will be the plausibility of the second premise – that the universe began to exist. The plausibility or the goodness or the cogency of the argument will not be reduced by any uncertainty attending the first premise which, to my mind, is rationally compelling.

Those are just some random thoughts upon natural theology and building a case for God’s existence.

On your outline, you will see arguments in support of God’s existence. They are listed – the ones we are going to discuss. This is just an overview not meant for you to take notes on. Rather, you have a separate outline for the first of these arguments or considerations which is the proper basicality of belief in God or belief in God as properly basic.

By way of introduction, this isn’t really an argument for God’s existence; rather it’s the claim that you can know that God exists wholly apart from arguments. This is still part of natural theology, I think, because what it is arguing is that belief in God can be rational and warranted apart from Scripture in accord with natural reason, but it doesn’t need to have argument.

The chief proponent of this point of view today is the great philosopher Alvin Plantinga, formerly of the University of Notre Dame now retired. He has a book that I highly recommend called *Warranted Christian Belief*. What Plantinga argues is that belief in God can be warranted (and is warranted) wholly apart from arguments. Plantinga makes clear in this book that he does think that when you consider the arguments for God’s existence it is more than probable that God exists. The probability based upon the arguments alone is that there is a God. But while he thinks the arguments are sufficient to justify and warrant belief in God they are not necessary. You can have warranted rational
belief in God wholly apart from arguments. Plantinga calls this Reformed Epistemology, after the Reformer John Calvin.

Let’s look at this more specifically. I put it in the form of an argument even though this isn’t an argument for God’s existence. It is an argument that belief in God can be warranted wholly apart from arguments. This is an argument for taking belief in God as properly basic.

1. Beliefs which are appropriately grounded may be rationally accepted as basic beliefs not grounded on argument.

Philosophers call beliefs which are rational to hold but not grounded on argument “properly basic beliefs.” They aren’t based on some other beliefs; rather they are part of the foundation of a person’s system of beliefs. Examples of properly basic beliefs would be things like the belief in the reality of the past (that the world wasn’t created five minutes ago with built-in appearances of age), belief in the existence of the external world around you, belief in the presence of other minds like your own. When you think about it, none of those beliefs can be proved on the basis of argument. How could you prove that the world was not created five minutes ago with built-in traces of age like breakfasts in our stomachs that we never really ate and memory traces in our brains of events we never really experienced? How could you prove that you are not a brain in a vat of chemicals wired up with electrodes by some mad scientist who is stimulating you to believe that you are here in this class listening to this lesson? In fact, he could be stimulating your brain to make you think it is absurd that you could be a brain in a vat of chemicals being stimulated by a mad scientist. How could you prove that other people really have an interior mental life like your own? That they are not just like the android Data who give all the external appearances of an individual with a mental life but in fact are just soulless robot-like automatons? There is no way to prove those sorts of beliefs. Rather, these are simply basic beliefs that we have that lie at the foundation of our system of beliefs.

Although these beliefs are basic for us (not founded on argument), that doesn’t mean that they’re arbitrary. Rather these sorts of beliefs are grounded in that they are formed in the context of having certain experiences. For example, in the experiential context of seeing and hearing and feeling things, I naturally form the belief that there is a world of physical objects around me that I am sensing. Thus, my basic beliefs are not arbitrary, but appropriately grounded in experience. There may be no way to prove such beliefs, but you are perfectly rational to hold them. In fact, you’d have to be crazy to think that the world was created five minutes ago or that you are a brain in a vat! These sorts of beliefs

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20:00
are not merely basic, but they are properly basic because of their grounding in experience.

**START DISCUSSION**

*Student:* How would you defend a properly basic belief like the reality of the world to someone with a more Eastern mindset that might say the world is, in fact, an illusion or we are maybe, not brains in a vat, but spirits experiencing an illusion of a world?

*Dr. Craig:* You are quite right. This is what the Buddhist or the Hindu thinks – that this world is *Maya*, or the realm of illusion. I think in response to that type of person, this is exactly how you should respond. You don’t try to argue for the reality of the external world. That is going to be futile because any evidence you appeal to will be from the external world. So what you say to the Buddhist or Hindu is that this is a properly basic belief (and we will talk about defeaters later) and in the absence of any defeater of this belief I am perfectly rational to go with my experience and accept my experience as veridical.⁵ So the person who claims that you are the victim of this massive delusion has a tremendous burden of proof to provide some defeater of that belief. Buddhists and Hindus have tried to do that. They’ve tried to propound these puzzles called *koans* – like the sound of one hand clapping. When you think about these, these supposedly demonstrate the absurdity of reason and the world around us. But I think those could all be resolved. They are not convincing arguments. So we are perfectly rational in the face of the Buddhist or Hindu to accept our experience of the external world as veridical. We will say something more about defeaters later, but that does come in here. Don’t think that because a belief is properly basic that it is indubitable or indefeasible.

*Student:* With the Buddhist you could also ask the question how they know they exist. That is properly basic. That is totally subjective. Following on you could ask, do you have a schedule? Do you have a calendar? Do you have a watch?

*Dr. Craig:* What you are emphasizing is that you could also try to defeat his belief by showing incoherences in it, or the unlivability of it – the practical impossibility of living with it. So why adopt such a view in the absence of good arguments for it?

*Student:* Nobody would ever live their life with that. The evolutionist would never live their life with such improbabilities.

*Dr. Craig:* As Ravi Zacharias has often said, *When I am in India, if I step into the street, it is either me or the bus. It is not both/and.* Even the Hindu or the Buddhist lives by the law of contradiction and recognizes the reality of the external world.

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⁵ 25:00
Student: What if an atheist were to insist that atheism were properly basic, as I think Ayn Rand would if she were alive today?

Dr. Craig: Really? I would like to hear that. I’ve often wondered about that. I don’t know of any atheist that does say that because it is hard on atheism to think of what sort of experience would make belief in the non-existence of God properly basic. As we will see when I get to premise (2), the theist (and particularly the Christian) can say that belief in God is properly basic because of the witness of the Holy Spirit to his own spirit. So he has a mechanism for grounding belief in the existence of God. But I can’t see what the atheist could say. Maybe the atheist could say, Confronted with horrendous evils and suffering in the world, it is just properly basic that there is no God. But if that is what he says then Christian philosophers can offer defeaters of that by showing there is no incoherence in the belief of an all-powerful and all-loving God and the existence of horrendous evil. I think the project of claiming that atheism is properly basic is one that has very dim prospects because of the lack of any sort of mechanism for appropriately grounding it. Remember it needs to be properly basic – it needs to be appropriately grounded.

END DISCUSSION

2. Belief that the biblical God exists is appropriately grounded.

This is the way that people in the Bible knew God, as professor John Hick (who was my doctoral mentor) explains:

God was known to them as a dynamic will interacting with their own wills, a sheer given reality, as inescapably to be reckoned with as destructive storm and life-giving sunshine . . . . They did not think of God as an inferred entity but as an experienced reality. To them God was not . . . An idea adopted by the mind, but an experiential reality which gave significance to their lives.6

What professor Hick is saying is that for biblical believers, God was an experienced reality, not the conclusion of a syllogism. I want to argue that, in fact, belief in God’s existence is appropriately grounded in the experience of God through the witness of the Holy Spirit.7

Rather than plunge into that at this time, we will end a bit early today but with the promissory note that the next time we are together we will look at the inner witness of the Holy Spirit, how that warrants belief in God (in the Christian God indeed) to the believer,

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7 30:13
and also I will argue to the unbeliever as well. Then we will talk about the question of
defeaters of this belief and how it will relate to those. We will hold that until next time.\textsuperscript{8}
Lecture 2: The Self-Authenticating Witness of the Holy Spirit

Last time we began an excursus in natural theology or arguments for the existence of God. The first topic that we wanted to undertake is the proper basicality of belief in God. This is not an argument for God’s existence, rather it is the claim that you can know that God exists, have a perfectly rational belief in God, without any sort of arguments for God’s existence.

Last time I shared with you something about properly basic beliefs. Beliefs which are appropriately grounded can be taken in a properly basic way. It is perfectly rational to hold these beliefs even though we may not be able to argue for the truth of these beliefs. Important examples would include things like the belief in the reality of the external world or belief in the reality of the past. These are sorts of things that you can’t prove on the basis of argument and evidence but you are perfectly rational to hold in a properly basic way as rooted in your experience.

What I argued then was that belief in the biblical God is appropriately grounded so that belief in God can be taken in a properly basic way. I want to look first at the role of the Holy Spirit in believing in a properly basic way in God’s existence and in the great truths of the Gospel.

I would argue that fundamentally the way in which we know that God exists and that Christianity is true is by the self-authenticating witness of God’s Holy Spirit. Now what do I mean by the self-authenticating witness of God’s Holy Spirit? Let me mention six points by way of explanation.

1. *The experience of the Holy Spirit is veridical and unmistakable for him who has it.*

That is to say, if you are a person who genuinely is experiencing the inner witness of the Holy Spirit you can’t mistake that for something else and think that it is just another god or some sort of fraudulent experience. You cannot mistake it. It is a veridical experience – that is to say, a genuine authentic experience of God himself.

But this doesn’t mean it is irresistible or indubitable. I think it is unmistakable and veridical for the person who has it, but nevertheless through sin we can quench the Holy Spirit in our lives. We can resist the Holy Spirit. This experience is not necessarily an irresistible or indubitable experience for him who has it.

2. *A person who enjoys the witness of the Holy Spirit does not need supplementary arguments or evidence in order to know (and know with confidence) that he is in fact experiencing the Spirit of God.*
3. Such an experience does not function in this case as a premise in an argument from religious experience to God, but rather it is just the immediate experience of God himself.

It is important to understand that the self-authenticating witness of the Holy Spirit is not an argument for Christianity from religious experience. It is not saying, “We have these religious experiences; the best explanation of these is that they are genuine and veridical and therefore Christianity is true.” It is not an argument. Rather, just as you have the immediate experience of the external world or the reality of the past, so for the person who is experiencing the inner witness of God’s Spirit, he grasps in an immediate way God’s presence and isn’t arguing for God’s presence on the basis of religious experience.⁹

4. In certain contexts the experience of the Holy Spirit will imply the apprehension of certain truths of the Christian religion, such as “God exists,” or in the case of an unbeliever, “I am condemned by God” when he is under the conviction of sin, or “I am reconciled to God” when someone is born again and comes to know Christ, or “Christ lives in me.” These are the sorts of truths which one apprehends through the inner witness of the Holy Spirit.

5. Such an experience provides one not only with a subjective assurance of Christianity’s truth, but with objective knowledge of that truth.

I am not saying that the witness of the Holy Spirit just gives you a touchy-feely assurance that Christianity is true, a feel-good experience. Rather, I am saying that through the witness of the Holy Spirit you come to have an objective knowledge that God exists, that you are reconciled to God through Christ, things of that sort. We are not talking here about fuzzy warm experiences. We are talking about objective knowledge.

6. Arguments and evidence incompatible with that truth are overwhelmed by the experience of the Holy Spirit for him who attends fully to it.

A person who is experiencing the witness of the Holy Spirit may confront unbelievers or skeptics who offer arguments and evidence against Christianity which he cannot answer. He may not be in a position to answer these objections to his faith. But what I am suggesting is that for someone who fully attends to the witness of the Spirit, who doesn’t quench the Spirit, who doesn’t live in sin, for one who attends fully to the Spirit, the witness of God’s Spirit will simply provide such warrant for the truth of Christianity that it will overwhelm the arguments and evidence that are brought against it. It doesn’t answer the arguments and evidence, but it just overwhelms them and makes the truth of the Christian faith more evident than its falsity. Think for example if you were confronted with some Buddhist who tries to convince you that the external world does not exist and

⁹ 4:57
that this is all illusory. Any argument that he would offer for that conclusion would be based on premises which are less obvious and less certain than just your properly basic belief that there is an external world. So those alleged defeaters are simply overwhelmed by the warrant that you already have in a properly basic way for the belief in the external world. My contention is that something similar is the case with the witness of the Holy Spirit, at least for those who are in a situation like this.

**START DISCUSSION**

*Student:* Could you repeat number 3 and 4?

*Dr. Craig:* Number 3 was that the witness of the Holy Spirit doesn’t function as a premise in an argument from religious experience. There are arguments for God from religious experience. People will say, *Look at the worldwide religious experience that people have in so many faiths. This has got to have a cause. There must be a transcendent reality that is the source of this religious experience.* This isn’t like that. This is not a premise in an argument from religious experience. Rather it is the immediate experiencing of God himself. Again, think of the analogy. You don’t want to give an argument for the reality of the external world. Any argument would be bound to fail because it would be based upon evidence that comes from the external world. You simply have it as a properly basic belief. I would say that is also the case with the witness of the Holy Spirit.

Number 4 was that in certain contexts the experience of the Holy Spirit will imply the apprehension of certain truths of the Christian religion. For example, imagine a non-believer who is an agnostic, but confronted with the beauty and the grandeur of nature he has the conviction that all of this has been made by God. That implies the truth that God exists. In grasping that, he grasps the truth of that proposition that God exists.¹⁰ Or, again, imagine someone who has been born again and comes to know Christ. He has the witness of the Holy Spirit in his heart that he is a child of God, and that implies truths like *I am reconciled to God.* So through the witness of the Holy Spirit we come to apprehend certain truths of the Christian religion, not just have a fuzzy experience. We grasp truths. That was the point.

Number 3 was that such an experience doesn’t function in this case as a premise in any argument from religious experience, but rather just is the immediate experiencing of God.

*Student:* How does a Christian best respond to a non-Christian who claims to have this same properly basic belief about something that is, in fact, false. I am thinking of the Mormons claiming to have the burning in the bosom.

¹⁰
Dr. Craig: Exactly. We will address that question later on when we consider objections. Right now I am simply trying to lay the view out, but this will be an important objection – the Mormon who comes to you and has no good reason for why he believes in the doctrine of the Latter Day Saints except, he says, I have this burning in the bosom that tells me this is true. We’ll address that later.

END DISCUSSION

It seems to me that the New Testament teaches this view that I’ve just laid out. It teaches it with respect to both the believer and unbeliever alike. Now at first blush it might appear to you that it is somewhat circular to appeal to scriptural prooftexts to prove the witness of the Holy Spirit, as if to say that we believe in the witness of the Holy Spirit because the Scripture says that there is such a witness of the Holy Spirit. But insofar as ours is an “in-house” discussion among Christian believers who do accept the authority of Scripture, it is perfectly legitimate for us to lay out what Scripture teaches about religious epistemology, that is to say about the theory of knowledge with regard to religious truths. If you were interacting with an unbeliever, you obviously would not appeal to Scripture. You would simply report to him that you do have an inner witness of the Holy Spirit which vouchsafes to you the great truths of the Christian religion – including that God exists.

Let’s open our Scriptures and look first at the role of the Holy Spirit in the life of a believer. According to Galatians 3:26 and 4:6, when a person becomes a Christian, he automatically becomes an adopted son of God and is indwelt with the Holy Spirit. Paul says, “for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. . . . And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’” Paul makes this very same point in Romans 8:15-16. Paul explains that it is the witness of the Holy Spirit with our spirit that allows us to know that we are God’s children. He says, “for you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the spirit of sonship. When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ it is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God.” Paul says that through the witness of the Holy Spirit we can know that we are God’s children. That obviously entails, for example, that God exists.

Paul uses elsewhere the Greek word *plerophoria* (which means “complete confidence; complete assurance”) in order to indicate that the believer has knowledge as a result of the Spirit’s work. For example, he uses this word in Colossians 2:2 and in 1 Thessalonians 1:5 to indicate the confident assurance that one has by the witness of the Holy Spirit that one is a child of God. In popular Christian piety this is usually called “assurance of salvation.” People will ask you “Do you have assurance of your salvation?
Do you know that you are saved? That you are going to heaven if you die?” Obviously the assurance of salvation (if you have it) entails certain truths such as “God forgives my sin,” “Christ has reconciled me to God,” “I am a child of God,” and so forth, so that by having assurance of salvation one has assurance of these truths.

Not only the apostle Paul, but also the apostle John makes it quite clear that it is the Holy Spirit living within us that gives believers conviction of the fundamental truth of Christianity. Look at 1 John 2:20, 27. There John says,

But you have been anointed by the Holy One, and you all know . . . the anointing which you received from him abides in you, and you have no need that any one should teach you; as his anointing teaches you about everything, and is true, and is no lie, just as it has taught you, abide in him.

Here John says that it is the Holy Spirit who teaches the believer the truth of divine things. In saying this, John is clearly echoing the teachings of Jesus himself as John records them in the Gospel of John. For example, in John 14:26 Jesus says, “But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.” Now the truth that the Holy Spirit teaches us is not, I’m convinced, the fine points of Christian doctrine. There are too many Spirit-filled Christian people who disagree doctrinally in order for that to be the case. Rather, I think what John is talking about is that inner assurance that the Holy Spirit gives of the basic truths of the Christian faith, what Alvin Plantinga calls the great things of the Gospel – the great truths of the Gospel. This assurance does not come from human arguments but comes directly from God himself.

Now someone might disagree with this by pointing to 1 John 4:1-3. It might be thought to indicate that the testimony of the Holy Spirit is not self-authenticating, but that you need to test it. John says,

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are of God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit which confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit which does not confess Jesus is not of God. This is the spirit of antichrist of which that you have heard that is coming and now it is in the world already.

I think to interpret this passage as saying that we ought to test or doubt the inner witness of the Holy Spirit is a misinterpretation of the passage. John is not talking to people about testing the inner witness of the Holy Spirit which they enjoy. Rather he is talking about testing people who come to you claiming to be speaking by the Holy Spirit. He points out there are many false prophets that have gone out into the world, therefore you have got to
be careful. You have to test the spirits. He referred to these same people earlier in 1 John 2:18-19:

Children, it is the last hour; and as you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come; therefore we know that it is the last hour. They went out from us, but they were not of us for if they had been of us they would have continued with us. But they went out that it might be plain that they are all not of us.  

John is not encouraging the believer to doubt the witness of the Holy Spirit in his own heart; rather he says that if somebody comes to you claiming to be speaking by the Holy Spirit, then, since that situation is external to yourself and involves additional truth claims that are not immediately apprehended by you, you must test that person to make sure that his claim is true because there are many deceivers and false prophets claiming to speak by the Spirit. But in our own lives, as we’ve already seen, John says you’ve been anointed by the Holy Spirit. You don’t have any need for anyone to teach you because the witness of the Spirit is sufficient to assure us of those truths to which he testifies.

John also underlines other teachings of Jesus about the work of the Holy Spirit found in the Gospel of John. For example, in John 14:16-17, 20, Jesus says it is the indwelling Holy Spirit who will give the believer the certainty of knowing that Jesus lives in him and that he is in Jesus, in the sense of being united with Jesus. Jesus says,

And I will pray the Father, and he will give you another Counselor, to be with you for ever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him; you know him, for he dwells with you, and will be in you. . . . In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.

John echoes this same teaching in 1 John 3:24, 4:13. John says, “All who keep his commandments abide in him and he in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit which he has given us. . . . By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his own Spirit.” John uses his characteristic phrase “by this we know” to emphasize that as Christians we have a confident knowledge that our faith is true, that we really do abide in God, and God really does abide in us. In fact John goes so far as to contrast the confidence which the witness of the Spirit gives to the evidence of human testimony. 1 John 5:6-10 John writes,

This is he who came by water and blood, Jesus Christ, not with the water only but with the water and the blood. And the Spirit is the witness, because the Spirit is the truth. There are three witnesses, the Spirit, the water, and the blood; and these
three agree. If we receive the testimony of men, the testimony of God is greater; for this is the testimony of God that he has borne witness to his Son. He who believes in the Son of God has the testimony in himself. He who does not believe God has made him a liar, because he has not believed in the testimony that God has borne to his Son.

In this passage, the “water” probably refers to Jesus’ baptism, and the “blood” to the cross – the crucifixion. These are the bookends of Jesus’ earthly ministry. They mark the beginning and the end of his ministry. When John speaks of “the testimony of men” (in verse 9 when he says, “if we receive the testimony of men”) he is talking about nothing less than the apostolic testimony to the events of the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. In his Gospel, for example in the Gospel of John 21:24, he emphasizes the importance of the apostolic testimony to these events. He says, “These things are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God and believing have life through his name” Yet here he says that even though we quite rightly receive the testimony of men (the apostolic testimony to the historical Jesus) nevertheless the inner testimony of the Spirit is even greater than the apostolic testimony! As Christians we have the testimony of God living within us, the indwelling Holy Spirit who bears witness to our spirit that we are children of God.

So, although evidence and arguments might be used to support the believer’s faith or to confirm the believer’s faith, they are not properly the basis of that faith. For the believer, God is not just the conclusion of a syllogism; he is the living God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob living within us. How then does the believer know that Christianity is true? Fundamentally, he knows because of the self-authenticating witness of God’s Holy Spirit living within him.

**START DISCUSSION**

*Student:* So far it sounds as though this is a defensive form of apologetic, but I’ve heard it used in an offensive way. I was curious if we could use this in an offensive way. For example, you mentioned earlier about a person looking at a beautiful sunset and inferring that God exists. Should we not use this in an offensive way as I’ve seen online and atheists hate it when you do that.

*Dr. Craig:* I guess that depends what you mean by offensive and defensive. Certainly we can see how this could be defensive in that you would say to the non-Christian, *You haven’t been able to invalidate or disprove my Christian belief which I hold in a properly basic way.* But on the other hand, I think we can be candid with non-believers in what you might call in an offensive way. That is to say, if they say, *How do you know that*
*Christianity is true? I think we can say, I know because of the self-authenticating witness of God’s Spirit who lives within me, and he gives me a fundamental knowledge and assurance that it is true.* I think that we should be candid and open with the unbeliever about this. Then what you can do is to say, *Now to show you that it is true, let me give you some arguments and evidence.* Then you can provide those as well. I like to distinguish between knowing our faith to be true and showing our faith to be true. The fundamental way in which we know our faith to be true is through the inner witness of the Holy Spirit. The way we show it to someone else to be true is by providing arguments and evidence. But I think that we should be unapologetic about the way in which we know our faith is true in a properly basic way.

*Student:* Some people distinguish salvation and sanctification as a separate thing. But Michael Youssef said there is no salvation without sanctification because it is of the working of the same Spirit. A lot of people kind of say, *Confess and believe that Jesus is Lord and you are saved* and yet does not work sanctification. That is kind of contrary to what all the Spirit is . . .

*Dr. Craig:* Our time is brief so let me just respond very quickly. We will talk more about the difference between justification and sanctification when we get to the part in the class on doctrine of salvation. But I would say it is patently clear from the New Testament that there are people who are justified, they are saved, they are born again in Christ, but they are not living very sanctified lives. I am thinking of the Corinthian church. The Corinthian church to which Paul wrote was filled with immorality, with wrong practices, people getting drunk at the communion table, divisiveness, factiousness, and yet Paul treats them as Christians. He says *You are believers but you are still living under the power of the flesh.* So I would disagree with those who say there is no such thing as a carnal Christian; that is to say, someone who is born again and saved but he isn’t living in full obedience and power of the Holy Spirit.

**END DISCUSSION**

With that we will close. Next week we will look at the role of the Holy Spirit in the life of the unbeliever. Since the unbeliever is not indwelt with the Holy Spirit, does that mean that he at least has got to rely upon arguments and evidence in order to know Christianity is true? That is the question we will look at next time.14  

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14 Total Running Time: 30:54 (Copyright © 2015 William Lane Craig)
Lecture 3: Witness of the Holy Spirit in the Life of the Unbeliever

Last time we were together I argued that for the Christian believer belief in God and the great truths of the Gospel are properly basic beliefs which are grounded in the inner witness of God's Holy Spirit.

If that is the case for the believer, what about for the unbeliever? What is the role of the Holy Spirit in the life of an unbeliever? The unbeliever is not regenerate and therefore is not indwelt by the Holy Spirit and therefore does not experience the witness of the Holy Spirit to the truth of the Christian faith as we Christians do. Since the unbeliever is bereft of the Holy Spirit, does this mean that he has to rely on arguments and evidence in order to convince him that Christianity is true? I think the answer is no, not at all. According to the Scripture, God has a special ministry of the Holy Spirit which is geared to the needs of the unbeliever in particular. Jesus describes this ministry in John 16:7-11. Jesus says,

> It is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. And when he comes, he will convince the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment: concerning sin, because they do not believe in me; concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father, and you will see me no more; concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged.

Notice here Jesus is addressing the ministry of the Holy Spirit not to the church but to the world. He is talking about people who, as he says, “do not believe in me.” The ministry of the Holy Spirit that is here described is three-fold: he convicts the unbeliever of his own sin, secondly of God’s righteousness, and thirdly of his condemnation before God. The unbeliever who is so convicted can therefore be said to know such truths as “God exists,” “I am guilty before God,” and so forth.

This is the way it has to be. For if it weren’t for the work of the Holy Spirit, no one would ever become a Christian. According to Paul, natural man left to himself does not seek God. Romans 3:10-11: “None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands, no one seeks for God.” Unregenerate man, Paul says, cannot understand spiritual things – 1 Corinthians 2:14: “The unspiritual man does not receive the gifts of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.” The unregenerate man is hostile to God – Romans 8:7: “For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God’s law, indeed it cannot.” As Jesus said, men love darkness rather than light. Left to himself, unregenerate natural man would never come to God.
The fact that we do find people who are seeking God and who are ready to receive Christ when we share the Gospel with them is evidence that the Holy Spirit has already been at work in their lives, convicting them and drawing them to him. As Jesus said in John 6:44, “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him.”

Therefore, when a person refuses to come to Christ, it is never just because of lack of evidence or because of intellectual difficulties with the faith. At root, he refuses to come because he willingly ignores and rejects the drawing of God’s Holy Spirit on his heart. This convicting power and drawing of the Holy Spirit may take time. It may take years in order for the unbeliever to finally come to Christ. Nevertheless, no one in the final analysis really fails to become a Christian because of lack of arguments or evidence; he fails to become a Christian because he loves darkness rather than light and wants nothing to do with God. But anyone who does respond to the drawing of God’s Spirit with an open mind and an open heart can know with assurance that Christianity is true, because God’s Spirit will convict him eventually that it is true. Listen to the words of Jesus in John 7:16-17 – I think two of the most remarkable verses in the New Testament. Jesus said, “My teaching is not mine, but his who sent me; if any man’s will is to do his will, he shall know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own authority.” Here Jesus said that if anyone is truly seeking God, if his will is to do God's will, then he will know that this teaching is from God or Jesus is just speaking of his own opinion. Jesus is affirming here that if anyone truly wants God's will – is truly seeking God – then he will come to know that Jesus' teaching truly is from God.

So then, I think, for the unbeliever as well as for the believer, it is the testimony of God’s Spirit that ultimately assures him of the truth of Christianity. The unbeliever who is truly seeking God will be convinced of the truth of the Christian message.

START DISCUSSION

Student: I read years ago when I first became a Christian in 2006 a book by Dinesh D'Souza called What Is So Great About Christianity?. In that book he talks about this idea of people looking at evidence and trying to get to God and can you argue your way to God? He said for most people, most people don't believe in God because of an argument. Most people just either know that Christianity is true through the witness of the Holy Spirit and that kind of thing. He said if you think about it, if you had to argue your way to God then getting into heaven would be like getting into Harvard. You'd have to be a certain intellectual smart person in order for God to go OK. Dinesh D'Souza said God tends to like more humble folk than us like intellectual whatever. I thought it was a really insightful idea anyway.
Dr. Craig: I agree with you. If God were to just abandon us to our own intelligence and ingenuity to work out whether or not he exists, he would be a very cruel God indeed. But God loves us. He loves people. So by his Holy Spirit he seeks to draw them to himself. That doesn't mean, as we will see, that there aren't evidence and arguments sufficient for knowing the truth of Christianity, but it is to say that they are not necessary and that a loving God can bring people to a knowledge of himself apart from argument if that needs to be the case.

Student: We have been visited in our home by the Mormons. They sit down and the thing they say over and over again is, *I can feel it in my heart. I can feel it in my heart.* How do you explain that? Is it indigestion?

Dr. Craig: I will say something more about this. That question was asked last week as well. I keep putting people off because this is a major objection that we need to deal with. But what I would simply say in a nutshell is this: spurious claims to a witness of the Holy Spirit do nothing to undermine logically the authenticity of a true claim to the Holy Spirit. Just because someone falsely claims to know something by the burning of the bosom or an immediate experience of God doesn’t mean that a person who has the genuine article is therefore unwarranted in what he believes.¹⁶ I think that is sufficient to undermine that objection. We will say more about it when we get to it.

Student: When we were in San Francisco, before I was a Christian, they had a church out there – Glad Memorial – that was an incredible ministry to the street people. The drug dealers and the prostitutes and all of the gang members showed up on Sunday morning and they danced around and they sung the songs and they felt great. They left the church and went right back out on the street and did the same things all over again. That is a terrible way – or at the time was a terrible way – for me to see Christianity. I just said, Wow! This is really neat. You can just do whatever you want, as long as you go on Sunday morning and sing.

Dr. Craig: That is what James calls a dead faith – a faith without works. It doesn't have any fruit in a person's life. It is not enough just to go to church for emotional experiences. It needs to manifest itself in your life. If it is a genuine witness of the Holy Spirit that you’ve received then you will bear the fruit of the Spirit, right? Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, self-control. These are the fruit of the life of a person who is genuinely indwelt and filled with the Holy Spirit.

**END DISCUSSION**

I’ve argued that belief in God and the truths of the Gospel are properly basic both for the believer and for the unbeliever alike, grounded in the testimony of the Holy Spirit. Does

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this mean that it is simply rational to believe in God and Christianity or does it mean that
this belief is actually warranted? What is the difference between these?

Plantinga distinguishes rationality and warrant. He argues that belief in God is not merely
rational for someone on the basis of the Spirit's witness, but that it is actually warranted
for them so that they can know that God exists. A belief can be rational even though it is
in fact false. When we say that a belief is rational, we mean either that the person doesn't
violate any epistemological duty in believing that. He is within his epistemological rights
in believing that. Or we mean that he exhibits no defect in his cognitive structure. He is
not doing anything wrong or misshapen with regard to his system of beliefs. It is clear
that a belief could be rational in that sense and yet be false. For example, if you were to
meet someone for the first time and he were to say to you, “Hello, my name is Mark,” I
would be rational to believe that his name is Mark. But it is possible that it is not Mark.
He might be lying for some reason to me. It could be some other name. So I would be
rational in believing what turns out to be a false belief. Being properly basic merely
enough to be rational isn't really enough. What we want to know is: is this belief
warranted for us in such a way that we can be said to actually have knowledge of the
existence of God and of Christianity's truth?

In Plantinga’s view we do have warrant and not merely rationality. For Plantinga, the
inner witness of the Holy Spirit is the close analogue of a cognitive faculty that we have.
In that sense it is a belief-forming “mechanism” which can be reliable. He thinks that the
beliefs formed by this “mechanism” meet the conditions for being warranted. Therefore
he would say that we can know the great truths of the Gospel through the witness of the
Holy Spirit. So these are warranted for us. We have genuine knowledge of the truth of the
existence of God and the great things of the Gospel.

Because we know the great truths of the Gospel through the Holy Spirit’s work, it follows
that you don't need to have any evidence for them. Rather they are properly basic for us,
both with respect to rationality and with respect to warrant.17 Plantinga affirms that
“according to the model, the central truths of the Gospel are self-authenticating,” that is
to say, “They do not get their evidence or warrant by way of being believed on the
evidential basis of other propositions.”

I’ve argued that this is in accord with New Testament teaching. For the believer and
unbeliever alike it is the self-authenticating work of the Holy Spirit that supplies
knowledge of Christianity’s truth. So I would agree with Plantinga that belief in the God
of the Bible is a properly basic belief and I would simply emphasize that it is the
testimony of the Holy Spirit that grounds this belief and therefore makes it properly
basic. And because this belief is formed in response to God's own witness (God's own

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self-disclosure via the witness of the Holy Spirit), it doesn't need any external authentication. It is not merely rational for us to believe what God says, but it constitutes knowledge. We actually have knowledge of Christianity’s truth through the witness of the Holy Spirit.

What then is the role of argument and evidence in knowing Christianity's truth? I’ve already said that the fundamental way in which we know the truth of Christianity is through the self-authenticating witness of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, the only role that is left for argument and evidence to play is a subsidiary role. Here I think Martin Luther correctly distinguished between what he called the magisterial and the ministerial uses of reason. What are these? The magisterial role of reason occurs when reason stands over and above the Gospel like a magistrate and judges its truth or falsity on the basis of argument and evidence. By contrast, the ministerial use of reason occurs when reason submits to and serves the Gospel message. In light of the Holy Spirit’s witness, I would say that only the ministerial use of reason is legitimate. Philosophy is rightly the handmaid of theology. Reason is a God-given tool to help us better understand and defend our faith; as St. Anselm put it, ours is a faith that seeks understanding. A person who knows that Christianity is true on the basis of the witness of the Holy Spirit may also have a sound apologetic which reinforces for him the truth of what the Holy Spirit says. We can imagine a person who has both the witness of the Holy Spirit and good arguments from natural theology and Christian evidences for the great truths of the Gospel. This person can be said to have a kind of dual warrant for the truth of his Christian beliefs. Such a person is doubly warranted in his Christian belief in the sense that he has two sources of warrant for what he believes which are independent of each other.

I think you can see there can be great advantages to having this sort of dual warrant for your Christian beliefs. Having sound arguments for the existence of a God and evidence for the reliability of the Gospels in addition to the Holy Spirit's witness in your life could increase your confidence in the truth of Christian truth claims. On Plantinga’s theory, at least, that would mean you have then greater warrant for what you believe as a result of these arguments and evidence as well as the Holy Spirit's witness. Greater warrant then, in turn, could lead, for example, an unbeliever to come to faith more readily when he sees this great warrant that Christianity has, or it could inspire a believer to share his faith more boldly because he has greater warrant for what he believes and therefore more confidence. Moreover, the availability of independent warrant for Christian truth claims which are apart from the work of the Holy Spirit might prompt an unbeliever to be more open to the drawing of the Holy Spirit when he hears the Gospel.18 He might not come to

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Christ because of the arguments he hears but nevertheless these might make him more open to responding to the Holy Spirit when the Spirit bears witness with his heart. Or, in the case of the believer, having independent arguments and evidence could give the believer support during times of spiritual dryness or doubt when he is struggling in his Christian life and the witness of the Holy Spirit seems eclipsed. Then having this independent warrant could shore up his faith when going through these times of doubt or struggle. I am sure you could think of many, many other ways in which this sort of dual warrant would be of great benefit in the Christian life.

So I would argue that as Christians we have in the work of the Holy Spirit and in the arguments of natural theology and Christian evidences dual warrant for the truth of our Christian beliefs so that we can be said to know these things via these two sources of warrant.

START DISCUSSION

Student: What do you think makes a person to hold either magisterial use of reason or ministerial use of reason?

Dr. Craig: What would make a person hold to either one?

Student: Yes. Does the Holy Spirit have any effect in changing their basis?

Dr. Craig: Well, I would say that a person who holds to the magisterial view of reason may not have reflected sufficiently upon the data of the New Testament about how we can come to know Christian truths through the witness of the Holy Spirit, and that that Spirit can be so powerful that it can even overcome objections and defeaters of the Christian belief. I am persuaded that what I've said is right in line with New Testament teaching. My belief that Luther was right in thinking that the ministerial use of reason is correct is that I just can't imagine any circumstances under which a person would be justified in apostatizing. I can't imagine any circumstances in which a person would find himself where the rational thing for him to do – the thing that he should do – is to reject Jesus Christ out of his life and revert back to being a non-Christian again. Apostasy seems to me as an unforgivable sin. It can only be unforgivable if a person could never be justified in doing it. Yet, on a magisterial view of reason one can easily imagine circumstances in which believers might find themselves where they don't know the answers to the objections and the arguments that are brought against them and so if they just follow the arguments and evidence they should de-convert – they should apostatize. To my mind that is just unconscionable. There must be – there's got to be! – some other warrant that would enable the person justifiably to persevere in his faith despite his inability to answer the objections.
Student: Would you say that at the decision of accepting Christ a person makes such a shift? Would you say that that is what that decision does to a person when they actually shift from magisterial use of reason into a ministerial use?

Dr. Craig: I don't think so. As I've argued, I think also for the unbeliever ultimately the reason an unbeliever fails to come to God is because he willingly rejects and ignores the drawing of God's Holy Spirit on his heart. Otherwise an unbeliever like Bertrand Russell, say, might be able to stand before God on the Judgment Day . . . Russell was actually asked this by a woman. She said, What would you say if you found yourself standing before God on the Judgment Day? And Russell replied, I would say not enough evidence, God. Not enough evidence. Well, some people might be able to be justified in saying that if there were no witness of the Holy Spirit. Imagine somebody raised in Soviet Russia who never had a chance to hear the Gospel and was indoctrinated with Marxist propaganda at the university. Such a person might find himself in that sort of situation. Yet I don't think, again on the New Testament, anybody would ever be justified in rejecting Jesus Christ. Nobody would be able to stand before God on the Judgment Day and excuse his unbelief by saying there wasn't enough evidence. I think that it is the witness of the Holy Spirit that is the fundamental factor in how we know Christianity to be true. Even people who have been given no good reason to believe and persuasive reasons to disbelieve are still ultimately accountable before God because the reason that they do not believe is ultimately because they reject and ignore God's own testimony to the truth of the Gospel.

Student: How does the passage in Romans 2 about God's law written on one's heart tie in with this?

Dr. Craig: Let's look at that passage. Romans 2:14-16,

When Gentiles who have not the law do by nature what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness and their conflicting thoughts accuse or perhaps excuse them on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus.

I take it that what Paul is teaching here is that the demands of God's moral law are also properly basic, and that people have an inherent knowledge of right and wrong, good and evil, so that the religious relativist or nihilist who thinks that there are no objective moral values and duties is flouting this properly basic belief which is written on his heart by God. I don't think that the passage is teaching that belief in God is properly basic, but I do think that the passage you cite is teaching that a knowledge of fundamental good and evil,
right and wrong, is written on our hearts and is properly basic and therefore we are accountable before God for our failure to live up to the demands of the moral law. That would provide a nice analogy perhaps to belief in God as properly basic.

Student: Wouldn't there have to be a basis – a standard – for the right and wrong?

Dr. Craig: Yes, absolutely! And that is why I would argue for the existence of God on the basis of objective moral values and duties. What I would say is something like this. Objective moral values and duties exist. Second, if God did not exist, objective moral values and duties would not exist. Three, therefore God exists. I think that is a good moral argument for God's existence. The first premise – that there are objective moral values and duties – I would say is a properly basic belief that is grounded in our moral experience.

Student: I wonder how you employ this when you are debating against a pious member of another religion. Shabir Ally, for example, himself admitted that he refused to use reason or evidence magisterially against the Qur'an. Remember when he talks about Jesus he says, I start with the Qur'an. And you criticized him for doing that. You said, That is not how proper scholarship is done.

Dr. Craig: Ah, right. Because we were debating on historical questions. But I think that the Muslim has every right to claim that his belief is properly basic and is in the witness of Allah in his heart. But I think he is just mistaken as I was saying earlier about the Mormons. This is getting back to this same question again about what about people who falsely pretend to a witness of the Spirit.

Student: I was wondering how you come up with that distinction. How do we decide which system is right without using reason magisterially or using evidence magisterially to decide between this or that?

Dr. Craig: The very point of calling it self-authenticating is that for the person who has the genuine authentic witness of the Holy Spirit it authenticates itself. He doesn't need arguments or reason. For the person who really has it, he knows he has it. It is the person who doesn't have it and who has a false counterfeit religious experience who is in trouble and whose confidence may be shaken when we present arguments and evidence against his view. That will be the hope – because we know he doesn't really have an authentic witness of the Holy Spirit to the truth of Mormonism or Islam – that when we share these arguments and evidence against Mormonism and Islam that they may penetrate and shake his confidence and he may lose his confidence in this false religion to which he adheres.
Student: It seems like we sometimes use the word “know” and “believe” interchangeably. It seems that we can believe without doubt, but that is different than knowing?

Dr. Craig: Right. That is right. I am glad you brought this up. When my son was 17 years old, he was certain about a lot of things. Trust me, Dad, he’d say. And he was wrong. He had belief without doubt, but that didn’t mean that he knew those things. Certainty is neither a sufficient condition for knowledge nor a necessary condition for knowledge. You can know things without being certain of them, and you can be certain of falsehoods that you don’t really know. What converts true belief (say you have a true belief) into knowledge? It is this elusive quality that Plantinga calls “warrant.” If the belief is in some way warranted for you in sufficient measure then you can be said to know that. But do not equate the word “knowing” with being certain of something. Certainty is a psychological property that is neither necessary nor sufficient for knowledge.

Student: So we walk by faith and not by sight. Doesn’t that imply that we don’t really know?

Dr. Craig: That was mentioned in the morning service today and made me reflect on that as the pastor was talking about walking by faith and not by sight. It seemed to me that a good example of the Christian life walking by faith and not by sight would be dealing with evils and disasters and suffering that come into our lives for which we see no sufficient reason. When something horrible happens to you – you back out of your driveway and accidentally run over your little daughter that was playing behind the car and you never saw her; horrible things like that happen – and you can see no good reason for that at all, those are circumstances in which like Job, I think, we walk by faith and not by sight. We don’t see God’s morally justifying reasons for allowing such things, but we trust him as we go through those. Is that a blind faith? No! Because we have good reasons to believe that God exists. We have the witness of the Holy Spirit; we have the arguments of natural theology. We are warranted in believing that God exists and that he loves us and has our best interests at heart. So when we see things like these terrible catastrophes happening, it is in those kind of circumstances that we need to walk by faith and not by sight.

Student: In saying things like, There can never be a reason why you would ever de-convert, or that, These experiences are enough, so no one ever gets into heaven through evidence, are we divorcing faith from reason?

Dr. Craig: I didn't say that, though. I never said that nobody gets into [heaven] through evidence. I never said that. What I said was that it is not necessary to have this warrant because you have the warrant of the Holy Spirit so you can get into heaven without argument and evidence. But you can get into heaven through the arguments and evidence, too, if they lead you to put your faith in Christ. What I said before, again, was that no one
could ever justifiably apostatize or justifiably resist until the end of his life believing in God because any intellectual difficulties or problems that he might have I would say will simply be overcome by the witness of the Holy Spirit. Again, think of what Jesus said: if any man's will is to do God's will then he will know whether my teaching is from God.\footnote{21}

\textit{Student:} Remind us that ministerial witnessing is important to us and our growth. If you look at Revelation 12:10-11 – the basic part is “For they conquered him by the blood of the lamb and by the word of their own testimony.” As we witness with love, ministering, God will open ourselves up and God will be able to show us deeper into his Word. There is time for magisterial arguments to defend the position in the Earth but for witnessing and saving others you have to have love for them and that actually ministers to you. He gives you deeper insight; shows you firmer truth and what to look at next. It is important to have both. As far as everybody having properly basic – God calls everybody accountable to know what they have in their testimony, so it is up to us to witness and then the Holy Spirit is stronger than anybody else's witness. What they are testifying to is spirit beings that are inserting themselves. They are idols. That is what ...

\textit{Dr. Craig:} I think you are making a good point. Don't you believe that the Holy Spirit is more powerful and can overcome the false testimony that a Muslim experiences to the truth of the Qur'an or Allah? Do you really think that God is so weak that he can't overcome that sort of psychological experience? I think he can.

\textit{Student:} And if the conviction when you witness to him and you tell him that, just accept it. That is God. Don't discount it. He is telling you you've got an error in your way. That is rejecting the Holy Spirit.

\textit{Dr. Craig:} The role of the Holy Spirit, remember, is “to convict those who do not believe in me of sin and righteousness and judgment.” Share your faith, trusting the Holy Spirit to secretly be at work in the person's heart.

\textit{Student:} You have to do it with love and they have to see it or else they will never trust in that conviction.

\textit{Dr. Craig:} That's right.

\textbf{END DISCUSSION}

What we will talk about next time is this now long-delayed objection about defeaters. What about the person who has the witness of the Holy Spirit in his heart but encounters objections or arguments against his faith which he cannot answer? How do we deal with
the rationality and the warrant of belief in Christianity in that kind of difficult circumstance? That is the question we will take up next time.\textsuperscript{22}
Lecture 4: Defeaters of Properly Basic Beliefs

Last time I argued that belief in God and in the great truths of the Gospel are properly basic beliefs, not only with respect to rationality, but also with respect to warrant through the witness of the Holy Spirit. So by means of the Spirit’s witness we can be said to know that God exists and that these great things of the Gospel are true. Today we come to a very important question that I’ve been postponing for the last two weeks, and this is the question of defeaters of properly basic beliefs.

Plantinga emphasizes that the proper basicity of belief in God does not imply its indefeasibility. That is to say this belief is defeatable – it can be defeated by other incompatible beliefs which come to be accepted by the theist. If a theist comes to accept beliefs which are incompatible with his belief in God then he has a kind of cognitive dissonance, and in order to remain rational he is going to have to give up some of his beliefs, and perhaps it will be his belief in God that he will give up in order to maintain his rationality. So, for example, imagine a Christian who is confronted with the problem of evil against the existence of God. He is confronted with a potential defeater of his Christian belief in God. If he is to remain rational in his beliefs, he is going to have to have a defeater of this defeater of his Christian beliefs – a sort of defeater-defeater if you will. This is where Christian apologetics can come in; it can help to formulate answers to these potential defeaters. For example, the Free Will Defense could be a way of defeating the problem of evil.

But Plantinga also argues that in some cases the original belief itself may so exceed its alleged defeater in warrant that it actually becomes an intrinsic defeater of its ostensible defeater. He gives the very interesting example of someone who has been accused of a crime which he knows that he did not commit, and yet a person against whom all the evidence is stacked. So if a jury of his peers simply went on the basis of the evidence they should convict him and find him guilty. Plantinga points out that such a person is not rationally obligated to follow the evidence to where it leads because he knows that he is innocent, and he knows that in a properly basic way. There is no need for him to give up that properly basic belief and to agree with his peers that he is, in fact, guilty. The belief that he did not commit the crime intrinsically defeats the defeaters brought against it by the evidence.

Plantinga makes the theological application by suggesting that belief in God may similarly intrinsically defeat all of the defeaters that are brought against it. Plantinga suggests that the circumstances which could produce such a powerful warrant for belief in God are the implanted, natural sense of God that he believes God has placed in our
hearts, as well as the testimony or the witness of the Holy Spirit which deepens and
accentuates this inborn, innate sense of God.

Should a conflict arise between the witness of the Holy Spirit to the fundamental truths of
the Christian faith and beliefs that are based on argument and evidence, then it is the
former that must take precedence over the latter, rather than vice versa.

This is exactly in line with what I described last week as Martin Luther’s claim that only
the ministerial use of reason is valid and legitimate. Reason is not permitted to stand
like a magistrate and judge the truth of the Gospel message. It is a minister of the Gospel
message and submits to and serves it. So belief in God and the great things of the Gospel
vouchsafed to us by the witness of the Holy Spirit and are intrinsic defeaters of any
alleged defeaters that might be brought against them.

Some people would disagree with this. They would say, no, reason can be used in a
magisterial role, at least by the unbeliever who hasn’t yet come to know Christ and is
exploring which religious system to believe. They will ask how else could you determine
which one is true, the Bible, the Qur’an, or the Book of Mormon, unless we use argument
and evidence to judge these? The Muslim or the Mormon also claims to have an inner
witness of God’s Spirit or a “burning in the bosom” which authenticates to them the truth
of their respective Scriptures. Christian claims
to a subjective experience, they say, just
seem to be on a par with similar non-Christian claims.

How might we respond to this objection? As I already intimated in previous lessons, it
seems to me that the fact that other persons claim to have a witness of the Holy Spirit or
burning in the bosom does nothing to defeat the belief that a person who genuinely has
the witness of the Holy Spirit to the truths of his faith. The existence of an authentic and
unique witness of the Holy Spirit does not exclude in any way that there could be people
who make false claims to such a thing. If that is the case, how does the existence of false
claims to a witness of the Holy Spirit in favor of a non-Christian religion do anything
logically to undermine the fact that the Christian believer does possess the actual and
authentic witness of the Holy Spirit? Why should I be robbed of my joy and my
assurance of salvation simply because somebody else falsely pretends, either sincerely or
insincerely, to the Spirit’s witness? If a Mormon or a Muslim falsely claims to experience
the witness of God’s Spirit in his heart to the truth of the Qur’an or Book of Mormon,
that does nothing (it seems to me) to undermine the veridicality of my experience.

But someone might insist at this point, “But how do you know that your experience isn’t
also as spurious as theirs?” That question has already been answered: the experience of
the Spirit’s witness is self-authenticating for him who really has it. The Spirit-filled
Christian can know immediately that his claim to the Spirit’s witness is true despite the presence of false claims made by other persons adhering to other religions.

When you are confronted with a Mormon or a Muslim or an adherent to some other faith claiming to know in a properly basic way that their faith is true, you can simply begin to share with that person defeaters of that person’s belief. Share with them objections to the Qur’an or objections to the historical veracity of the Book of Mormon, for example. As you share these defeaters with them, do so prayerfully trusting that God will use them to break down their false confidence because they don’t really have an authentic witness of the Holy Spirit. They don’t have a self-authenticating experience. They are misled by some sort of counterfeit experience. So the defeaters that you share with them will not be intrinsically defeated by their belief. They may break through and help to convince that person. Don’t ever forget that while you share these defeaters the Holy Spirit is also quietly at work bearing genuine witness to that person’s heart to the truth of the Gospel. He can remain a non-Christian only by ignoring and resisting the conviction and the drawing of God’s Spirit upon his heart. Don’t be cowed by false claims to a self-authenticating witness of the Holy Spirit. Rather, when you confront such a person, share with them defeaters for their belief and pray for them that God’s Spirit would convict their hearts and draw them to him.

START DISCUSSION

Student: You have debated innumerable skeptics and folks who don’t believe in God. You and Plantinga are willing to stand up in front of multitudes and talk about it. How would you describe their unwillingness to accept the Spirit?

Dr. Craig: I think, quite candidly, for many of the folks that I’ve debated it is very evident that their unbelief is not based on argument and evidence because so many of them prove to be so incapable, frankly, of defending their own worldview when challenged or refuting the arguments and evidence for the existence of God or the truth of Christianity. It seems very evident that if they really followed the evidence to where it leads they would be shaken at least, if not change their minds. But I think that for many of them there is just a deep-seated commitment to the truth of either naturalism or at least the falsity of Christianity. Some of them have been quite candid about this. I remember, for example, the Canadian humanist and abortionist Henry Morgantaler saying in the debates that I’ve had with him that even if God were to appear to him and show himself to be true, Morgantaler said, *I still would not bow the knee to him. I would prefer to go to hell than to bow the knee to God and worship him.* It was just a deep, deep moral rejection of God on his part.
Student: This is also true in religions outside of Christianity. One of my experiences with the orthodox rabbis is – some of them have even said if Jesus were to descend in all of his glory from heaven, I would not bow the knee to him.

Dr. Craig: Wow. I think when you reached a point like that with a person you should not feel discouraged in one sense. You have actually, I think, done all that apologetics can do. Because what you’ve done is you’ve removed any intellectual excuse for unbelief and exposed unbelief for what it really is – just a deep hardened heart and determination of the will not to believe on any basis.

Student: I love movies and I love connecting movies with apologetics. I was thinking about the movie Contact when it comes to this. That last scene with Jodie Foster – would that be a good example of a properly basic belief where she is standing before everyone and they are saying, You have no proof. You have no evidence. Don’t you admit the possibility you could be hallucinating all of this? At the end she says, Yes, but I can’t deny though that it really happened because everything in me tells me that it was real.25 Would that be a good example?

Dr. Craig: It is a wonderful example from contemporary cinema. I really liked that movie Contact. When she has this cosmic vision of the essence of the universe or whatever, she cries, I never knew! I never knew! The truth of this just crashes in on her. Then, as you say, all the evidence is against her, at least until very near the end when I think they find the 18 minutes missing of time. But even apart from that. Say she didn’t have that evidence that finally does materialize at the end; for her this was a properly basic belief grounded in this experience that simply, intrinsically defeated the evidence that was brought against her by people who had never had such an experience and were telling her it was delusory. If you’ve not seen the movie Contact I would encourage you to watch it and think of it in terms of properly basic beliefs and intrinsic defeaters of defeaters. Good example.

Student: I think for a lot of these skeptics it is a belief in an anti-religion. It is an anti-belief rather than a belief. This is what they embrace.26

Dr. Craig: I think that is a good point. You especially see that with agnostics who really don’t have a positive belief system. It is not as though they are committed to any sort of alternative. But they are committed, as you say, to the falsity of Christianity – that this is not allowed to be true.

25 See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DVn90-83NQQ#t=1m23s (accessed September 6, 2015).
26 15:03
Student: As a corollary, I heard somebody comment that you can address a critic but you can’t address a cynic. If somebody is cynical, they are really not interested in what is true or evidence or anything like that.

Dr. Craig: That does require sensitivity when you are talking to a person whether or not this is a conversation that is worth having. Because there are people who are searching and who will respond to the evidence and argument. We get wonderful emails every week from people like this. What we are talking about here is someone who, to the end of his life, stalwartly resists the drawing and convicting of the Holy Spirit. That person will not be able to stand before God and have a just excuse because the evidence and arguments that he had weren’t adequate.

END DISCUSSION

Let’s continue. I think that the most plausible spin that a person could put on this objection, if we want to press forward the discussion a notch, would be to say that false claims to a witness of the Holy Spirit ought to undermine my confidence in the reliability of the cognitive faculties which form religious beliefs, because those faculties evidently so often mislead people. You see so many false religions in the world, it would seem you just can’t have any confidence in the cognitive faculties that lead to religious beliefs because by your own admission most people have false beliefs as a result of these faculties. The fact that so many people apparently sincerely, but falsely, believe that God’s Spirit is testifying to them of the truth of their religion ought to make us leery about our own experience of God. Why should we trust our experience when we think that everybody else’s experience is untrustworthy?

I think there are at least two things wrong with this statement or construal of the objection. First, as Christians we don’t need to say that every non-Christian religious experience is simply spurious – that it is totally invalid. It may well be the case that adherents of other religions do enjoy a veridical experience of God in certain respects. For example, maybe in pantheistic religions the experience of God as the Ground of Being upon whom we contingent creatures depend moment by moment for our existence. Or maybe in certain religions an experience of God as the Moral Absolute from whom moral duties and values derive. Or even a religious experience of God as the loving Father of mankind. We don’t need to say that all of these experiences of God are just spurious. We are not committed to saying that the cognitive faculties which are responsible for people’s religious beliefs are fundamentally unreliable.

Secondly, the objection unjustifiably assumes that the witness of the Holy Spirit is the product of human cognitive faculties or that it is indistinguishable from the products of human cognitive faculties. That is simply not true. It is just a sociological fact that non-Christian religious experience, such as Buddhist or Hindu religious experience, is
typically very different from Christian experience. Why should I think that when a Mormon says that he has a “burning in the bosom” that the Book of Mormon is true that this is qualitatively indistinguishable from the witness of the Holy Spirit that I experience? I don’t see any reason to think that these non-veridical religious experiences that people have are qualitatively indistinguishable from the witness of the Holy Spirit. One way to get evidence of this fact would be to just simply ask converts from those other religions to Christianity if their experience is any different now. Ask the ex-Mormons or ex-Muslims who have become Christians, “Is your experience of God now different than when you were a Mormon or a Muslim?” I think in most cases they will say absolutely it is different. They’ve come to know God in a different personal way. It is simply not correct to say that the witness of the Holy Spirit is indistinguishable from these counterfeit religious experiences.

Somebody might say (and I’ve heard it said), “But hasn’t it been said that neuroscientists can artificially stimulate the brain to have religious experiences which are obviously non-veridical and yet they are like the witness of the Holy Spirit?” Maybe a brain scientist could stimulate your brain to make you think you have a witness of the Holy Spirit to the truth of Christianity. Again, as a factual matter, that is simply not true. The sort of religious experiences that neuroscientists have been able to artificially induce by brain stimuli are more akin to pantheistic religious experiences, like in Taoism, Buddhism, and Hinduism – a sort of sense of oneness with the All where you lose your personal identity in the All, the totality of everything, the Absolute. They are not like Christian experiences of God’s personal presence and love. So it is simply not true that neuroscientists have been able to induce anything like the witness of the Holy Spirit in people.

But more importantly, more fundamentally than that, the fact that a non-veridical experience can be induced which is qualitatively identical to a veridical experience does absolutely nothing to undermine the fact that there are veridical experiences and that we are rational in taking those experiences to be veridical. Otherwise, you would have to say that because neuroscientists can induce in your brain experiences of seeing an object or having a hallucination of something, that therefore your five senses are utterly unreliable and you should never trust them when you do see an object. Just because a neurologist can artificially stimulate your brain to make you think that you are having an experience of some object is no reason at all to doubt that when you are not under such artificial stimulus that your experiences of such objects are not veridical. Similarly, even if a scientist could artificially stimulate my brain to make me think I am having an experience of God does nothing to undermine the veridicality of my experience of God when I am not under artificial stimulus from a neuroscientist.
So the objection to a self-authenticating witness of the Spirit on the basis of these sorts of false claims to such an experience does not undermine my rationally trusting in the deliverances of the Holy Spirit and his testimony to the existence of God and the great truths of the Gospel.

START DISCUSSION

**Student:** I know you use the term “self-authenticating.” But doesn’t the Bible tell us to test the spirits with his Word? So in essence it is not self-authenticating. It may be self-actualizing in that I experienced it, but am I not supposed to test that experience or that vision with the Word of God?

**Dr. Craig:** I think you may not have been here about three weeks ago when we looked at the New Testament data concerning the witness of the Holy Spirit because I dealt with that passage in 1 John where 1 John 4:1 says, “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God.” What I argued – and I feel very confident of this – is that John is not encouraging people to test in this way the witness of the Holy Spirit in their own hearts. He is talking about false prophets who come to them claiming to speak in the name of God’s Spirit. You need to test those prophets to see whether they are genuinely speaking from God. He talks about such persons in 1 John 2 – *They went out from us but they are not really of us.* There are these counterfeit claims out there, and I would say people who claim the burning of the bosom for Mormonism would be an example of such a false spirit. It needs to be tested. But there is nothing in John that would suggest that we test the witness of the Holy Spirit to the truth of the Gospel. On the contrary, everything John says about that is that it teaches us and leads us into all truth, it exceeds the testimony of men, it is the testimony of God himself, and gives us assurance and confidence that our faith is true.

**Student:** So you are saying that I could be delusional and I am still not supposed to test it?

**Dr. Craig:** No. What I am saying is . . . OK, you need to go back and look at the notes on this, what I said about what it means to be self-authenticating. I said that for a person who does have a genuine witness of the Holy Spirit, that person cannot be deluded. It is unmistakable. It is, as I say, a self-authenticating witness. You can be deluded like a Mormon or a Muslim and think you have such an experience; that is true. But the person who has a veridical experience of God’s Spirit can’t be mistaken about that.

**Student:** I remember I went through that path of looking at Buddhism, Taoism, and the like. I remember waking up. I knew I was asleep because I remember waking up. I woke up when I heard God’s Word. That experience in that sense was self-authenticating, but the experience came through God’s Word. What I am not hearing – may be I am just not
getting it – what role does God’s Word play in assuring us that what we have self-authenticated is, in fact, veridical and not a delusion.

*Dr. Craig:* OK. Plantinga has a lot to say about God’s Word. What I said is that the Holy Spirit bears witness to the great truths of the Gospel. So how do we find out what those truths are? Well, they are in God’s Word. So God’s Word is the medium by which we learn these truths, and then it is the Spirit that bears witness to that truth. Just like in your experience! You heard this, and I am sure it impressed itself upon you somehow as true, that this is really the Word of God that is speaking to me. The assurance doesn’t come from the Word. It comes from the Holy Spirit who bears witness to that Word. The Word is what gives you the content. It is the medium. But then it is God’s own Spirit that bears testimony to the truth of that. That is why the proclamation of the Gospel and the Word of God is so important because it will be the medium by which we will learn about these truths that the Spirit bears witness to.

**END DISCUSSION**

Let me proceed to suggest two theological reasons why I think that those Christians who do support the magisterial use of reason are mistaken. These are now two reasons why I would reject the magisterial use of reason.

First, such a role would consign most Christians to irrationality. Think about it. The vast majority of the human race have neither the time, nor the training, nor the library resources to develop a full-blown Christian apologetic as the basis of their faith. Even the proponents of the magisterial use of reason were at one time early in their education still presumably lacking such an apologetic. According to the magisterial use of reason, these people should not have believed in Christ until they had finished their apologetic. Otherwise, they would be believing for insufficient reasons. I remember when I was a seminary student at Trinity, I asked one of my classmates, “How do you know that Christianity is true?” He said to me, “I really don’t know.” Does that mean that he should have been a non-Christian at that point? That he should reject Christ out of his life until he can come up with an answer to that question? I think obviously not! He knew Christianity was true because he knew Jesus, even though he had not yet worked out some sort of an apologetic for the Christian faith. The fact is that we can know the truth whether we have rational arguments or not. The vast majority of Christians throughout the world and down through history have never been in a position where they could justify their Christian beliefs in a rational way through argument and evidence. I think it was last week that someone said that if God just abandoned us to work out by our own

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29 30:06
reason whether or not he exists then getting into heaven would be like getting into Harvard. I thought that was so apropos.

The second reason I want to give for rejecting the magisterial use of reason, is that if the magisterial use of reason were legitimate, then a person who had been given poor arguments for Christianity would have a just excuse for not believing in God. Imagine somebody who had been given an invalid argument for God’s existence. Could that person stand before God on the Judgment Day and say, “God, those Christians only gave me this lousy invalid argument for believing in you. That’s why I didn’t believe”? No! The Bible says that all men are without excuse. That is in the book of Romans. Even those who are given no good reason to believe and many good reasons not to believe are ultimately without excuse, because the ultimate reason that they do not believe is because they deliberately reject the testimony of God’s own Holy Spirit to the great truths of the Gospel or to God’s existence.

So it seems to me that the role of rational argumentation in knowing Christianity to be true is again the role of a servant. A person knows that Christianity is true fundamentally because the Holy Spirit tells him that it is true, and while argument and evidence can be used to confirm this truth, it cannot legitimately be used to defeat it or override it. The witness of the Holy Spirit is an intrinsic defeater of any defeaters that are brought against it.

I might just say here that I don’t see any reason to think that God can’t increase the witness or intensity of his Holy Spirit’s witness as need be. It may well be that the witness of the Holy Spirit that you have right now may not seem sufficient to overcome great defeaters against the Christian faith, but it is sufficient for you right now. But imagine a student, say, raised in the old Soviet Union and indoctrinated with Marxist propaganda throughout his schooling and his university career. In order for that person to believe and intrinsically defeat the defeaters brought against him, God may intensify the witness of the Holy Spirit to a degree that is far beyond what you or I experience here. In other words the witness of the Holy Spirit can vary in its intensity relative to the circumstances and the needs. What God won’t permit is for a person to be in a situation where the rational thing for him to do is to apostatize, reject Christ or not be a believer, and be an atheist or agnostic – a non-Christian.

Even if the witness of the Holy Spirit in your life may not seem powerful enough to defeat every defeater, it may well be the case for those who are confronted with very powerful defeaters that they would experience a more intense witness of the Holy Spirit that will be sufficient for their perseverance in the faith.

That leads us finally to step three of the argument:
3. Therefore, belief that the biblical God exists may be rationally accepted as a basic belief not grounded on argument.

I would just add, as we’ve seen, that that properly basic belief is properly basic not only with regard to rationality but also with respect to warrant so that we can be said to know on the basis of the Holy Spirit’s witness that God exists and the great truths of the Gospel are indeed true.30
Lecture 5: Argument From Contingency

It may seem strange to have begun an excursus on natural theology by arguing that we don’t really need arguments for the existence of God in order to believe rationally and even know that God exists. But we’ve seen that, in fact, arguments for God’s existence are not necessary because God can be known to exist in a properly basic way through the self-authenticating witness of the Holy Spirit.

But to say that arguments for God’s existence are not necessary in order to know that God exists or that the great things of the Gospel are true is not to say that there are not also arguments that are sufficient for the knowledge of God. In fact, I would agree with Alvin Plantinga that even though belief in God and the great truths of the Gospel are properly basic, still there are arguments and evidences that are sufficient to warrant belief in the existence of God and in the great truths of the Gospel.

Today we want to begin to look at some of these arguments for God’s existence. The first argument is the argument from contingency. [Dr. Craig hands out the outline.] Sometimes this is called the Leibnizian cosmological argument. I discuss this argument in the book *On Guard* and also in a deeper way in the book *Reasonable Faith*. We will be looking this morning at the version as it is laid out in *On Guard*.

I have always been impressed by the mystery of the existence of the universe. I remember as a boy looking up at the stars at night and wondering where did all of this come from? It just seemed to me that there had to be an explanation for why all of this exists. Little did I realize that my boyhood question as well as its answer had been reflected upon by philosophers for centuries, millennia even. For example, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (who was the co-discoverer of the calculus; a polymath of tremendous genius and one of the great geniuses of 18th century Europe) argued that, in his words, “The first question which should rightly be asked is, ‘Why is there something rather than nothing?’” That is to say, why does anything at all exist? Leibniz believed that this is the most basic question that anyone can ask. Like me, Leibniz came to the conclusion that the answer is to be found not in the universe of created things but rather in a transcendent cause of the universe in God. God, he said, exists necessarily and is the explanation for why anything else exists.

One of my friends has said to me that it is a shame that I began the book *On Guard* with this Leibnizian argument because it is an argument that is very philosophical and metaphysical and which the layperson finds, I think, very difficult to grasp. So right at the beginning of the book this hurdle is placed in his path whereas it would have been perhaps better to have begun with easier-to-grasp arguments for God’s existence. But I must say, I agree with what Leibniz said – logically this is the very first question which
ought to be asked. Before we ask, “Why is the universe fine-tuned for our existence?” or “Why did the universe begin to exist?” the most fundamental question is “Why is there anything at all?” This is clearly the beginning point.

Two centuries after Leibniz, Martin Heidegger, who was a very famous German 20th century metaphysician, wrote this: “Why are there beings rather than nothing? That is the question. Clearly it is no ordinary question. ‘Why are there beings, why is there anything at all, rather than nothing?’ – obviously this is the first of all questions.” That is where we will begin in our survey of arguments for God’s existence with this most fundamental question of all: why does anything at all exist?31

We can put Leibniz’s argument in the form of a very simple series of premises which are on your outline.

1. Every existing thing has an explanation of its existence, either in the necessity of its own nature or in an external cause.
2. If the universe has an explanation of its existence, that explanation is God.
3. The universe is an existing thing.
4. Therefore, the explanation of the existence of the universe is God.

This is a logically airtight argument. That is to say, if the three premises are true then the conclusion follows necessarily. It doesn’t matter if you don’t like the conclusion. It doesn’t matter if you have other objections to God’s existence. If you think that those premises are true then you’ve got to accept the truth of the conclusion as well. Anyone who wants to reject the conclusion has got to say that at least one of those three premises is false.

But which one will he reject? Clearly, premise (3) is undeniable for any sincere seeker after truth. Obviously the universe exists! Therefore, the skeptic is going to have to deny either premise (1) or premise (2). So the whole question with regard to this argument comes down to this: are these two premises more plausible than not? Are they more plausibly true or are they more plausibly false? Well, let’s look at each one of them in turn.

First, every existing thing has an explanation of its existence, either in the necessity of its own nature or in an external cause. You will notice that Leibniz makes a distinction here between two types of being. The first type is things that exist necessarily – by a necessity of their own nature (a necessary being). This is the idea of a being which cannot fail to exist. It is something the non-existence of which is impossible. What would be an example of a necessary being? Very many mathematicians think that mathematical
entities are necessary in this way – things like numbers, sets, propositions, things of that sort. Even those who are anti-realists about these – who don’t think that mathematical objects really exist – nevertheless recognize that if they do exist then they exist necessarily. If the number 1 exists in any possible world then it actually exists. It would be impossible for the number 1, for example, to just contingently exist – to exist in this world but not in some other possible world. Even those who don’t believe in the existence of mathematical entities like numbers, sets, and geometrical figures still would recognize that it belongs to the nature of these things to exist by necessity. If they exist at all, they exist necessarily. These kinds of things are not caused to exist by something else. They simply exist by a necessity of their own nature, and it is impossible for them to fail to exist.

The other type of thing would be things that exist contingently. That is to say, they are contingent beings. Contingent beings are things that exist but they don’t have to exist. It is possible for them to fail to exist. They exist but their existence isn’t necessary; they could have failed to exist. This is the case with the world of objects around us – things like people, chairs, planets, galaxies, and so forth. These things exist but they are not necessary in their being. We can imagine a possible world in which any or all of those things fail to exist. These kinds of things, if they exist, have explanations outside of themselves for why they exist. They don’t exist by a necessity of their own nature. If, for example, a unicorn exists in this world, there must be some explanation for why it exists rather than not exist.32 There are lots of possible worlds in which there are no unicorns, like the actual world. If a unicorn does exist, there needs to be some sort of explanation that is apart from the nature of a unicorn that would explain why the unicorn actually exists rather than is a mere possibility.

So when Leibniz says that everything that exists has an explanation of its existence, that explanation could be one of two sorts. The explanation could be that it exists by a necessity of its own nature – it is a necessary being. Or the explanation could be that it is a contingent being that has a cause outside of itself that produces it in being. If God exists, God is a being that would exist by a necessity of his own nature. It is impossible for God to be caused by anything else. If God were to be caused by something else then there would be something greater than God and therefore he wouldn’t be God. So by the very concept of God, God cannot be something that would be caused to exist by something else. If there is a God then he would exist necessarily. Leibniz’s argument is driving us toward a very powerful concept of God, namely, the idea of a metaphysically necessary being – a being that exists by a necessity of its own nature. Not merely a contingent being that happens to exist, but a necessarily existing being.

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START DISCUSSION

*Student:* A contingent being would require a necessary being?

*Dr. Craig:* That will be the argument, yes. A contingent being requires some sort of cause or explanation outside of itself. Ultimately, this is going to have to be grounded by a metaphysically necessary being. That is right. You are already seeing the implication of Leibniz’s argument.

*Student:* Could you explain further more necessary-being philosophy. Obviously the concept of God is huge and hardly comprehensible. The same thing as math – like numbers or time. Do you have something else to relate that to that would make it more understandable?

*Dr. Craig:* I don’t. The difficulty here is, at least on a Christian view of things, everything physical – everything in the space-time universe – is created by God and is therefore contingent. So one really has to cast about to find non-theological examples of necessary beings. The only place that you can really find these would be in these so-called abstract objects – things that are not concrete, made out of matter and energy, existing in space and time. Things like mathematical objects, propositions, properties, possible worlds. These are called abstract objects. I think that the example of mathematics is the clearest. Most of us in math class have thought about whether or not numbers exist or is there a perfect circle? We all know there is no perfect circle in the physical world, so are all these approximations to some sort of abstract perfect circle? Does that thing sort of exist as an abstract object? If it does, it would exist necessarily. It would be impossible to say that there just happens to exist a perfect circle in this world but it doesn’t exist in these other worlds. Mathematical objects, for me, is the most accessible example of something that exists necessarily if it exists. If you want some explanation beyond that all I can do is ask a question and I’ll try to respond to it.33

*Student:* I struggled for a long time with this concept of a necessary being. I finally arrived at something that at least helped me and may be it will help other people, too. There are an infinite number of things that could have happened to keep me from existing. So I am not a necessary being. There is nothing that could have happened to keep God from existing. Why is this? In my mind (maybe it is a little too narrow) I’ve distilled it down to the fact that he has no beginning. Anything that has no beginning is necessary because nothing could have happened to prevent his existence. There is only two things that I could think of that have no beginning – God and (we won’t get into time but) his time (I think they are probably different times). Both of those entities had no beginning. The second thing about abstract numbers and all – to me, those are concepts,
and a concept can only exist if there is an intelligence. If there is no intelligence or comprehension there is no number 7. There is no square root of this, that, and the other. But since God is necessary, he is the intelligence. So they are necessary, too, because he is here to have them as a concept.

Dr. Craig: Let me address the second concern first. Do you remember in our discussion of the attributes of God we talked about divine aseity or self-existence and the challenge posed to that by Platonism, which is the philosophy that there are these sorts of abstract, necessarily existing, uncreated entities like numbers and sets and geometrical shapes and so forth. One of the Christian responses, indeed the mainstream Christian response, to this challenge is exactly what you said; namely, these are divine concepts. So they don’t really exist independently of God. They are ideas or concepts in the mind of God. I think that is a defensible perspective. As I emphasized in appealing to this example, even people who are conceptualists would recognize that if there were these sort of Platonic entities like numbers and sets and so forth they would be necessary beings. They would be things that exist by a necessity of their own nature. But he thinks there aren’t those sort of things. He thinks instead these are concepts in God’s mind. They aren’t really abstract objects. While I tend to agree with you that these things don’t have any sort of independent existence of God, I don’t think that robs the illustration of its power because it is the best example of a necessary being that is not God if the Platonist is right.

I liked very much what you said in your first question about nothing could prevent God from existing whereas with contingent beings they could be prevented in their existence. There are other possible worlds where these things never happened or never come to be. But I want to resist, however, your explanation of why God can’t be prevented from existing and why other things can. You found that in the fact of a temporal beginning. I don’t think that is right. Indeed, Leibniz emphasizes that you cannot evade his argument by saying the universe is eternal whereas if you gave your explanation you could evade his argument that way. But Leibniz says even if the universe has existed from eternity, it is still possible for it not to have existed. It is logically possible that there be no universe at all, or that there be a universe with a beginning instead of an eternal universe. Even saying that the universe is beginningless and eternal in the past does not answer Leibniz’s question, “Why is there something rather than nothing?” While I like what you said about God’s necessity entailing that nothing can prevent his existence, I wouldn’t find that in his being beginningless because I think that is incorrect and it would also allow the atheist a way out of this argument.

Student: It seems like what we are saying is if there is a God as we’ve defined God he is a necessary being. But it requires us to say our definition of God is this, and therefore he
would be a necessary being. It is not a proof that God exists. Am I understanding that correctly?

Dr. Craig: Sort of. Wait until we get to premise (2) where it says, “If the universe has an explanation, that explanation is God.” That is where God will get pulled into the argument. But not in premise (1). Premise (1) is just a principle that things that exist have explanations for why they exist, and those explanations can either be in some external cause or that they exist by a necessity of their own nature. In philosophical literature, and in Leibniz’s own writing, this is called the principle of sufficient reason. Leibniz stated a very radical version of this principle. The version that I have here is a quite modest version of the principle that I think is very plausible as I’ll say. It requires that simply any existing thing has an explanation for why it exists rather than not. We’ll talk about whether or not premise (2) is true, and we are justified in calling this being God.

Student: It seems to me that only God has his existence by necessity because even time began to exist. Also when you think of numbers you are looking at numbers are ways to consider objects. It is a concept but I don’t know how you could have even a concept that is separated from God because I can’t even imagine anything that can exist that hasn’t an origin of God.

Dr. Craig: You mean apart from God? Again, I want to refer back to our discussion of divine aseity when we talked about the attributes of God, and where I argued precisely this point. Everything that exists other than God is contingent and dependent upon God. But what that just means is I am not a Platonist. But many mathematicians are Platonists. They don’t ground these objects in God as his concepts. They think that the number 1 and the set of natural numbers and the perfect circle and other geometrical shapes are real objects that actually exist. They are abstract objects. I am saying that on Platonism we have an illustration of a non-theological necessary being. I am trying to find something here that illustrate for lay folks what a necessary being is that doesn’t appeal to God. That is the best example that I can come up with. If you are a Platonist you are loaded with these things.

Student: Even on that score, not to belabor the point, you have to have a mind to conceive of a contingent or necessity . . . it is a concept of a mind. But then does the mind not have a necessity?

Dr. Craig: This is interesting. Plato had a concept that he called the demiururge. This is sort of “god” with a small “g.” He is the creator of the physical world. What Plato says is that these abstract objects or Forms are the most real things. They exist independently of anything else and “god” looks to the Forms and then he fashions the physical world on their model. So the perfect circle is the model for these approximations that “god” makes. These numbers are the ideal entities when “god” makes three things, say, then there are
one, two, and three in the realm of the Forms. Yeah, the concrete world on Plato’s view is
due to the action of this demiurge but he isn’t responsible for this realm of Forms or
abstract objects. They exist quite independently of him. As you rightly point out, this is
utterly incompatible, I think, with Christian theism or Jewish-Christian theism. The
church fathers rejected Platonism and they tended to put these things in the mind of God
– these are God’s ideas. They internalized Plato’s realm of the Forms into the mind of
God. When I appeal to this illustration, I am appealing to (for the most part) non-theistic
mathematicians and philosophers who still endorse Platonism. Sadly, the truth is there are
a good many Christian philosophers who endorse Platonism as well. I am thinking of
people like Peter van Inwagen and Keith Yandell who are Platonists. I am baffled by that,
but there are Platonists today who think that these things are necessarily existing beings.

**Student:** Are these not then just a character of God? These concepts? In essence, they are
saying they believe in this concept but they are not giving that as part of God’s character.

**Dr. Craig:** They don’t think they are concepts. They think they are real objects. They are
as real as this chair or you. In some ways they are more real in one sense in that they exist
necessarily whereas the chair and you are just contingent.

**Student:** You can’t objectify these things without a mind. You can’t have a concept of
oneness and numbers in abstraction unless there is a mind which presupposes you could
understand such a thing.

**Dr. Craig:** Again, we are reverting to our earlier discussion about divine aseity. I don’t
want to rehearse that again here because all I am trying to do is illustrate the idea for you
of a necessary being. I agree with you that Platonism is false. We are on board with each
other, right? But do we understand the idea of a being that exists by a necessity of its own
nature – a being that cannot fail to exist? If you get that idea then fine. That is all we want
to establish. And how that is distinct from a contingent being which happens to exist but
could fail to exist if things had gone otherwise and therefore has some cause outside of
itself.

**Student:** Can we use a substitute description for necessary being as a set of divine
concepts? Because John 1:1 says, “In the beginning was the Word.” The Word is just
divine concepts. As we have the ability to think of concepts there may be a law that the
concepts can come together and become a set and that set we call it God.

**Dr. Craig:** I’ll go with you part way on that. In the beginning was the Word, or the
Logos. This is who Jesus Christ is said to be. He is the incarnate Logos. As I indicated in
response to earlier questions, the church fathers located these abstract objects in the
Logos. The Logos is the mind of God. These things are concepts in the mind of God. But
all of these questions concern the previous lesson that we’ve already finished about divine self-existence or aseity. All we are talking about here now is: is it true that everything that exists has an explanation of its existence? There are two types of explanation. I think you get that. You just want to talk about this other thing.

Student: Maybe we are looking for more literature on this?

Dr. Craig: Oh, that’s easy to give.

Student: I asked my friend this question – why is there something rather than nothing? – this probably was a month ago. He walked away asking to think about it. About two weeks ago I again asked him, “Did you come to a conclusion?” He said no. He is still looking. Now I am going to look into it, too, to help him out. There are some articles out there but they are very complex. I don’t know where else we can turn to on this particular question and this argument.

Dr. Craig: Have you read the treatment of this argument, for example, in Reasonable Faith yet?36

Student: I have not.

Dr. Craig: OK, that is a place to begin. There are footnotes that you can follow to read further literature on Leibniz’s argument. You can go back and read Leibniz himself.

Student: Is there a particular chapter in there that I should look into?

Dr. Craig: Yes, it is chapter 3 in the book. That is a place to look. As I say, there are citations to further literature and bibliography there.

END DISCUSSION

What reason might be offered for thinking that premise (1) is true? Why should we think this is true? I think when you reflect on it there is a kind of obviousness about the premise. If something exists contingently – like, say, if there is a unicorn rather than no unicorn – then there needs to be some sort of explanation for why one of those alternatives is actualized rather than the other. Why does the unicorn actually exist rather than not when its non-existence was possible?

Richard Taylor, who was a prominent 20th century American philosopher, gives a wonderful illustration for this. He says imagine you are walking through the woods and you suddenly come upon a translucent ball lying on the forest floor. He said you would naturally wonder why it exists. How did it come to be there? If your hiking buddy said to you, “Forget about it! It just exists inexplicably! There is no explanation of its existence.” Taylor says you wouldn’t accept that. You’d think that the guy was either just joking or
wanted you to keep moving. But it is obvious that there would be some kind of an explanation for why that ball exists.

Notice that merely increasing the size of the ball, say, until it is the size of an automobile does nothing to explain its existence. Or making it even bigger to the size of a house. Same problem. Suppose it is the size of a planet. Same problem. Suppose it is the size of a galaxy. Same problem. Suppose it is the size of the entire universe. Same problem. Merely increasing the size of the object does nothing to provide an explanation for its existence.

If you have the sense that finding a ball in the woods requires an explanation for its existence, that, I think, will lead inevitably to saying that bigger and bigger objects (even the universe itself) will have to have an explanation of its existence because merely increasing the size of the ball does nothing to either provide or remove the need for an explanation of its existence.

With that we will close today. I will take up next time some atheist responses to premise (1) to try to exempt the universe from this principle. 37
Lecture 6: Objections to the Contingency Argument

We’ve been looking at the contingency argument for God’s existence. Last time I offered a defense of premise (1) of the argument that everything that exists has an explanation of its existence, either in the necessity of its own nature or else in some external cause. In defense of this premise I shared Richard Taylor’s illustration of going on a walk through the woods and finding a ball lying on the forest floor. You would naturally wonder how it came to be there. If anyone said it just exists without any explanation of its existence you would think he was joking. It is not just the ball that this would apply to. Any sort of object you might think of would fit the bill. A tree in your front yard. A car in your driveway. A person who works at your office. In every case we would say there is an explanation of why that thing exists rather than not. Merely increasing the size of the object does nothing to provide or remove the need for an explanation of its existence. That leads naturally to the question: then what is the explanation of the existence of the universe?

Atheists will typically say in response to premise (1) that this principle of sufficient reason as it is called is true of everything in the universe but they want to exempt the universe itself from the principle. The universe itself is the exception to the rule and it doesn’t need to have an explanation of its existence. Everything in the universe has an explanation of its existence, but the universe itself exists without explanation.

I think this atheist response to the principle commits what has been aptly called “the taxicab fallacy.” The nineteenth century German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer pointed out that the principle of sufficient reason is not something that can be dismissed like a hack when you arrive at your desired destination! When you get to the universe you can’t just say the universe is the exception to the rule. That commits the taxicab fallacy of thinking you can just dismiss the principle of sufficient reason when you get to your explanatory ultimate. Remember Leibniz does not exempt God from the principle of sufficient reason. He says, yes, God has an explanation of why he exists. He exists by a necessity of his own nature. Leibniz can’t be accused of arbitrarily exempting the explanatory ultimate from the principle of sufficient reason, but that is what the atheist tries to do. He simply says the universe is the exception to the rule, and in so saying he is being arbitrary. He doesn’t give any reason for thinking that the universe should be exempt from the principle – he just arbitrarily exempts it. That is without justification. Remember the illustration of the ball in the woods. Merely increasing the size of the ball even until it becomes the entire universe itself does nothing to remove the need for an explanation of its existence.
Notice, as well, how unscientific this objection is. The whole project of contemporary cosmology (the study of the large scale structure of the universe) is devoted to a search for an explanation of the universe’s existence. This atheist attitude of thinking that the universe just exists without any explanation would actually be a science-stopper. It would cripple the project of modern cosmology of trying to explain why the universe exists.

So this typical atheist response, I think, commits Schopenhauer’s taxi cab fallacy.

Some atheists have tried to avoid this arbitrariness – this fallacy – by providing a justification for exempting the universe. They try to give an argument for why the universe should be exempted from the principle of sufficient reason. They will typically say that it is impossible for the universe to have an explanation of its existence, and therefore it is the exception to the rule because it is impossible for there to be an explanation of the existence of the universe. Why is that? What is there about the universe that would make it impossible for it to have an explanation? One pair of philosophers I’ve read on this says that if there were an explanation of the existence of the universe it would have to be in some sort of explanatorily prior state of affairs in which the universe did not exist. If this is going to be an explanation of the existence of the universe then this would have to be some sort of explanatorily prior state of affairs in which there is no universe. But, they say, that would be a state of nothingness. There would be nothing, and nothingness can’t be the explanation of anything, and therefore the universe must just exist inexplicably.

If you think about this for a minute, I think you can see that this reasoning is obviously fallacious because in saying that the explanatorily prior state of affairs in which the universe doesn’t exist is nothingness these people are assuming that the universe is all there is. So if there were no universe there would be nothing. That just is to assume that atheism is true. Right? So the whole objection is reasoning in a circle. It is presupposing that there is no God. It is presupposing the truth of atheism! So it is reasoning in a circle. We can agree that if atheism is true then the universe has no explanation of its existence. But the whole question is: is atheism true? You can’t just assume that it is true in order to object to Leibniz’s argument.

Leibniz would agree that the explanatorily prior state of affairs that explains the existence of the universe is going to be a state of affairs in which the universe does not exist. But it wouldn’t be a state of nothingness; rather, it would be God and his will. That would be the explanation of the origin of the universe.
So don’t let the atheist get away with assuming the universe is all there is. Because that assumption presupposes the truth of atheism, and that is what is under question. That is what we are trying to investigate.

**START DISCUSSION**

*Student:* Going back to the “true of everything in the universe but not the universe itself” atheist argument, would you say that that is the atheist essentially looking for a necessary something out there? They understand that having a necessary thing is necessary, so they attribute it to the universe and not to God?

*Dr. Craig:* Not typically. Do you hear his question? Because this is perceptive. Is the atheist saying, *When you get to the universe, the universe exists by a necessity of its own nature. So the universe isn’t an arbitrary exemption to premise (1). It has an explanation of its existence, namely the universe exists by a necessity of its own nature.* As I will say later on, that isn’t typically what they are saying. I don’t know of any contemporary atheist who holds to this position – that the universe exists by a necessity of its own nature. Instead, what they say is the universe is the exception to the rule. Everything else has an explanation of its existence but not the universe itself. As I say, in the absence of some sort of justification for that, that is committing this taxicab fallacy because there is nothing about the universe other than its just being big that would prevent its having an explanation of its existence.

*Student:* A lot of atheists also say that we just don’t have the explanation yet. We don’t know. They lean on, *Hold on, we’ll have an answer. We don’t know when, but we will. We’ll figure this out.* The agnostic wants to say, *I want to know how God created the universe, so we are going to continue with science to develop and research and all of that.* Us, as Christians, I want to know do we want to know how God created the universe or is that just a mystery?

*Dr. Craig:* I think that the person who says what you’ve just said hasn’t understood the argument. This is not an argument to which science is even relevant. Your friend is confusing this argument with the *kalam* cosmological argument which does “Ask how did the universe originate? What was the temporal origin of the universe?” But as I said last week in response to a question, Leibniz is quite willing to admit that the universe is past-eternal – that it has always been there. So there is no explanation of its origin. It maybe didn’t have an origin in a temporal sense. But what Leibniz points out is that even an eternally existing universe is still contingent. It doesn’t have to exist. It could have failed to exist, or a different kind of universe could have existed – maybe one with a beginning instead of an eternal one. So just positing the past eternity of the universe

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doesn’t escape this argument. That means that scientific questions about where the universe came from and how it was created are just irrelevant to this. This is a philosophical argument, or a meta-physical argument. It is asking why is there a space-time reality at all (no matter how big it is, how wide-ranging, whether it had a beginning or no beginning, or what its laws are)? All of that is irrelevant. What is being asked here is what is the explanation for why there is such a thing rather than not. That is not a question to which science is relevant.

**Student:** One thing I have a problem with understanding is things like contingency and necessary beings. You mentioned Leibniz is willing to accept the universe even being past-eternal but it is still contingent. Can you explain to me how that is possible? Because what I’ve always understood is if something is eternal it will of course not have a beginning. That is one thing I don’t understand. How can it still be contingent even if it is past-eternal.

**Dr. Craig:** Because it could not exist. There could be nothing instead. We can imagine another possible world in which there is no universe. Or, as I said a moment ago, we can imagine another possible world in which there is a different kind of universe – maybe one that does have a beginning. So, an eternal universe is only one of a wide range of logical possibilities and therefore it is contingent that such a thing exists. There happens to exist a universe with a beginning according to the best evidence we have. But that is a contingent fact. If there had been a universe that is past-eternal that would also be a contingent fact. It is not logically or metaphysically necessary that there be that kind of universe. There could have been one like ours, right? As long as you can see that there could have been one like ours, then you’ve got to see that an eternal one is contingent. It is not necessary because you could have had ours instead, like we do have. If you think this world is possible (which it obviously is) that shows that that other type of world isn’t necessary, if that had been instead.

**Student:** If you had an eternal universe it would be heat-dead.

**Dr. Craig:** That is getting into the next argument. We will talk about thermodynamic properties of the universe when we get to the so-called *kalam* cosmological argument. That is a different kind of argument than this one. And that is very important to distinguish the two because objections against one version just won’t apply to the other version, particularly one’s like we just heard about “maybe science will explain how the universe originated back when.” That is just irrelevant to Leibniz’s argument.

**Student:** Do you think that Peter van Inwagen’s objection to the principle of sufficient reason apply to this particular version of it?

**Dr. Craig:** I’ve read van Inwagen on this and I think that those who have defended the principle of sufficient reason in a modest form like this (and I’m thinking here of people
like Alexander Pruss of Baylor University) have had adequately addressed that.\(^{40}\) Van Inwagen’s objection is to Leibniz’s own very radical strong version that every fact – every truth – has an explanation. Van Inwagen says that would make everything necessary if you have that. But this version of the principle – premise (1) – doesn’t say every truth has an explanation or every fact has an explanation; just that every thing that exists has an explanation why it exists rather than not. That would be found in a necessary being and his will. Given the freedom of his will, this necessary being can choose to create a contingent reality or not create a contingent reality. So I don’t think this modest version of the principle falls prey to the objections to Leibniz’s own very strong version of the principle. That was one of the reasons that I came to accept this version of the argument. I had been skeptical of Leibniz’s argument for many years until I read this reformulation by Stephen Davis, who is a Christian philosopher, using this very modest version of the principle. I thought, “Wow, this really makes sense and avoids those problems.”\(^{41}\)

**Student:** Some people would talk about a multiverse. This argument, even if someone believed in a multiverse, wouldn’t answer the explanation for our universe. The multiverse itself would have to have an explanation of its existence.

**Dr. Craig:** That is the idea, yes. Because when Leibniz is talking about “universe” here he means all of physical space-time reality including any embedding multiverse that you might want to have our universe be a part of; we’ll then want to know why does the multiverse exist rather than nothing, rather than, say, a single universe. Why is there a multiverse? Ultimately I think he is right. You’ve got to get back to a necessary being which exists by necessity of its own nature.

**END DISCUSSION**

Let me say this about the first premise. This first premise can be reformulated in a more simple way if you want to. We could reformulate it to simply say “every contingent thing has an explanation of its existence.” That would be a simpler version that would also be acceptable. Obviously, if everything has an explanation of its existence (as this premise states) then every contingent thing has an explanation of its existence. So they are compatible, but this would just be more modest – every contingency thing has an explanation of its existence. Then you would modify premise (3) to say the universe is a contingent thing. Then it will follow that the universe has an explanation of its existence. Sometimes in my debates – like the one coming up in Germany – in order to make this more accessible to a lay audience who is hearing it orally, I’ll use that simpler version of

\(^{40}\) For more details on van Inwagen’s objection and Dr. Craig’s response to it, see Q&A #132 “Leibniz’s Cosmological Argument and the PSR” at [http://www.reasonablefaith.org/leibnizs-cosmological-argument-and-the-psr](http://www.reasonablefaith.org/leibnizs-cosmological-argument-and-the-psr) (accessed on September 20, 2015).
the premise, and then use the story of the ball in the woods to make the point. I hope that will be helpful to you in memorizing the premises and being able to share them with someone else. That is a simpler version.

Let’s now go on to premise (2) which is that if the universe has an explanation of its existence, that explanation is God. At first, this sounds rather jarring. I remember when I first saw Steve Davis’ version of the argument I thought, “Wait a minute. Where does that come from?” He seems like a *deus ex machina* – God out of the machine. If the universe has an explanation of its existence, that explanation is God. What Davis pointed out is that premise (2) is actually logically equivalent to the atheist’s typical response to Leibniz’s argument. What do I mean by that? Two statements are logically equivalent if it is impossible for one to be true and the other one to be false. They stand or fall together. They can both be true. They can both be false. But if they are logically equivalent, one can’t be true and the other false. Here is a real simple illustration. Take the proposition $p$. $p$ is logically equivalent to double negation $\neg\neg p$. Those are logically equivalent. If you say, “It is not impossible that Bryant is preaching this morning” that means it is possible that he is preaching this morning. Very often we will talk in these sorts of double-negatives. I remember one scientist saying to me once, “That is definitely not a non-trivial result,” which is just to say that this is a significant result. We sometimes talk in these double-negatives. “That is not unusual” we say, which is to say, “that is usual.” That would be an example of logically equivalent statements.

**START DISCUSSION**

*Student:* Could you illustrate two logically equivalent statements where implication is involved?

*Dr. Craig:* Yeah, actually we can. $P$ implies $q$ is equivalent to $\neg p$ or $q$. If $p$ implies $q$, that means either $\neg p$ or $q$. That is a simple logical equivalence. The one I am going to appeal to is if $p$ implies $q$, that is equivalent to $\neg q$ implies $\neg p$. That is called contraposition, actually. There is a name for that logical equivalence. Don’t be confused by all of these symbols. This is just illustrative of the idea of statements that are logically equivalent to each other – they are either both true or both false, but you can’t have one be true and the other false.

**END DISCUSSION**

What does the atheist almost always say in response to Leibniz’s argument? As we saw in our examination of premise (1), what the atheist typically says in response to Leibniz is:

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42 20:05
A. If atheism is true, then the universe has no explanation of its existence.

He says the universe is the exception to the principle of sufficient reason. The universe just exists inexplicably. He says if atheism is true, the universe has no explanation of its existence. But that is logically equivalent to saying:

B. If the universe has an explanation of its existence, then atheism is not true.

Those two statements are logically equivalent, right? But (B) is virtually synonymous with premise (2)! So premise (2) which might at first blush seem very daring and bold is really virtually synonymous with what the atheist himself believes. So premise (2) is not one that the atheist disputes.

So in affirming (A) the atheist is also implicitly affirming (B) and (B) is virtually synonymous to premise (2) so the atheist himself is affirming premise (2).43

Here is a second argument for premise (2). I think premise (2) is plausible in its own right regardless what the atheist thinks. I think premise (2) is very plausible. Just think of what the universe is: all of space-time reality, all matter and energy. So it follows that if the universe has an explanation of its existence, that must be found in a cause which exists beyond space and time, beyond matter and energy, and is therefore a non-physical, immaterial, spaceless, timeless being. This is incredible. The explanation of the universe could only be found in something that transcends space and time, matter and energy, and has created the universe.

Now what possible candidates could there be for such a being? I can think of only two things that could fit that sort of description: either an abstract object like a number (or other mathematical object) or else an unembodied mind or consciousness. An abstract object is, you’ll remember, immaterial, non-physical, exists beyond space and time, exists necessarily (if it exists at all, it doesn’t exist contingently). So an abstract object would really fill the bill very nicely for a transcendent, immaterial, timeless, spaceless, metaphysically necessary being. The problem is abstract objects don’t stand in causal relations. Indeed, among contemporary philosophers that is virtually definitive for what is an abstract object. What differentiates an abstract from a concrete object is that only concrete objects stand in causal relations. Abstract objects are causally effete, or causally impotent. The number 7, for example, has no effect upon anything. So it follows that the cause, or the explanation, of the universe cannot be an abstract object. Therefore it must be an unembodied mind or consciousness which would be a transcendent, immaterial, non-physical, spaceless, timeless, personal being who has freely created a contingent universe.
This is clearly a conclusion that is pregnant with theological significance. I hope you begin to grasp the power of Leibniz’s argument. The explanation of the universe has to be a necessary, uncaused, timeless, spaceless, immaterial, personal being. This is not some ill-conceived flying spaghetti monster. This is a being which must exhibit the traditional attributes of God. This is truly a mind-blowing conclusion.

START DISCUSSION

Student: What if the atheist were to say something about the philosophy of mind – they believe the mind is only material, and if you don’t have the neurons firing then you don’t have a mind and therefore it is inherently physical.

Dr. Craig: It is important to see that this argument that Leibniz is giving here is an argument for an immaterial mind! This would be a reason to believe that minds are not just physical or material like brains, but that they are immaterial entities. Because that is the only way to explain the existence of a contingent universe. This is actually an argument for the immateriality and non-physicality of mind. The atheist probably doesn’t believe in minds like that. So he can then raise objections to this. He can try to give us his proofs for materialism or reductive physicalism. The theist will have to respond to those arguments. But he can’t just presuppose it. Otherwise he is begging the question again. If he just presupposed there can’t be a mind then he is begging the question because this is an argument for such a mind. But if he has some arguments for reductive physicalism or materialism, great! We’ll hear them and see if we can respond to them. Typically the arguments against the existence of mind, I have found, will be based upon human cognition and that in human beings minds are typically conjoined with brains and the claim is that their brain states that correlate with mental states and all the rest of that. The problem with that is at the very best that would only prove that we are physical creatures, not minds. But that doesn’t show that a mind is impossible. It is going to be pretty hard, I think, for the materialist or atheist to show that there cannot be an immaterial transcendent personal mind that has created the universe. The most he is going to do would be to maybe make that kind of dualism implausible with regard to human creatures. But then he’d need to extrapolate that to a cosmic creator, and I am not sure how he would be able to do that.

Student: Can you clarify the idea of metaphysical necessity. A lot of people get hung up on that. If I say, “the universe exists and God doesn’t,” there is no strict contradiction. We are not contradicting some stipulated definition. But we don’t mean “impossible” in the way of saying it is impossible to move faster than light, it is impossible to create a perpetual motion machine.
Dr. Craig: We can rely upon you to make things more complicated than we want them to be! What he is pointing out is there are different kinds of possibility and necessity. For example, one would be physical possibility and necessity. It is physically impossible to accelerate an object through the speed of light and make it go faster than light. That is physically impossible. It is against the laws of nature. But there is no logical impossibility with that. There could have been a universe with different laws of nature where you could accelerate something through the speed of light. That would be a kind of low-level possibility and necessity based upon the laws of nature. On the other hand, there is what we could call strict logical possibility and necessity. Here in order for something not to be strictly logically possible its opposite would have to involve a contradiction. For example, a married unmarried man. That would be strictly logically impossible because there you’ve said he is married and unmarried – those are strictly logically contradictory. What philosophers have noticed is there is a different kind of possibility and necessity different than these that is usually called broad logical possibility and necessity as opposed to strict. Sometimes it is called metaphysical possibility or necessity. The idea is something that could be actual would be metaphysically possible. It is not enough just to be free from contradiction. That would show it is strictly logically possible, but that wouldn’t show that it could really exist, that it could be metaphysically possible. One of my favorite examples is the illustration that Alvin Plantinga gives: could the prime minister have been a prime number? Obviously not. There is no logical contradiction in that statement, right? The prime minister is a prime number. There is no strict logical contradiction, but nevertheless it is obviously metaphysically impossible for the prime minister to be a prime number. If you wonder why, just think of the fact that prime ministers are causal agents and a prime number as an abstract object isn’t a causal agent. We’ve already said abstract objects don’t stand in causal relations. So it is metaphysically impossible that the prime minister could be a prime number even though there is no strict logical contradiction. What we are talking about here is a being which is metaphysically necessary in his existence. God is a metaphysically necessary being. It doesn’t refute this for the atheist to point out that the statement “God does not exist” doesn’t involve a logical contradiction.45 “God does not exist” doesn’t involve a strict logical contradiction anymore than the prime minister is a prime number. But that doesn’t mean that therefore God is not a metaphysically necessary being. God is metaphysically necessary in his existence even though there is no strict logical contradiction in saying God does not exist. That is what the question is getting at here – he wants me to make it clear that what Leibniz is talking about is metaphysical necessity. God exists with metaphysical necessity. The way I cash that out is he exists by a necessity of his own nature.
END DISCUSSION

If these two premises are true that everything that exists has an explanation of its existence (either in the necessity of its own nature or in an external cause) and it is also true that if the universe has an explanation of its existence that explanation is God then it follows that God exists by a necessity of his own nature. He is a metaphysically necessary being.

Next week we will consider one final objection to Leibniz’s argument. Suppose the atheist says, *All right, I withdraw my objection to premise (1) and I am going to say instead the universe is a metaphysically necessary being. The universe exists by a necessity of its own nature.* What can we say in response to that?46
Lecture 7: Another Objection to the Contingency Argument

We’ve now looked at the two premises of the argument from contingency for God’s existence that are under dispute. Those were, as you recall:

1. Everything that exists has an explanation of its existence either in the necessity of its own nature or in some external cause. (Or, more simply, I said we can reformulate that as “every contingent thing has an explanation of its existence.”)

Then I offered a defense of the second premise that:

2. If the universe has an explanation of its existence, that explanation is God.

Again, if you find that premise too jarring to suit your tastes, that could be reformulated as well to a more modest premise. You can reformulate that as “if the universe has an explanation of its existence then that explanation is a transcendent personal being.” You don’t have to call it God if you don’t want to, but this will be a metaphysically necessary, transcendent, personal being which has created the universe. And then the defense that you would give of the premise would be similar.

I think we have good grounds for thinking that these two premises are true, and therefore if the universe exists it has its explanation or ground in such a metaphysically necessary, transcendent being.

What can the atheist do at this point? I think he does have one recourse left to him, though it is a radical one. He can retrace his steps, withdraw his objection to premise (1), and instead admit that, yes, the universe does have an explanation of its existence. But, he might say, that explanation is: the universe exists by a necessity of its own nature. The atheist can regard the universe as a kind of God-substitute. It is the metaphysically necessary being that explains why everything else exists. For the atheist, the universe could be a sort of surrogate for God as the metaphysically necessary being that grounds the existence of everything else.

This would be a very radical step for the atheist to take. In fact, I cannot think of any contemporary atheist philosopher who says such a thing. Several years ago I was participating in a conference on the Philosophy of Time at City College in Santa Barbara. I thought that Professor Adolf Grünbaum, who was speaking at the conference and is a vociferous atheistic philosopher, was flirting with this idea – that the universe exists necessarily. But when I raised the question from the floor whether he thought the universe exists necessarily, he was very indignant at the suggestion. “Of course not!” he said and went on to say the typical line that the universe just exists inexplicably. It is contingent, but it just has no explanation for why it exists.
The reason that atheists haven’t been eager to embrace this escape from the argument, I think, is fairly obvious. When you look about the universe, none of the things that make the universe up seem to exist necessarily, whether we are talking about planets, intergalactic dust, radiation, stars, or galaxies. None of these things seem to exist necessarily. They all seem to be contingent. They could all fail to exist. In fact, at one point in the past, when the universe was very dense and very hot, none of them did exist. So these things don’t exist necessarily, and the universe is just the collection of all these things. It would seem the universe doesn’t exist necessarily. So atheists have not been eager to try to adopt this escape route from the argument.

Somebody might say in response to this: granted all of the things in the universe are contingent, nevertheless, what about the matter that they are made out of? Maybe the matter itself exists necessarily, and it just takes these different contingent configurations. All of these different configurations of matter – like stars, and planets, and galaxies – are contingent, but the matter itself is necessarily existent. I think the problem with this suggestion is that according to the standard model of subatomic physics matter is itself composed of tiny fundamental particles like quarks and electrons. All of the things in the universe are made out of these tiny fundamental particles. Indeed, the universe just is the collection of all of these particles arranged in different ways.

Let’s focus on the quarks and talk about them. Couldn’t a collection of different quarks have existed instead of the collection that actually does exist? Does each and every one of these quarks exist necessarily? It seems crazy to think that each and every quark in the universe exists by a necessity of its own nature so that there couldn’t have been fewer quarks or there couldn’t have been more quarks or different quarks. This is the only collection of quarks that could possibly have existed. That seems crazy.

Notice what the atheist cannot say at this point. He cannot say all of these quarks are just different configurations of matter, and they could have been different but the matter itself exists necessarily. He can’t say this because quarks are not made up of anything else. They just are the fundamental units of matter. So if the quark doesn’t exist, the matter doesn’t exist. Quarks aren’t composed of anything else. They just are the fundamental units of matter. Without the quarks there wouldn’t be any matter.

But then it seems obvious that a different collection of quarks might have existed instead of the collection that actually does exist. If that were the case – suppose a different collection of quarks were to have existed – I think then you would conclude a different universe might have existed. If a different collection of quarks could have existed, a different universe could have existed.
To see this point, I want to invite you to think about the shoes that you have on right now. Think about the shoes you are wearing. Could those shoes have been made of steel instead of what they are made out of? Certainly you could have had a pair of steel shoes that were the same shape and size as the shoes that you are wearing, but would they be the same shoes? Or wouldn’t it be a different pair of shoes – a steel pair of shoes? Could the very shoes that you have on have been made of steel? I think the answer is obviously not. They would be a different pair of shoes, not the very shoes that you have on. The same would be true of the universe. A universe which is made up of different quarks would not be the same universe even if all of those quarks were arranged in exactly the same way so that the same macroscopic objects existed, it would be a different universe because it is made up of a different collection of quarks.

Somebody might object at this point – wait a minute, they might say, the matter in my body is completely recycled every several years so that the molecules or the particles that I have in my body today are not the ones that I had, say, when I was a little boy and yet I am the same person. I remain identical even though all of the matter in my body is completely recirculated and there is none of the particles in my body now that used to be there. So they might say analogously a universe could be identical across different possible worlds even though it is made up of a wholly different collection of quarks. I think these two situations are not analogous though. The crucial dis-analogy is that the different between possible worlds does not involve any kind of intrinsic change. There is no enduring subject which undergoes a change from one state to another, whereas in my body there is an enduring subject that goes through intrinsic change. So comparing different universes in different possible worlds would be more like comparing human bodies which have no connection whatsoever with each other and are made up of different matter. In that case I think you would say it is not the same body. These are different bodies because the one doesn’t change into the other one as my boyhood body changed into my adult body. In the case where there is no intrinsic change and there is completely different matter making up the object you would have two objects. You would have two human bodies. Similarly, you would have two universes.

START DISCUSSION

Student: I am wondering about Spinoza. Do you think he would have bit the bullet and said yes it is? Do you have any idea what response he might have?

Dr. Craig: Yeah, that is why I said no contemporary atheist. You are pointing out the 17th century Dutch philosopher Benedict de Spinoza did believe that the universe is a sort of God substitute. He coined the famous phrase *Deus sive Natura* – God or Nature. He took the universe to be God and to exist with metaphysical necessity. You are right. There
have been people like this, but I can’t think of anybody on the contemporary scene that
would defend Spinozism, or this alternative. Where you would find it, I think, would
perhaps be in pantheistic religions – some form of Hinduism or Buddhism. Though there
they usually think the universe is illusory, not that it is necessary. But I could imagine a
pantheist saying something like this. But you won’t find this among your typical Western
naturalistic atheist. The response, I think, would be exactly what I have given. I think
given the fact that the universe is made up of this collection of fundamental particles it
would just seem utterly implausible to say each and every quark in the universe exists by
a metaphysical necessity of its own nature. That just, to me, is utterly implausible.

**Student:** I was having an issue with what you were saying at the beginning as you were
reintroducing the stuff – I am sorry to bring it up again, I don’t know if you already
moved past it – but the personal part of what you are saying that the Creator of the
universe must be. I didn’t get that in the previous weeks.

**Dr. Craig:** The argument there was we get to a being which is beyond space and time,
beyond matter and energy, because it is the cause or explanation of the existence of the
universe. So this has to be an immaterial, spaceless, timeless, metaphysically necessary
being. If you ask yourself – what could possibly fill that description (something that is
spaceless, timeless, immaterial, metaphysically necessary) – it seems to me there are only
two things that I could think of that could possibly fit that description: either an abstract
object (like a number or other mathematical object) or else an unembodied mind or
consciousness. An unembodied mind could be immaterial, timeless, spaceless, and
metaphysically necessary. But here is the rub. Abstract objects don’t stand in causal
relations. It is definitive of what it is to be an abstract object – it is causally effete,
causally impotent, and has no causal powers. So the cause of the universe cannot be an
abstract object, and therefore by logic it follows that it must be an unembodied mind or
consciousness or person.

**Student:** What do you mean by “person?” You mean it has the traits of a person, or do
you mean it actually has personal interaction?

**Dr. Craig:** By a “person” I mean “a mind” - a self-conscious individual endowed with
intellect, self-consciousness, and will. There is actually another really nice argument for
the personhood of this first cause that maybe I will go ahead and share with you that was
suggested by one of my students at Talbot in class. He pointed out, “How do you get
from a necessarily existing cause to a contingent object like the universe?” If the cause is
an impersonal, sort of mechanically operating set of necessary and sufficient conditions,
then if the cause is necessarily there and is sufficient for its effect, the effect should be
there necessarily as well. If you have a necessary being as your cause, you are going to
have the effect existing necessarily though dependent upon the cause. How do you get a contingent effect from a necessary cause? I think the answer is: if the cause is a personal agent endowed with freedom of the will who can freely choose to create a contingent effect. Getting back to a personal agent and appealing to agent causation will enable you to explain how you get a contingent effect like the universe from a necessarily existing cause. I think this is a great argument. I really like this argument for the personhood of the first cause. That gives us two independent arguments for the personhood of the first cause; namely, the argument from the properties that it must have as being immaterial, spaceless, timeless, etc, and then the other argument from how you get from a necessary cause to a contingent effect. I think there are good reasons to think that that second premise is true wholly apart from the fact that, as I say, it is virtually synonymous to what the atheist himself says. Remember there we talked about how the atheist typically says that if atheism is true the universe has no explanation of its existence, which is logically equivalent to saying that if the universe has an explanation of its existence then atheism is not true. That is to say, God exists. So I think this makes the second premise very plausible indeed.

*Student:* I want to ask an antagonistic view, and that is if matter and energy are interchangeable can we not think of this necessity as an energy which is converted back into matter in that relationship?

*Dr. Craig:* I think that perhaps what the non-theist could do here would be to say that these fundamental quarks or these fundamental particles are different configurations of underlying quantum physical fields, and that that is what underlies these particles that appear in different ways. That would be an interesting, I think, response. But then it would require you to say these quantum fields exist necessarily, and again that just doesn’t seem to be true that these things have metaphysical necessity. They seem to be contingent. I will reinforce that in just one more moment with my next point.

*Student:* Would you classify energy as the timeless, immaterial . . .

*Dr. Craig:* Oh, no, no. That is clearly something that exists in space and in time, and as you say can be converted into matter and matter back into energy. That is Einstein’s famous equation E=mc². So energy and matter would be convertible quantities.

*Student:* If you had a consciousness as necessary like they do in pantheism, it doesn’t reflect itself except in other deities and manifestations. It doesn’t show itself causally either. You would reject some kind of universal consciousness.

*Dr. Craig:* Right. In Hinduism, for example, these gods are not ultimate reality. Ultimate reality is impersonal, propertyless, can’t be characterized. So these gods like Shiva and Vishnu and so forth are just, in a sense, illusory manifestations of this impersonal absolute – they are not the ultimate reality.
END DISCUSSION

What I’ve argued here is that it is implausible to think that the universe exists necessarily. Why? Because it is made up of stuff which is obviously contingent – things like quarks and electrons.

The claim that I’m making here, I think, becomes all the more obvious when we reflect on the fact that it seems entirely possible that the fundamental building blocks of nature could have been substances quite different from quarks and electrons, and so characterized by a whole different set of laws of nature. Even if you say that the laws of nature are metaphysically necessary, that this is the only way that quarks and electrons could have behaved, nevertheless the laws of nature could still have been different because there could have been different substances than quarks that exist endowed with different dispositions and different properties so that you would have a whole different set of laws of nature. There is no reason to think that only quarks are possible and that there couldn’t have been other kinds of particles instead of quarks, and that therefore there could have been a quite different universe. I think it would be utterly implausible to say that that would be the same universe. That would be like saying that a pane of glass could retain its identity if it had been made of steel instead. That seems obviously absurd. That would not be the same window if it were made of steel instead of made of glass. So I think we have quite good grounds for thinking that in virtue of its composition or constitution that the universe doesn’t exist metaphysically necessarily. That is probably why very few, if any, contemporary atheists appeals to this to try to escape from the argument.

START DISCUSSION

Student: I have a question about past-eternity and necessity. Carl Sagan, in the opening sentence of Cosmos which is pretty famous, essentially substituted John 1:1 with “The Cosmos is all that ever was, all that ever is, and all that ever will be.” I am just wondering if an atheist makes the claim that the universe has a state of past-eternity, is that essentially claiming necessity for it?

Dr. Craig: We talked about that a couple of times in the class. I tried to point out that merely making the universe past-eternal doesn’t make it necessary. I think the easiest way to see that is to imagine the universe is past-eternal. OK? Imagine that the universe never began to exist. Wouldn't it be logically possible for our universe to exist instead? Of course it would because we know this universe is logically possible. We exist in it. It is real. If, in an eternal universe, it is logically possible that there could have been our universe instead, it follows that that eternal universe doesn’t exist necessarily. It exists.
contingently and there could have been a different universe instead. Leibniz’s argument is wholly independent of whether the past of the universe is eternal or had a beginning.

END DISCUSSION

Your point does make a very nice segue to the next point that I wanted to make, and that is a second reason for thinking that the universe does not exist by a necessity of its own nature is the fact that it appears to have begun to exist. If something exists necessarily then it must exist eternally because if it begins to exist that shows that its non-existence is possible. It came into being. So an essential property of a necessarily existing being will be its eternality – being without beginning or end. We have now pretty strong evidence that the universe is not past eternal but had a beginning which would show its contingency.

This takes us into the next argument that we are going to talk about – the *kalam* cosmological argument – which is based upon the beginning of the universe. As I’ve said, I want to try to keep the arguments as independent from one another as we can because then if they are independent of each other you multiply the probabilities by accumulating these independent arguments in favor of God's existence. I think we've got good grounds for thinking the universe doesn't exist necessarily quite independent of its beginning. But nevertheless this does show how the arguments kind of dovetail into each other and reinforce one another. Because if the universe does have a beginning, that reveals the contingency of the universe. Not only that, but it reveals that the universe is contingent in a very special way, namely, it came into being out of nothing. On the existence of an eternal universe, it would still exist contingently even though it exists eternally, but for the universe to exist contingently and have a beginning seems to be just doubly absurd because now it comes into existence without any explanation whatsoever out of nothing. I can imagine giving the atheist a run for his money and say, yes, if the universe is eternal, if it has always been there, it doesn't have a cause. But once you say the universe had a beginning and came into being then it just seems to be completely implausible to think that there is no explanation of the existence of the universe. The *kalam* cosmological argument powerfully reinforces the argument from contingency by showing or underlining the contingency of the universe in a very special way. Even if the universe is past-eternal, it is contingent – but if it had a beginning then that just makes its contingency all the more obvious, and the need for an explanation just cries out all the more.

As I say, atheists have not been eager to affirm that the universe exists with any sort of metaphysical necessity. Instead, the typical response to this argument is to just commit the taxicab fallacy and say the principle of sufficient reason applies to everything in the
universe but don't apply it to the universe itself. The universe just exists without any explanation, which I think is arbitrary and ad hoc.

**START DISCUSSION**

*Student:* I talked to my brother yesterday a little bit and just kind of generated some thoughts. I was just thinking through this whole thing. I remember the debate you had with Lawrence Krauss. It kind of hits me saying that he is probably the best atheist that ever existed, because he wants to prove that everything just came out of nothing. The reason I want to say that is because my brother was saying what is the opposite of God? The thought that I want to say is it is the devil. But it is not the opposite of God because God created him and he gives him abilities and all that. The way Christianity looks at God is that God is everything – all-powerful, and so on and so forth.

*Dr. Craig:* Christianity doesn't think God is everything, right? That is pantheism.

*Student:* God created everything.

*Dr. Craig:* Right, that is very different!

*Student:* A maximal being. The opposite of God, he was saying, is nothing. That is why I believe that is where the atheist has to stand – that things came out of nothing.

*Dr. Craig:* Let me just say that it is difficult to know what a person means when they talk about the opposite of a being. I think your example of the devil shows that a person might be thinking opposite in terms of its moral qualities. In one sense, contingent beings are the opposite of God because he exists necessarily and independently; we exist contingently and dependently. So in one sense that is the opposite of God. But in the sense that God exists, I can see why he would say the opposite of that is nothing exists.

*Student:* The atheist can't take that approach saying contingency is the opposite of God. The atheist has to stick with nothing. That is their whole beginning, I guess.

*Dr. Craig:* OK, I think maybe I am understanding more what you are saying. When you say the opposite of God, you mean what is the alternative explanation to God, in a sense. Right? I think that is what you are saying. What is the alternative? And, right, the alternative seems to be to say that there is no explanation of the existence of the universe. In the case of someone who thinks the universe began to exist (like Krauss) that would mean the universe just came out of nothing, which is what he asserts. But I have to say he doesn't really mean it. He knows that in physics the vacuum state, or these states that don't have classical space-time in them, are physical states described by the laws of nature. Krauss will say things like “nothing actually weighs something,” “everything is almost nothing.” He makes all sorts of self-contradictory statements. He is using the word...
“nothing” there in a way that is scientifically misrepresentative of the physics. It is a kind of colloquial way of speaking that isn't accurate. He is talking about states in which our general relativistic space-time doesn't exist, but it is still a state of the universe. It will be a very early state of the universe in which these sorts of structures haven't yet emerged. But it is not nothing in the sense of non-being or “not anything.” So it is really a gross misuse of language, and I, frankly, think a deliberate misrepresentation of science.

Student: For further study in looking up Leibniz's work, he wrote in German and French and Latin (unfortunately not English). He wrote on dozens if not hundreds of subjects. He wrote thousands and thousands of pages. It doesn't seem like for this kind of discussion that there is a single representative work that I could pinpoint to say it would be fun to go back and read what he wrote about it. Is there a certain edition? What we really need is the William Lane Craig-simplified Leibniz.

Dr. Craig: There already are such books. I am glad you asked the question. There is a very nice volume called *Leibniz Selections* which includes all of these selected works that we've been talking about. I am not exactly sure, but I think it is edited by Philip Wiener. It will include all of these. Now, you say, where am I going to get a copy of *Leibniz Selections*? You go to the East Cobb library and order it on inter-library loan. This is an untapped treasure trove of stuff. I rarely buy books. I go to inter-library loan and get all of the stuff here in the little East Cobb library. For example, this past week I've been reading the three volume systematic theology of Francis Turretin, who was a Swiss 17th century Reformed theologian, called *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*. And they got me that at East Cobb library on inter-library loan! The week before they got me a book by L. W. Grensted called *A Short History of the Atonement* which was published back in 1905 or something like that. They will get you all of this stuff free! It is free! So there is just no excuse. Use your local library. This is an untapped resource that most people don't know about. So thank you for that question because this is how you can get this stuff.

Student: There is also (I just looked on Amazon) a copy for 41 cents with 3.99 shipping!

Dr. Craig: Go for it! Was it Wiener who edited it?

Student: Yes.

Dr. Craig: Excellent!

END DISCUSSION

Let me just say, by way of conclusion for this argument, given the truth of the three premises the conclusion follows logically: *God is the explanation of the existence of the universe*. This argument gives us a very rich concept of God: an uncaused, unembodied mind who transcends the physical universe and even space and time themselves and
exists with a metaphysical necessity of its own nature. This is an exalted concept of God.⁵³
Lecture 8: The *Kalam* Cosmological Argument

Today we turn to a new argument for God’s existence – the so-called *kalam* cosmological argument.

As a boy I wondered at the existence of the universe. I wondered where it came from. Did it have a beginning or has it always existed? I can remember lying in bed at night trying to think of a beginningless universe. Every event would be preceded by another event. Back and back with no stopping point (or more accurately, no starting point). My mind just reeled at the concept. It seemed to me inconceivable. There must have been a beginning at some point, I thought, in order for everything to get started.

Little did I realize that for centuries men had grappled with the idea of an infinite past and whether the universe had a beginning. Ancient Greek philosophers, like Aristotle, believed that matter was necessary and uncreated and therefore eternal in the past. God may be responsible for introducing order into the cosmos, but he did not create the universe itself.

This Greek view was in contrast to the even more ancient Jewish view on the subject. Hebrew writers held that the universe had not always existed but had a beginning point at some time in the past at which it was created by God. As the first verse of the Hebrew Bible states: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1).

Eventually these two traditions (Greek and Jewish) began to interact. There arose within Western philosophy an on-going debate that lasted for well over a thousand years about whether or not the universe had a beginning. This debate played itself out among Jews and Muslims as well as Christians, both Catholic and Protestant. It finally sputtered to something of an inconclusive end in the thought of the great eighteenth century German philosopher Immanuel Kant. Kant held, ironically enough, that there are rationally compelling arguments for both sides thereby exposing the bankruptcy of reason itself!

I first became aware of this debate only after graduating from college. One week before graduation I was browsing the clearance tables at the college bookstore and came across this book by one of my former professors, Steward Hackett, entitled *The Resurrection of Theism*. I had heard that this was an important book, and since it was on clearance I decided to buy it. After graduation I began to read it that summer. And I was blown away by its contents. You see, I had been taught in college that there are no good arguments for God’s existence – that all of these arguments had been refuted by modern philosophers. Therefore there really aren’t any good arguments per se for God. Although that seemed to me counterintuitive, nevertheless I had great respect for my learned professors and thought if they said there aren’t any good arguments for God’s existence they must surely...
be right. Then here I discovered in Hackett’s book a defense of argument after argument for the existence of God along with detailed refutations of every conceivable objection that might be raised against these arguments. I was absolutely overwhelmed.

Wanting to come to grips with Hackett’s case, I went on to do Master’s Degree work in philosophy. In preparing for the graduate record exams I discovered that the centerpiece of Hackett’s book – the so-called *kalam* cosmological argument – actually had this long history in Jewish, Muslim, and Christian thought reaching all the way back to the early centuries after Christ. I wanted to settle my mind on this argument. So when I applied to do doctoral work at the University of Birmingham in England, I proposed writing my doctoral thesis – or dissertation – on the cosmological argument for God’s existence. I did write on that argument. I was able to explore the historical roots of this argument as well as deepen the analysis of the argument, and also discovered amazing connections with contemporary astronomy and astrophysics.

Because of its roots in medieval Islamic theology I dubbed this argument the *kalam* cosmological argument to differentiate it from other versions of the cosmological argument like Leibniz’s argument from contingency which we’ve studied. *Kalam* is the Arabic word for medieval theology. It was medieval Islamic theology that developed this argument to a great degree of sophistication.

This argument – the *kalam* cosmological argument – largely forgotten since the time of Kant is now back at center stage in philosophical discussion. *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism*, published in 2007, reports,

A count of the articles in the philosophy journals shows that more articles have been published about the *kalam* argument that have been published about any other contemporary formulation of an argument for God’s existence. Theists and atheists alike cannot leave the *kalam* argument alone.

What is the argument which has stirred such interest? Let’s let one of its greatest medieval Muslim proponents speak for himself. Al-Ghazali was a twelfth century theologian from Persia, or modern day Iran. He was concerned that Muslim philosophers of his day were being influenced by ancient Greek philosophy to deny God’s creation of the universe.

After thoroughly studying the works and teachings of these philosophers, Al-Ghazali wrote a withering critique of their views in the book called *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, or in Arabic *Tahāfut al-Falāsifa*. This is a fascinating book which is still worth reading today. If you were here last week, you know where you can get a copy of this book, right? Where can you find it? Inter-library loan! That’s right! So if you are
interested in reading Ghazali’s book, just go and get it on inter-library loan. It is a fascinating read. In this book, Ghazali argues that the idea of a beginningless universe is absurd. He argues that the universe must have had a beginning, and, since nothing can begin to exist without a cause, there must be a transcendent Creator of the universe.

Ghazali formulates his argument very simply. Let me quote from him directly. He wrote: “Every being which begins has a cause for its beginning; now the world is a being which begins; therefore, it possesses a cause for its beginning.”

Ghazali’s reasoning involves three very simple steps:

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

This is a logically valid argument so the only question is whether the premises are more plausibly true than false. Let’s look at each of the two premises.

First, premise (1) is “Whatever begins to exist has a cause of its beginning.” Notice that al-Ghazali does not really need a premise which is so strong as premise (1) that whatever begins to exist has a cause. His argument can be more modestly formulated as follows:

1’. If the universe began to exist then the universe has a cause of its beginning.

This more modest premise doesn’t state that everything that begins to exist has a cause of its beginning, but simply that if the universe began to exist then the universe has a cause of its beginning. This more modest version of premise (1) will enable us to avoid all of these distractions about whether or not subatomic particles which are the result of quantum decay processes come into being without a cause. We can just leave that issue aside as irrelevant to premise (1’). This alleged exception to premise (1) (“whatever begins to exist has a cause”) is not relevant to (1’). Why? Because the universe comprises all of contiguous space-time reality. All of physical reality. Therefore, for the entire universe to come into being without a cause would come into being from nothing, which is absurd. In quantum decay events, the particles do not come into being out of nothing. As Christopher Isham, who is Great Britain’s premier quantum cosmologist, explains:

Care is needed when using the word ‘creation’ in a physical context. One familiar example is the creation of elementary particles in an accelerator. However, what

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occurs in this situation is the conversion of one type of matter into another with
the total amount of energy being preserved in the process.

In these quantum decay events the particles don’t come into being out of nothing. So the
alleged exception to premise (1) isn’t an exception to premise (1’) as I have formulated it,
which would require the universe to come into being out of nothing.

Let me give three reasons in support of this premise (1’).

1. **Something cannot come out of nothing.** Think about it. To claim that something can
come into being from nothing is worse than magic. When a magician pulls a rabbit out of
the hat, at least you’ve got the magician, not to mention the hat! But to say that the
universe came into being without any sort of a cause would be simply to come into being
from sheer non-being. It would be nothing. That is literally worse than magic. You would
have to believe that the entire universe just appeared at some point in the past for no
reason whatsoever. But nobody, I think, sincerely believes that things, say, a horse or an
Eskimo village, can just pop into being without a cause.

Sometimes skeptics will respond to this point by saying that in physics sub-atomic
particles (so-called “virtual particles”) come into being from nothing. Or on certain
theories of the origin of the universe these are described in popular magazines as getting
something from nothing, so that the universe is supposed to be the exception to the
proverb “There ain’t no free lunch.”

I think this skeptical response represents a deliberate abuse of science, as I’ve already
hinted. The theories in question have to do with particles’ (or the universe’s) originating
as a fluctuation of a physical system, such as the vacuum or quantum fields. The vacuum,
for example, in modern physics is not what the layperson understands by the word
“vacuum,” namely, nothing. Rather in physics the vacuum is a sea of roiling energy
governed by physical laws and having a physical structure. To tell laypeople that on such
theories something comes from nothing, I think, represents a deliberate misrepresentation
of those theories.

Properly speaking, the word “nothing” is a term of universal negation. It means “not
anything.” So, for example, if I say, “I had nothing for breakfast today,” I mean, “I
didn’t have anything for breakfast today.” If you read an account of World War II and
the text says that “Nothing stopped the German advance from sweeping across Belgium,”
that means that the German advance was not stopped by anything. If a theologian tells
you that “God created the universe out of nothing,” he means that God’s creation of the
universe was not out of anything. The word “nothing,” to repeat, is simply a term of
universal negation, meaning “not anything.”

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There’s a whole series of words like this in the English language – terms of universal negation: “Nobody” means not anybody. “None” means not one. “Nowhere” means not anywhere.

Now because the word “nothing” is grammatically a pronoun, you can use it as the subject or direct object of a sentence. By using these terms of universal negation as words supposedly referring to something, you can generate all sorts of funny situations. For example, if you say, “I saw nobody in the hall,” the wiseacre says, “Yeah, he’s been hanging around there a lot lately!” If you say, “I had nothing for lunch today,” he says, “Really? How did it taste?” It is misusing these terms of universal negation as though they were referring to something.

These kinds of word tricks are as old as literature itself. For example, in Homer’s *Odyssey*, Odysseus introduces himself to the Cyclops as “No man” or “Nobody.” One night Odysseus puts out the Cyclops’ eye. His fellow Cyclopses hear him screaming and they yell to him, “What’s the matter with you, making so much noise that we can’t sleep?” The Cyclops answers, “Nobody is killing me! Nobody is killing me!” They reply, “If nobody is attacking you, then you must be sick, and there’s nothing we can do about it!”

In Euripides’ version of this same story, he composes a sort of Abbott and Costello “Who’s on first?” routine. Here’s how it goes in Euripides:

> “Why are you crying out, Cyclops?”
> “Nobody has undone me!”
> “Then there is no one hurting you after all.”
> “Nobody is blinding me!”
> “Then you’re not blind.”
> “As blind as you!”
> “How could nobody have made you blind?”
> “You’re mocking me! But where is this Nobody?”
> “Nowhere, Cyclops!”

The use of these terms of negation as substantive words referring to something is a joke. *It is a joke!*

How astonishing, then, to find contemporary popularizers of science, whose mother tongue is English, using these terms precisely as substantive terms of reference. For example, Lawrence Krauss, a fine physicist, has told us with a straight face, for example:

> “There are a variety of forms of nothing, [and] they all have physical definitions.”
> “The laws of quantum mechanics tell us that nothing is unstable.”
> “70% of the dominant stuff in the universe is nothing.”
“There's nothing there, but it has energy.”

“Nothing weighs something.”

“Nothing is almost everything.”

All of these claims take the word “nothing” to be a substantive term referring to something, for example, the quantum vacuum or quantum physical fields. These are physical realities and therefore clearly not nothing – they are something. To call these realities “nothing” is at best misleading, guaranteed to confuse laypeople, and at worst it is, as I say, a deliberate misrepresentation of the science involved.

2. If something can come into being from nothing, then it becomes inexplicable why just anything and everything doesn’t come into being from nothing. Think about it: why don’t bicycles and Beethoven and root beer come into being from nothing? Why is it only universes that can come into being from nothing? What makes nothingness so discriminatory? Obviously, I am being facetious here, because nothingness isn’t anything; it has no properties. It is just a term of universal negation. There isn’t anything to be constrained. “Nothing” means not anything. If things can just come into being out of nothing without a cause then all kinds of things ought to be doing this all the time.

At this point the atheist is very likely to retort, “All right, if everything has a cause then what is God’s cause?” I’m always amazed at the self-congratulatory attitude with which students pose this question. They imagine that they’ve said something really important or profound, when all they’ve done is just misunderstand the premise. Premise (1) does not say that everything has a cause. It says that everything that begins to exist has a cause; or that if the universe began to exist, it has a cause. But something that is eternal wouldn’t need a cause, because it never came into being.

Al-Ghazali would respond to this question by saying that God is eternal and uncaused. Notice this isn’t special pleading for God, because this is exactly what the atheist has traditionally said about the universe: the universe is eternal and uncaused. The problem is, I think, we have good evidence that the universe is not eternal in the past but had a beginning, evidence that we will look at during the coming weeks. That then backs the atheist into the corner having to say the universe sprang into being without a cause, which to my mind is absurd.

3. Common experience and scientific evidence confirm the truth of premise (1). Premise (1) is always verified and never falsified. It is hard to understand how anyone committed
to modern science could deny that premise (1) is more plausibly true than false in light of the evidence.

I’ve heard some Internet skeptics respond to this third point by saying it commits the fallacy of composition. What is that? The fallacy of composition involves inferring that because every part of a thing has a certain property, therefore the whole thing has that property. For example, somebody might say because every part of an elephant is light in weight therefore the whole elephant is light in weight. That would obviously be fallacious. That commits the fallacy of composition. This third point that I am making – that common experience and scientific evidence support the truth of premise (1) – doesn’t reason by composition. It doesn’t infer because every part of the universe has a cause therefore the whole universe has a cause. It doesn’t even refer to parts of the universe!

Rather this third point is a case of what is called inductive reasoning which underlies all of science. One infers from a random sample of items some property which is shared by items of that sort. In this case the sort in question is things that begin to exist. When we look at things that begin to exist, scientific evidence and common experience is that they always have causes. The generalization “Whatever begins to exist has a cause of its beginning” is a very powerful inductive inference. You infer this general truth based upon a random sample of typical cases. This objection is, I think, just based on a confusion between inductive reasoning (which is sound reasoning) and reasoning by composition (which is fallacious reasoning). This third argument is not an instance of reasoning by composition.

To my mind, I think this first premise has a very good claim to being true. If the universe began to exist then the universe had a cause of its beginning.

START DISCUSSION

Student: Under the Christian worldview is it accurate to say God brought the universe into existence out of nothing, or do we believe that, as a Christian, there is no concept of nothingness for us because there is never a state in which God wasn’t there? In other words, there was never a time where it was true that nothing was there. Does that make sense? Can we say God brought the universe out of nothing, or does “nothing” have no meaning because God was always there?

Dr. Craig: The Christian view of creation is called creatio ex nihilo which is Latin for “creation out of nothing.” But, as I explained in my examples, when the theologian says that God has created the universe out of nothing, what he means is he did not create it out of anything. God created the universe, but he didn’t create it out of anything. Here is a way to think about it. Aristotle distinguished between different kinds of causality, such as
efficient causality and material causality. Michaelangelo is the efficient cause of the statue David. He sculpted it. He produced it. He is the efficient cause of that statue. The material cause of the statue is the block of marble that he used. That is the material cause. Michaelangelo is the efficient cause. In creation ex nihilo, God is the efficient cause of the universe and there is no material cause. That is the way to think about it. It isn’t as though there was something called “nothing” and God made the universe out of it. That commits this fallacy of using the word “nothing” as a referential term. Rather, it means “not anything.” There was no material cause.

Student: I was hoping you would bring up the Aristotelian causes. I am not an expert on this stuff. Do we have any examples of creatio ex nihilo other than the universe? You give the example of Michaelangelo, but that is efficient and material cause.

Dr. Craig: I have a question of the week on our website, ReasonableFaith.org, where I discuss this. From a Christian point of view, creation out of nothing is unique to God alone. There is nothing else that has the power to create something without a material cause. One great medieval theologian, Scotus, said the distance between being and non-being is infinite so it would take a being of infinite power to create from nothing. This is not a power that creatures have. Only God has the power to create ex nihilo. We have the ability to reshape material things so a carpenter can create, say, a chair using lumber, but he can’t create ex nihilo.

If you are willing to run with me a little bit on this, though, one can furnish some possible examples though they are very unusual. In this class we’ve often talked about abstract objects like numbers, and sets, and properties, and so forth. In philosophy of aesthetics, there is a similar debate over the existence of things like musical compositions and literary productions. Tolstoy’s War and Peace, many would say, can’t be identified with any physical exemplar of that because otherwise if it were destroyed then the novel War and Peace wouldn’t exist. Or Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony can’t be identified with any particular series of ink marks on a piece of paper. Rather, these are abstract objects that have instances or exemplars in the world. These physical books and physical scores are exemplars of an abstract object which is the Fifth Symphony or War and Peace. That is what some aestheticians believe. But they also believe that Beethoven created the Fifth Symphony. And they think Leo Tolstoy created War and Peace. These things are not eternally existing abstract objects. These are contingent and had a beginning and were created by their composers and authors.

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If that is true, that would be an example of something being created without a material cause, because these things don’t have any material. They are not made out of stuff. If you can entertain that idea, this would be an example of creation where you would have an efficient cause but no material cause.

Here is one more example for you that is provocative suggested to me by the physicist Jim Sinclair. In contemporary cosmology, space is expanding. It is not that the galaxies are moving away from each other in a pre-existing empty space, like particles in a big empty box. Rather, space itself is expanding. Space is a physical thing – it has physical properties. Where does the new space come from as the universe expands? You are getting more and more space as time goes on. It doesn’t come out of anything. It would be another example of something that is created ex nihilo. That would be a possible illustration of something where you would have an efficient cause but you wouldn’t have a material cause.

I am not suggesting by any means that these are knockdown examples. But I think they are thought experiments. They are illustrations that can help provoke us to think about the idea of creation ex nihilo and can make it more intelligible and more understandable.

Student: It is interesting you associated contingency with the beginning of the universe. Immanuel Kant said if something is assumed to be contingent, it is just an analytical truth to say that it has a cause. Couldn’t we cut to the chase and just say this premise is analytically true?

Dr. Craig: Let’s be careful here. An analytic truth means it is true by definition, like “A bachelor is an unmarried man.” Kant did not think this causal premise is true by definition. On the contrary, he said it is a synthetic truth, not an analytic truth. He called it a synthetic a priori proposition. That is to say, it is a universal necessary truth, but it is not true by definition. It is an informative truth. The idea that whatever begins to exist has a cause (or more modestly, if the universe began to exist the universe has a cause) that is not true by definition. That is an informative truth for which we would look for evidence in order to believe it.

END DISCUSSION

I will be back next Sunday, and we will then move to the defense of the really key premise in this argument which is that the universe began to exist.63

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63 Total Running Time: 33:49 (Copyright © 2015 William Lane Craig)
Lecture 9: Defense of the Second Premise of the Kalam Cosmological Argument

Last week we began talking about the *kalam* cosmological argument. I offered a defense of the first premise. Today we want to turn to the second premise of that argument which is that the universe began to exist.

This is obviously the more controversial of the two premises. It is fairly obvious, I think, that if the universe began to exist then the universe has a cause of its existence. But it is by no means obvious that the universe began to exist. So I want to examine both philosophical arguments and scientific evidence in support of this second premise.

If you were to ask me what the relationship is between these two, I would say that, for me at least, the first line of defense for this second premise is the philosophical arguments. I see the scientific evidence as simply a confirmation (empirically) of a conclusion already established on the basis of philosophical arguments. I will often speak of the support for this premise in terms of philosophical arguments and scientific confirmation.

Let’s look at the first philosophical argument. Al-Ghazali, the 12th century Muslim theologian whom we’ve taken as our springboard for examining this argument, argued that if the universe never began to exist then there has been an infinite number of past events prior to today. But, he argued, an infinite number of things cannot exist. Therefore it follows that there cannot have been an infinite past. Al-Ghazali recognized that a *potentially* infinite number of things could exist, but what he denied was that an *actually* infinite number of things could exist. It is important that we understand this absolutely crucial distinction between the potential infinite and the actual infinite.

When we say that something is potentially infinite, we mean that something is indefinite but progressing toward infinity as an ideal limit which is never reached. You never actually arrive at infinity. Infinity is simply a limit concept which you approximate toward. For example, take any finite distance. You could divide that distance in half, and then into fourths, and then into eighths, and then into sixteenths, and then into thirty-secondths, ad infinitum. But you would never reach an “infinitieth” division. The number of divisions is potentially infinite in that you could go on dividing endlessly. But you never arrive at infinity. You would never have an actually infinite number of divisions or of parts. The symbol for this kind of infinity is the lemniscate or the lazy-eight (∞). This is the type of infinity that is used in calculus in mathematics where you have infinite limits.
By contrast with that, the actual infinite is an infinite which is, as it were, complete. The number of items in the collection is not growing toward infinity; it is infinite! It is complete and static and involves an actually infinite number of things.

This type of infinity is symbolized by the Hebrew letter aleph (ℵ) and is used in set theory. In set theory, mathematicians talk about sets like the set of natural numbers which have an actually infinite number of members in the set. The collection is not growing toward infinity as a limit. It is infinity. There are an actually infinite number of natural numbers in this set. ℵ is a number. If you were to ask what is the number of elements in the set of natural numbers, the answer would be aleph-null (ℵ₀). That is the number of members in the set of natural numbers.

Technically speaking, what defines a collection or a set as actually infinite is that it has a proper part which has the same number of members as the whole collection. So, for example, think about this. The number of odd numbers is the same as the number of all the natural numbers - namely, ℵ₀. It is exactly the same. There are just as many odd numbers as there are natural numbers, even though the natural numbers includes not only the odd numbers but an infinite number of even numbers as well! Technically speaking, the definition for an actual infinite is that it is a collection that has a proper part with the same number of members in it as the whole collection.

What al-Ghazali is claiming is that while potentially infinite collections can exist (that is to say, collections that are always finite at any point in time but they are growing toward infinity as a limit) there cannot be a collection that is actually infinite – that has an actually infinite number of members in it.

START DISCUSSION

Student: You indicated that the odd numbers would be equal to the actual number of numbers. It seems to me it is just half of the odd and even numbers.

Dr. Craig: Yes, and I am glad that you feel that way because this is precisely what will engender various absurd situations when you translate this out of the mathematical realm into the real world of people, and sticks, and rocks, and eggs, and things like that. You get extremely bizarre results precisely because of this. What al-Ghazali would say is while you could talk about actually infinite collections and do these mathematics on paper, it is not something that can exist in the real world because it will involve these sorts of counter-intuitive absurdities.

Student: If you have an infinite number of odd numbers and an infinite number of total numbers then they are both infinite and therefore the same number.
Student: The potential infinite – that would be a concept where you could imagine something indefinite.

Dr. Craig: Yes.

Student: Therefore it is potential, but it is a concept of infinity rather than an actual number of items.

Dr. Craig: Yes! Very good! I am so impressed. Notice the distinction that she saw. $\aleph_0$ is a number. It is a quantity. It is the number of members in this set. The lemniscate ($\infty$), or the potential infinite, isn’t a number. It is a limit. It is an ideal limit concept, but it is not a number. That is important to understand.

Student: I know the lazy-eight ($\infty$) is not a number, as you said, and you can’t do math on it.

Dr. Craig: You can do calculus with it. It is used in calculus.

Student: OK, right. But you can’t multiply it by two because then it is equal to itself. But in what way is the aleph ($\aleph$) a number because you can’t do math on that either?

Dr. Craig: Actually you can. This is the interesting thing with these alephs, because there really is more than one of them. Remember I said the number of natural numbers is $\aleph_0$? But there are more real numbers than there are natural numbers. You begin to get a whole series of these alephs that have subscripts. $\aleph_0, \aleph_1, \aleph_2$, and it goes to infinity. There are actually an infinite number of these infinities. This is where it just becomes completely beyond the human mind to comprehend. And you can do mathematical operations with these numbers. This is called transfinite arithmetic. For example, what is $\aleph_0 + \aleph_0$? Well, the answer is $\aleph_0$. You can do transfinite arithmetic using these numbers. You can do multiplication, and you can do addition, and you can do exponentiation (like $\aleph_0$ to the second power, for example). This is a number that can be manipulated in arithmetic in this way.

What is interesting, and this will become significant when we talk about whether actual infinities can really exist, is that you can’t do inverse operations like subtraction and division with them, because then you get self-contradictions. It is stipulated – it is part of the rules – that all you can do are these positive operations like addition and multiplication, and you can’t do subtraction and division (that is prohibited).

Student: [off-mic] So one-over-aleph ($1/\aleph$) isn’t zero?

Dr. Craig: Right, you can’t do division with these sorts of things.
Student: You had said that you can have an infinite number of alephs. Would that be aleph-to-the-aleph ($\aleph^n$)?

Dr. Craig: That’s a good question. I think that the number of alephs is $\aleph_0$ because they are enumerated by the natural numbers 0, 1, 2, 3, 4, . . . . So if you have them subscripted with the natural numbers, the number of alephs would be $\aleph_0$.

Student: Is it an actual infinite of alephs?

Dr. Craig: Yes. Right.

Student: Isn’t the ratio of $\aleph_n$ divided by $\aleph_{n+1}$ always zero by definition because you can’t put them into a one-to-one relationship?

Dr. Craig: You can’t do those kind of inverse operations. That is prohibited. You are trying to do division with these, and you can’t do that.

Student: I think you can prove that it is zero. I think that is known. I could be wrong.

Dr. Craig: So far as I know, you can’t do those kinds of inverse operations like dividing one aleph by another.

Student: Speaking to the size of it – the next one is always . . .

Dr. Craig: Bigger. That is right. These are different sizes of infinites. That is correct. The $\aleph_1$ is a larger collection than $\aleph_0$. In that sense, it has members in it that the other one doesn’t have.

END DISCUSSION

Al-Ghazali, as I said, has no problem with the idea of merely potential infinites. These are just ideal limits. But he argued that if an actually infinite number of things could exist then various absurdities would result. If we are to avoid these absurdities we have to deny that an actually infinite number of things can exist. That would imply that the number of past events in the history of the universe therefore cannot be actually infinite. It must be finite. Therefore, the universe cannot be beginningless. The universe must have begun to exist.

START DISCUSSION

Student: What are the absurdities?

Dr. Craig: I’ll go into those in a moment. Of course, of course. I just wanted you to make sure we are all tracking together and I don’t get ahead of you. You understand the basic argument; namely, it is absurd that an actually infinite number of things could exist, but a beginningless past would involve an actually infinite number of things; namely, past events. So the past can’t be actually infinite. It must be finite, and therefore have a beginning. That is the basic argument that I want to make sure we all get.
**Student:** I am one of those that doesn’t quite understand. To me, the better way to understand what the term actual infinite means – what you are trying to do with saying actual is not infinite. Rather than say infinite, you can say finite. It seems like what you are saying is not-infinite means it is finite. It seems like we are starting with a contradiction of terms to begin with.

**Dr. Craig:** That is why it is important to make sure we are on the same page with the definitions.

**Student:** I’m not there yet.

**Dr. Craig:** When mathematicians talk about an actual infinite, as I say, they don’t mean what you just said – that this is some kind of finite thing or contradiction. It means that the collection is complete, it is not growing toward infinity as a limit. There is a real infinite number of things in that collection. That is the force of the word “actual.”

**Student:** And that is a contradiction in terms.

**Dr. Craig:** Well, that is very interesting. Is it? I am going to speak to that in a minute. If you follow the rules and the conventions laid down by set theory, you won’t run into any contradictions. It isn’t logically contradictory if you follow the rules and obey the axioms and conventions. But there is the rub. I will say something about that in a minute.

**Student:** So you are saying you can add it and multiply it, but you can’t reverse it?

**Dr. Craig:** Yes.

**Student:** I’m not sure I follow how you can add it, multiply it, but then you can’t reverse the process back to the original. You can you can add and multiply actual infinity, but you couldn’t divide it or subtract it. So you can’t reverse it. I don’t understand how you can’t go back to the original.

**Dr. Craig:** You can’t mathematically. The difficulty is, I think, that if this is something that really exists (like it is a bunch of eggs or coins or people), you could! I think that illustrates what we are saying. While this works on paper (if you obey the rules), there is no reason to think that those sort of rules hold in reality, and you are going to get into difficulties. I have yet to illustrate these.

**END DISCUSSION**

It is very frequently alleged that al-Ghazali’s sort of argument is invalidated by modern mathematics. In modern set theory, as I’ve said, the use of actually infinite sets is commonplace. The number of members in the set of the natural numbers is actually
infinite, not just potentially infinite. Many people have inferred that given the coherence of infinite set theory in mathematics that this sort of argument is just a non-starter.

But is that really the case? Modern set theory shows that if you adopt certain axioms and rules, then you can talk about actually infinite collections in a consistent way, without contradicting yourself, as I said in response to an earlier question. All this does is succeed in setting up a certain universe of discourse for talking consistently about actual infinites. But it does absolutely nothing to show that such mathematical entities really exist or that an actually infinite number of things can really exist. If Ghazali is right, this universe of discourse may be regarded simply as a fictional realm, rather like the world of Sherlock Holmes in the Arthur Conan Doyle novels, not something that exists in the real world.

START DISCUSSION

**Student:** Couldn’t you also criticize the criticism by applying Gödel’s Incompleteness Theorem – in any mathematical system, you are going to assume something is true in order for it to work, and you can’t prove the assumption is true?

**Dr. Craig:** I don’t think that that is relevant to the concern that we are raising here. I think it would mean you couldn’t prove the consistency of infinite set theory, but we are not trying to do that. So I don’t think that that result is pertinent to the question that we are raising here. 67

**Student:** The adding and multiplying of the alephs is possible because they are both infinite. But taking from it would obviously make it a part of an infinite, which doesn’t exist, which proves the point that having every odd number equals the same amount of every other number also can’t exist, so no actual infinity actually exists, except for possibly God. The only infinity – the real infinity that never had a beginning and never has an end – that always counts as infinity is just God. Is that right?

**Dr. Craig:** You raised a number of questions there. The reason that you can’t do these inverse operations in transfinite arithmetic is because you get self-contradictory results. Let me give an example. Suppose you take the natural numbers and you subtract all the odd numbers. How many numbers are left over? All the even numbers, right? So infinity minus infinity is infinity. But suppose instead you subtract from the natural numbers all the numbers greater than 2. Now how many are left over? Well, 3! So infinity minus infinity is 3. In fact, you can get any answer to infinity minus infinity from zero to infinity. As I say, there is no well defined result for the equation infinity minus infinity equals blank. You can get any answer from zero to infinity. You get self-contradictory answers. So these operations are simply prohibited to the mathematician.

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With respect to God, people will often ask this question: “But isn’t God infinite?” Here I think it is very important to understand that the infinity of God is not a quantitative concept. God is not a mathematical quantity. The infinity of God is not the infinity of a collection that is made up of an infinite number of definite and discrete parts. When theologians talk about God as infinite, it is more, as it were, a qualitative infinite, not a quantitative infinite. That is to say, God is omnipotent, omniscient, morally perfect, eternal, necessary, all-loving. Those aren’t quantitative concepts. Indeed, in a sense there isn’t any separate attribute of God called “infinity.” It is kind of just an umbrella term for all of his superlative attributes. If you were to take away in your mind omniscience, omnipotence, eternity, necessity, holiness, there wouldn’t be any attribute left over called “infinity.” That is just an umbrella term for all those superlative attributes that God possesses. So we shouldn’t think of God’s infinity as a quantitative concept. He doesn’t involve an actually infinite number of definite and discrete pieces that go to make up his being.

*Student:* About God’s infinity – is it possible that with God he may be able to understand and do calculations with an actual infinite? For example, might God have considered an actually infinite number of counterfactuals before creating this universe?

*Dr. Craig:* Wow. OK. You are getting into very difficult issues of metaphysics now. What you are raising is this old problem that we’ve encountered again and again, and that is do abstract objects exist. Because propositions (or counterfactuals) would be examples of abstract objects. If there are abstract objects like mathematical objects, numbers, propositions, possible worlds, properties, then these are plausibly actually infinite. But I’m persuaded that these things don’t exist and that therefore they do not contradict al-Ghazali’s statement that there cannot be an actually infinite number of things. The anti-realist isn’t bothered by those sorts of counter-examples. In order for that to be an effective counter-example to al-Ghazali, you would need a proof that Platonism is true, and there isn’t any such proof. Platonism is just one alternative among many, and it is not incumbent upon us. We really get into the deep weeds when we start talking about these things!

**END DISCUSSION**

The way in which al-Ghazali brings out the real impossibility of an actually infinite number of things is by imagining what it would be like if such a collection could exist and then drawing out the absurd consequences of it. Let me share with you one of my favorite illustrations called “Hilbert’s Hotel,” which is the brainchild of the great German mathematician David Hilbert.
Hilbert warms up by inviting us to imagine an ordinary hotel with a finite number of rooms. Let’s suppose that the rooms are completely occupied. There is not a single vacant room throughout the entire hotel. Now suppose a new guest shows up at the front desk asking for a room. “Sorry,” the manager says, “All the rooms are occupied,” and the new guest has to be turned away.

But now, Hilbert imagines, let’s suppose we’ve got a hotel with an infinite number of rooms, and let’s suppose once again that the hotel is completely occupied. We have to fully appreciate this fact. There is not a single vacancy in the entire infinite hotel; every room has a flesh-and-blood person in it. Now suppose a new guest shows up at the front desk, asking for a room. “No problem,” says the manager. He moves the guest that was in room #1 into room #2, he takes the guest that was in room #2 and puts him in room #3, he takes the guest that was in room #3 and puts him in room #4, out to infinity. As a result of these transpositions, room #1 now becomes vacant, and the new guest is easily accommodated. And yet, before he arrived, all the rooms were already full!

It gets even worse! Now, Hilbert says, let’s imagine that an infinite number of new guests shows up at the front desk asking for rooms. “No problem, no problem!” says the manager. He moves the person who was in room #1 into room #2, the person who was in room #2 into room #4, the person who was in room #3 into room #6. He puts each person into the room number double his own. Since any number multiplied by two is always an even number, that means all the guests wind up in the even-numbered rooms. As a result, all the odd-numbered rooms become vacant, and the infinity of new guests gratefully checks in. And yet, before they arrived, all the rooms were already full!

As one student remarked to me, Hilbert’s Hotel, if it could exist, would have to have a sign outside: “No Vacancy (Guests Welcome).”

Can such a hotel exist in reality? Since nothing hangs on the illustrations involving a hotel, this argument can be generalized to show that the existence of an actually infinite number of things is really absurd.

I hadn’t planned on sharing further difficulties with Hilbert’s Hotel, but given that it has already come up, let me say that the German mathematician didn’t even fully demonstrate the absurdity of this hotel. Because he never asked: what would happen if people started checking out of the hotel? Suppose all the people in the odd-numbered rooms check out – 1, 3, 5, 7, and so forth. How many guests are left? Well, all the even-numbered guests. An infinite number of guests are still left in the hotel even though an equal number has already checked out and left the hotel. But now let’s suppose instead that all of the guests in the rooms 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, out to infinity checked out. How many guests are left now? If there is a room #0, just three are left. Yet, the same number of guests checked out this time as when all of the odd-numbered guests left. You subtract
identical quantities from identical quantities and you get non-identical results, which is absurd.\textsuperscript{69}

Someone might say that you can’t do inverse operations with mathematical quantities. Not on paper perhaps, but there is no way you can stop people from checking out of a real hotel. If you try to bar the door, they will go out the windows. This illustrates the absurdity of the real existence of an actually infinite number of things.

Sometimes students will react to Hilbert’s Hotel by saying that these absurdities result because the concept of infinity is just beyond us and we don’t understand it. But that reaction is mistaken and naïve. As I said, infinite set theory is a highly developed and well-understood branch of modern mathematics. These absurdities result because we do understand the nature of the actual infinite. Hilbert was a smart man, and he well knew how to illustrate the bizarre consequences of the existence of an actually infinite number of things.

\textbf{START DISCUSSION}

\textit{Student:} I taught this argument at Mount Vernon Presbyterian School to a bunch of high schoolers. We got to this philosophical understanding of actual infinite. I used the example that you gave in Lee Strobel’s \textit{A Case for a Creator} with marbles. If you have an infinite number of marbles and you want to give another person an infinite number of marbles you can do it in different ways, and you would get absurd results. I just wanted to say that they really enjoyed talking about it and they understood it. So anyone who says they can’t understand these things, high schoolers can really get into this kind of stuff. They just really enjoyed it. I just wanted to say that.

\textit{Dr. Craig:} Thanks for the encouraging words.

\textit{Student:} You stated that infinity in mathematics . . . the reason they are not allowed to do all of these sort of subtraction, etc. is because you get contradictions. But they say as long as you don’t do that it is not contradictory. It reminds me the point that Wes Morriston likes to bring up that the contradictions arise when you move people around whereas the past (which is what you are trying to argue is finite) isn’t something . . . you can’t move around past dates like you can people in a hotel or coins or marbles.

\textit{Dr. Craig:} I’ve never understood why someone thinks that that is a good objection. We are obviously not talking with regard to Hilbert’s Hotel about a real hotel that is built out of bricks and wood and has people trying to walk down infinite hallways to get out the door. It is a conceptual thought experiment. You imagine the hotel with all the people in the rooms and then, as it were, in thought just eliminate all the people in the odd-numbered rooms. Just vaporize them or something. Then you’ve got all the people left in.

\textsuperscript{69} 30:05
the even-numbered rooms. You don’t want to get into difficulties about physically
moving them about and so forth. Similarly, with respect to the number of past events. If
you imagine the number of past days in the history of the universe, it is easy to just
mentally annihilate every other day, or all the odd-numbered days, and ask how many are
left over. The answer is obvious. There would still be all the even-numbered days, which
is the same number. It seems to me that that kind of objection just fails to reckon with the
nature of a thought experiment which isn’t based upon real, physical movements and
operations.

Student: It seems a lot of the more knee-jerk reaction that some people will have (mostly
atheists) will say something like, OK, there is no absurdity. That is just what happens
when you have infinity. That is just the way infinity works, and there is no problem to it.

Dr. Craig: OK. Thank you for saying that, because that is the segue to the next point.

END DISCUSSION

Really, the only thing the critic can do at this point is to just bite the bullet and say that
Hilbert’s Hotel is not absurd. Yeah, that’s right; that is the way it would be. Sometimes
they will justify this by saying that if an actual infinite could exist then such situations are
exactly what we should expect. But, again, I don’t think this is an adequate response.
Hilbert would, of course, agree that if an infinite hotel could exist then the situation that
he has imagined is what we would expect. Otherwise, it wouldn’t be a good illustration!
Right? So, of course this is what would happen if an actually infinite number of things
could exist. But the question is: is such a hotel really possible? I think that these
illustrations show that, no, such a thing is not really possible. It is metaphysically absurd.
So I think al-Ghazali’s first argument is a good one. It shows that the number of past
events must be finite. Therefore, the universe must have had a beginning.

We can summarize this argument as follows:

1. An actual infinite cannot exist.

2. An infinite temporal regress of events is an actual infinite.

3. Therefore, an infinite temporal regress of events cannot exist.

Next time we will look at the second independent argument that al-Ghazali offers for the
beginning of the universe and the finitude of the past.
We have been looking at the kalam cosmological argument for God's existence. Last time we began studying the philosophical arguments and the scientific confirmations of the crucial second premise that the universe began to exist.

We looked at Ghazali's first philosophical argument based upon the impossibility of the existence of an actually infinite number of things. But he has a second philosophical argument as well. This argument is independent of the first argument. That is to say, even if you think that an actually infinite number of things can exist, this argument aspires to show that the series of past events (at least) cannot be actually infinite.

The series of past events, Ghazali observes, has been formed by adding one event after another. The series of events in the past is like a sequence of dominoes falling one after another until the last domino today is finally reached. But, he argues, no series which is formed by adding one member after another can be actually infinite, for you cannot pass through an infinite number of elements one element at a time.

I think this is easy to see in the case of trying to count to infinity. No matter how high you count there is always an infinity of numbers left to count. Therefore no one can count to infinity. He can go on and on, and infinity will simply be a limit to the series of numbers he counts, but he will never arrive at infinity.

But if you cannot count to infinity, how can you count down from infinity? This would be like someone's claiming to have counted down all of the negative numbers ending at 0. -3, -2, -1, 0. That seems crazy, for before he could count zero he would have to count -1. But before he could count -1 he would have to count -2. But before he could count -2 he would have to count -3. And so on and so on back to infinity. Before any number could be counted an infinity of numbers would already have to have been counted first. So you just get driven back and back into the past so that no number could ever be counted. But then the final domino would never fall if an infinite number of dominoes had to fall first. So today could never be reached. But obviously here we are. This shows that the series of past events must be finite and have had a beginning.

**START DISCUSSION**

*Student*: I understand the argument, but what are the objections to how someone can say, like the atheist says, how do you reach a past infinite event?
Dr. Craig: Honestly, I read the responses to the kalam cosmological argument and I can’t think of any atheistic response to this as to how you could count down an infinite number of events to arrive at today. Here is a response that is sometimes given, and I think we already encountered it. They will say, Look, any negative number you pick is only a finite distance from zero, whether it is -3 or -10 trillion or whatever. So you could count down from that number to 0. If you have an infinite number of negative numbers you can count down to 0 from every one of them. So if from every number you could count down to zero (if that is only a finite distance) then it follows there is no problem counting down an infinite series. As I said last week that clearly commits a fallacy called the fallacy of composition which is saying that because a part of a thing has a property therefore the whole thing has the property. A classic example of this fallacy would be to think that every part of an elephant is light in weight therefore the whole elephant is light in weight. That is obviously a fallacious inference. You can’t reason that because a part of something has a property therefore the whole has the property. Similarly, in the series of negative numbers, every part of the series is only a finite distance from zero and so could be counted down, but it doesn’t follow from that that therefore the whole series can be counted down. The objector has clearly committed the fallacy of composition. The question is not how any finite part of the series can be traversed or counted. The question is how the whole infinite series could be traversed or counted. That just isn’t answered by this fallacious sort of objection.

Student: This is something that has actually bothered me as a physicist and astronomer. Current models of the universe would say that the universe is flat, therefore according to the principle of homogeneity it has no edge so it goes on for infinity. But it would have started from the Big Bang as a mathematical point, so it went from size 0 to size infinity.

Dr. Craig: That is a real problem. I’ve asked cosmologists about that. It is very difficult to make sense of that. I think what many would say (and what I would say) is that the universe is not in fact flat. It is not like a Euclidean plane that goes out to spatial infinity. Rather, space is curved like the surface of a sphere. On the surface of a sphere there is no edge where you are going to fall off, but what will happen is if you go far enough you just come back to where you start again. If three dimensional space is like that then there is no problem in it having this sort of beginning and making this magical leap, as you say, from a singular beginning point to infinite size. That is just avoided by saying that the universe is spatially finite. That is a good question, not tangential.

Student: Doesn’t Stephen Hawking try to curve off the bottom of the light cone to avoid this idea of a beginning of time? I never understood how that avoids it because even if it’s curved there is still a bottom point.
Dr. Craig: Yes. What you point out, and we’ll talk more about this when we get to the scientific confirmation of the beginning of the universe, is that if we let this disc represent our three-dimensional space, as you go back in time space shrinks down to a singular point which is a boundary or an edge to space and time. In Hawking’s model he does some mathematical tricks to eliminate that beginning point and round off. It is sort of like a southern hemisphere of the Earth or a badminton birdie. It doesn’t go back to a singular point at which you drop off the edge. Rather, if you go back, as I say as on a sphere, you just keep going and you’ll go right past the south pole. The south pole on the Earth is not an edge or a boundary where you fall off. If you go south and you go through the south pole you just start going north again. There isn’t any boundary point. As you say, Hawking mistakenly thinks that because in his model there isn’t any boundary point that therefore there is no beginning to time and the universe. I am actually letting the cat out of the bag from my talk that I am going to be giving at the EPS conference in November, but you are quite right in pointing out to us that on Hawking’s model, time here (which is the vertical dimension) is still finite. The universe has not existed infinitely into the past. It is finite and has a beginning. It just doesn’t have an edge or a boundary point as a cone does. I have to say that in his most recent book, *The Grand Design*, co-authored with Leonard Mlodinow, Hawking does admit exactly what you said. [We can let the lines of] latitude represent time so that as you go back in his model he says you finally reach the south pole, and this is the beginning of the universe. It is the beginning of time and space. He actually admits exactly what you are saying. It doesn’t have to be a boundary point or singularity in order for it to be the beginning of time and space. We will talk more about that when we get to the science.

Student: I know that you distinguish eternity for God and time within our world in the universe. Can God count outside of the universe?

Dr. Craig: Let’s recall our discussion of the attributes of God when we talked about divine eternity. Remember we said the core concept of eternity means to be without beginning or end – something that exists permanently. But we saw that you could do that in two radically different ways. One would be to endure throughout infinite time without beginning or end; the other way would be to be outside of time altogether – to transcend time or to be timeless. Theologians have typically thought that God is eternal in the sense that he is outside time. But when we are talking about the universe being past eternal, we don’t mean the universe is outside time. We mean that first model – extended throughout infinite time. So the question is: can the universe be past eternal in that sense of going back in time to infinity? Can there be an infinite number of prior events before today?
So, can God count infinitely? I would say that insofar as God is in time . . . and my argument, you remember when we talked about his attribute of eternity, is that God is in time with the universe – once time comes to exist God enters into time in virtue of his real relations with his created world. So God could start counting at the moment of the Big Bang and he would then count forever, but he would never reach infinity because you can’t count to infinity. That is metaphysically impossible. Any finite number you count plus one is always another finite number. That is why you cannot reach infinity by counting one number at a time.

**Student:** So prior to the existence of the universe, God wasn’t able to count?

**Dr. Craig:** I would say yes he was able to count and in that sense had he been counting time would have started prior to the Big Bang. We could imagine God leading up to the moment of creation by saying, “3, 2, 1, Let there be light!” In that case you would have a succession of mental events prior to creation. Yes, he would be able to be counting. But I would say that not even God could count down from infinity past because that is metaphysically impossible.

**Student:** I was wondering if you were going to address objections where someone offers a hypothetical scenario – a widget is able to make a copy of itself in a half a second, then in a quarter of a second, eighth of a second. Any time before one second is finite. Once you are past one second it gets infinite and presumably weirder and weirder as you go beyond one second.

**Dr. Craig:** What you are alluding to is the claim of some philosophers that there are things called supertasks, and that is you could form a collection that is actually infinite by doing it faster and faster and faster. You could imagine a machine that moves a marble from one tray to another. It moves the first marble in one minute, then it moves the next marble in 30 seconds, then it moves the next marble in 15 seconds, and faster and faster so that after 2 minutes all of the marbles would be transferred and it would have completed an infinite number of tasks in a finite amount of time.74 I would argue that this sort of idea of a supertask is, again, metaphysically impossible.

How do I explain this simply? Let’s use the letter omega (Ω) to symbolize that process that is going on of transferring the marbles. Ω is an ordinal number of infinity. You say, *Wait a minute, I thought that the number of infinity was א – the Hebrew letter aleph.* Well, to be precise that is the cardinal number of infinity. What is the difference between cardinal numbers and ordinal numbers? Cardinal numbers are numbers like 1, 2, 3, 4, 5. Ordinal numbers are numbers like 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th. The cardinal numbers tell you how many things there are. The ordinal numbers tell you the order in which they are –

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first, second, third, fourth, fifth. The order type or ordinal number of infinity is $\Omega$. After you have completed the transfer of the marbles, you have a new state – the marbles are all now in the left hand tray whereas when you began that were all in the right-hand tray. That would be the state designated by $\Omega+1$. All of the states transferring the marbles were going on during the $\Omega$ state. Now you are done. That is $\Omega+1$. The state that is after the process. Notice here that there is no last member in this $\Omega$ series. There is no last marble that gets transferred from the right to the left because it is just infinite. What that means is that the state that exists at $\Omega+1$ is completely indeterminate with respect to the $\Omega$ series. It would be a causal gap in nature. One philosopher who discussed this used the example of a light that is turned on and off faster and faster. His question was, at $\Omega+1$ is the light on or is it off? The answer is there isn’t any answer because the state of the lamp at $\Omega+1$ is completely unconnected to its state during the $\Omega$ series. That may be fine mathematically or on paper, but in reality, as I say, that means there is a sort of hole or a causal gap in nature where the state of the lamp at $\Omega+1$ is completely unrelated to the series of turning it on or off, or where the state of the marbles at $\Omega+1$ is unrelated causally to the state of the marbles during the series. My argument would be that, again, this kind of supertask is metaphysically impossible because there is a causal gap in reality on this model that makes no metaphysical sense.

Of course, in talking about whether you can have an infinite number of past events, we are not talking about doing an infinite number of things in a finite amount of time. We are talking about a series where all of the intervals are equal – an infinite number of years or an infinite number of seconds, or an infinite number of days. There is no faster and faster. In one sense this question is purely academic because it doesn’t apply to the series of past events which are all equal in duration. There you can’t appeal to this speeding up in order to get the job done. As you can see, these arguments are just the tip of the iceberg that leads into fascinating discussions.

**END DISCUSSION**

Al-Ghazali sought to heighten the impossibility of forming an actually infinite past by giving illustrations of the absurdities that would result if you could form an actually infinite past by adding one member after another. He says let’s imagine our solar system. Here is Saturn. Let’s imagine that for every one orbit that Saturn completes around the sun Jupiter (which is closer in) completes two. Notice that the longer they orbit, the further Saturn falls behind. If Jupiter has done ten trillion orbits, Saturn has only done five trillion. The longer they orbit the further and further Saturn falls behind. If they continue to orbit forever they will approach a limit at which Saturn is infinitely far behind.
Jupiter. Of course they will never actually arrive at this limit but nevertheless they will approach this limit the longer they orbit.

Now turn the story around, says al-Ghazali. Suppose they have been orbiting the sun from eternity past. Now which one has completed the most orbits? The answer mathematically is that the number of orbits completed is exactly the same: they have both completed infinity – an infinite number of orbits! Notice you can’t get out of this argument by saying that infinity is not a number. Because it is a number in this case. We are dealing with an actually infinite number of orbits. So it is a number. In mathematics, infinity is a number (in set theory at least) – it is the number of elements in the set of natural numbers \{0, 1, 2, 3, 4, \ldots\}. So if they have been orbiting from eternity past at the rate of two orbits of Jupiter to every orbit of Saturn they have now both completely the same number of orbits. But that seems absurd because the longer they orbit, the more the disparity between them grows. So how does the number of orbits magically become equal just by having them orbit from eternity past? As I say, this is his [al-Ghazali] argument from the 12th century. It is just amazing to read this stuff.

Here is one more little juicy tidbit about this illustration. Al-Ghazali asks: is the number of orbits completed odd or even? You know what the answer is mathematically? It is both. It is both odd and even. That, again, I think just shows the absurdity of trying to form an actually infinite number of things by successive addition.

Here is another illustration. Suppose we meet a man who claims to have been counting down from eternity past and is now finishing: \ldots -3, -2, -1, 0! Whew! At last! Why, we may ask, is he just now finishing his countdown today? Why didn’t he finish it yesterday or the day before that, or the year before that? After all, by then an infinite amount of time had already elapsed. So if the man were counting, say, at the rate of one number per second, he’s already had an infinite number of seconds to finish his countdown. He should already be done! In fact, at any point in the infinite past you pick, the man will already be finished with his countdown, which implies that no matter how far back in time you go you will never find the man counting. That contradicts the hypothesis that he has been counting from eternity. This, again, I think shows the absurdity of trying to form an actually infinite by adding one member after another.

START DISCUSSION

Student: I know that guys like Wes Morriston, regarding the point made about when you ask why hasn’t he finished counting down yesterday or the day before that, will try to say that is a non sequitur. Just because we can’t postulate a reason for why they haven’t finished their countdown doesn’t mean there isn’t a reason for it.76

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Dr. Craig: I think it is very clear that there cannot be a reason for finishing today rather than tomorrow or finishing today rather than yesterday. There simply isn’t any reason that could be given why one point in the past would be the point at which he finishes. I think what someone like Morriston would rather have to say is there doesn’t need to be a reason – it just is that way. That would be an acceptable response. But I guess what I would say in a case like that is that given an infinite amount of time, that is a sufficient condition for finishing his countdown and therefore he should be done by now.

Student: I know what he says to that though. He’ll say something like isn’t there a difference between counting down an infinite amount of the past versus all of the past. Isn’t it possible somebody could have counted infinitely but still not have gotten to the present because isn’t there a difference between the two?

Dr. Craig: That is a good point. There is a difference between counting all the numbers and counting an infinite number of numbers. But in this case it would seem to me that if you are counting at one number per second you would finish counting all the numbers. There is no reason as to why you would finish tomorrow rather than today or yesterday rather than today. Having an infinite amount of time would be a sufficient condition for counting all the numbers in the negative number series.

Student: It keeps going around in my mind that if he had to have a finish, where and when would he have begun in the first place?

Dr. Craig: It is important to understand that he did not have a starting point. Just as the series of negative numbers has no beginning point – there is no largest negative number – so the series of past events in a beginningless universe would have no beginning point, which makes it all the more unintelligible, I think. For him to arrive at today is kind of like trying to jump out of a bottomless pit. Think about that. There isn’t any beginning point whereas to get leverage so to speak; it just sinks into an infinite regress. It becomes unintelligible how the man could get to any point in the past, I think.

Student: When I am thinking about this, something that comes to mind is can God make a rock so big that he can’t lift it. Is that analogous to the question that can God traverse an actual infinite?

Dr. Craig: What you are saying is that is a logically impossible task, or a metaphysically impossible task for God to do. Therefore it is no infringement on his omnipotence. Similarly, al-Ghazali and I would say these are metaphysically impossible things and therefore it is no infringement on God’s omnipotence that he couldn’t do such a thing.

END DISCUSSION

It is always encouraging when one’s philosophical colleagues express support for an argument and you manage to make some impact upon the territory. Therefore, I have
been tremendously encouraged that two very brilliant and gifted philosophers Alexander Pruss of Baylor University and Rob Koons of University of Texas at Austin have recently both defended a very engaging contemporary version of Ghazali’s argument. This is called the Grim Reaper Paradox.

Imagine there are infinitely many grim reapers who are bent on your destruction. We can identify these as gods so as to forestall any physical objections. Suppose you are alive at midnight, and that grim reaper #1 will strike you dead at 1:00am if you are still alive at that point. But grim reaper #2 will strike you dead at 12:30am if you are still alive at that point. But grim repeater #3 will strike you dead at 12:15am, and so on and so on. Such a situation seems clearly conceivable given the possibility of an actually infinite number of things. But it leads to an impossibility. You cannot survive past midnight, but you cannot be killed by any grim reaper at any time because you would already be dead first. Pruss and Koons show how to reformulate this paradox so that the grim reapers are spread out over infinite time rather than over a single hour. For example, you can stipulate that each grim reaper will swing his scythe on January 1 of each past year if you have managed to live that long. You will get the same sort of paradox – you cannot survive to the present and yet you cannot be killed by any grim reaper at any time. This shows, again, the impossibility of an actually infinite past.

Let me just conclude by saying that these illustrations, I think, go to strengthen al-Ghazali’s claim that no series which is formed by adding one member at a time can be actually infinite.
Lecture 11: First Scientific Confirmation for the Second Premise

We have been looking at philosophical arguments for the second premise of the *kalam* cosmological argument. We saw that the impossibility of forming an actually infinite collection of things adding one member after another implies that the universe began to exist, which is the second premise of that argument. We can summarize this argument as follows:

1. A collection formed by successive addition cannot be an actual infinite.
2. The temporal series of events is a collection formed by successive addition.
3. Therefore the temporal series of events cannot be an actual infinite.

Now we have two philosophical arguments for the second premise of the cosmological argument – one based upon the impossibility of the existence of an actually infinite number of things, and the other based upon the impossibility of forming a collection of an actually infinite number of things by successive addition (adding one member after another one at a time).

Lest we lose the forest for the trees, let’s just step back a moment and ask what we’ve done here. What we’ve basically argued is that the idea of an infinite past is absurd. The past cannot be infinite, and therefore it must have a beginning. These arguments, though seemingly very complex and mind-stretching, can be shared in a very simple way. That is important to understand lest you just throw up your hands and say all this mathematics is too difficult for me.

The first argument based on the impossibility of an actually infinite number of things – what I often do in a debate situation is to simply say that the existence of an actually infinite number of things is impossible because of the absurdities that would result if it could exist. For example, what is infinity minus infinity? That is a simple question. You get self-contradictory answers, and that shows that infinity is just an idea in your mind, not something that exists in reality. So there can’t be an actually infinite number of past events. That is a very simple statement of that first argument.

The second argument – you can simply give an illustration of an infinite series of dominoes and say, *How can the present domino ever fall if an infinite number of earlier dominoes had to fall first one after another?* You’d never get to the present domino. We know that the past can’t be infinite; it must have had a beginning – it must be finite.
There you see I’ve shared those two arguments in about 45 seconds. Even though there is
this wealth of interesting material below the surface, the tip of the iceberg can be shared
in a relatively simple and straightforward way.

Now we want to go on to scientific confirmations of the beginning of the universe.

In one of the most astonishing developments of modern astronomy and astrophysics,
which our Muslim theologian friend al-Ghazali could never have anticipated, is that we
now have pretty strong scientific evidence for the beginning of the universe. I like to
think of these scientific arguments as confirmations of the philosophical arguments. They
are confirmation of a conclusion already reached by philosophical argument. That is to
say, given the scientific evidence, the statement “the universe began to exist” is more
probable than it would have been without that evidence. The evidence confirms the truth
of that premise that the universe began to exist. So if someone says to you, as they very
often do, Nobody knows how the universe began. Nobody knows whether the universe
had a beginning or is eternal, what they are usually thinking of by the word “know” is
“know with certainty.” Of course that is not what we are claiming here – that somebody
knows with certainty.\footnote{Science doesn’t deal in certainties. What we are saying is that
given the scientific evidence that we have it is more probable than not that the universe
did have a beginning. It seems to me that it is almost undeniable, at least, to say that the
scientific evidence confirms that the universe began to exist. That statement is more
probable given the scientific evidence we have today than it would have been without it –
than it was, say, in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century before the Big Bang model was ever broached or the
expansion of the universe discovered. The evidence at least confirms the second premise
even if it doesn’t render it certain. Certainty is a will-o-the-wisp that we don’t need to be
concerned about. The question is: is the premise more probable than not given the
evidence that we have? I think that it is.}

Let’s look at the first scientific confirmation which comes from the expansion of the
universe.

All throughout history men have always assumed that the universe as a whole was
unchanging. Of course, things in the universe were moving about and changing, but the
universe as a whole was just there, so to speak. This was also Albert Einstein’s
assumption when he first began work on his General Theory of Relativity.

In 1917 Einstein applied his gravitational theory which is called the General Theory of
Relativity. It is really not a theory of relativity. It is a theory of gravitation. It is the theory
of gravitation that is accepted in physics today. In 1917 Einstein began to apply his newly
discovered gravitational theory to the universe as a whole.
But he found that something was terribly amiss. His equations described a universe which
was either blowing up like a balloon or else collapsing in upon itself. During the 1920s
the Russian mathematician Alexander Friedman and the Belgian astronomer Georges
LeMaître independently discovered models of the universe which took Einstein’s
equations at face value, and as a result they discovered models of an expanding universe.
In 1929 the American astronomer Edwin Hubble, through tireless observations at Mt.
Wilson Observatory, confirmed Friedman and LeMaître’s theory. He found that the light
coming to us from distant galaxies appears to be redder than expected. This “red shift” in
the light was most plausibly explained because the galaxies are moving away from us and
therefore the light waves (the wavelengths) are stretched so that they appear to be redder
than expected. Wherever Hubble trained his telescope in the night sky, he observed this
same redshift in the light from the galaxies. It appeared that we are at the center of a
cosmic explosion, and all of the other galaxies are flying away from us at tremendous
speeds!

Now according to the Friedman-LeMaître model, we are not really at the center of the
universe. Rather an observer in any galaxy will look out and see the other galaxies flying
away from him. This is because, according to the theory, it is really space itself which is
expanding. The galaxies are actually at rest with respect to space, but they recede from
each other as space itself expands. The best way to visualize this, I think, is to imagine a
balloon with buttons glued on the surface. The buttons are glued in place so they cannot
move across the surface of the balloon. The buttons are stuck in place. But as you blow
up the balloon, the buttons will get further and further apart because the balloon itself is
inflating. 80 Those buttons are just like the galaxies in outer space. The galaxies are
actually at rest with respect to expanding space but they recede from one another as space
itself expands.

The Friedman-LeMaître theory eventually came to be known as the Big Bang theory. But
that name can be misleading. The Big Bang sounds like an explosion, doesn’t it? But
thinking of the expansion of the universe as a sort of explosion could mislead us into
thinking that the galaxies are moving out into a pre-existing empty space from a central
point. That would be a complete misunderstanding of the theory. As we’ve seen, the
theory is much more radical than that. It is space itself which is expanding.

As you trace this expansion back in time, the galaxies will get closer and closer together.
Eventually the distance between any two points in space becomes zero. You can’t get any
closer than that! So at that point you have reached the boundary of space and time. Space
and time cannot be extended any further back than that. It is literally the beginning of the
universe.

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To imagine this, we can think of our three-dimensional space as a two-dimensional disk. As you go back in time, space shrinks down until the distance between any two points in space becomes zero. That is the beginning of the universe. The vertical dimension represents time. Over time the universe is expanding. We can represent the expansion of space geometrically as a cone. What is interesting about a cone is that although it can be extended indefinitely in one direction, it has a boundary point in the other direction and cannot be extended in that direction. Because this direction represents time and the boundary point lies in the past, that point represents the beginning of the universe. It implies that the past is finite and that therefore time and the universe began to exist.

Since space-time is the arena in which all matter and energy exist, the beginning of space-time is the beginning of all the matter and energy in the universe. It is the beginning of the universe itself.

Notice that there’s simply nothing prior to the initial boundary point. There’s nothing prior to the beginning of the universe. Here it is very important that we not be misled by words. When scientists say, “There is nothing prior to the initial boundary,” they do not mean that there is some something prior to it, and that is a state of nothingness. That would be to treat nothing as though it were something! Remember when we talked about what “nothing” means. It is just a term of universal negation meaning “not anything.” So when they say there is nothing prior to the Big Bang or nothing prior to the boundary point, what they mean is there was not anything prior to the boundary point. At that boundary point, it is false that there is something prior to this point.

Incredibly, the standard Big Bang model thus predicts an absolute beginning of the universe. If this model is correct, then we have amazing scientific confirmation of the second premise of the kalam cosmological argument – the universe began to exist.

**START DISCUSSION**

*Student:* Is that zero-point also the limit of time?^81^

*Dr. Craig:* Yes. Both time and space.

*Student:* Do the cosmologists consider the singularity to be a thing? A being? An actually existing object?

*Dr. Craig:* That is a really, really good question. He is saying when you get to this boundary point, is that an actual physical state of reality? My impression is that among many cosmologists, they would say no; that this is an idealization. It would be . . .

*Student:* Like an asymptote?
Dr. Craig: Right. It wouldn’t be an actual physical state. It would be kind of like the series of fractions converging toward zero as a limit. You’d have 1/2, 1/4, 1/8, 1/16. There the endpoint is simply an ideal limit that doesn’t actually exist. It isn’t an actual physical state of affairs. In this case there wouldn’t be an actual T=0 at the singularity. It would just be like that descending series of fractions.

Student: But that doesn’t do anything to avoid a beginning even if there is no beginning point.

Dr. Craig: Exactly.

Student: According to certain models of M-Theory, scientists have put forth of an idea of a variable dark energy that sometimes is positive and sometimes negative and allows for an oscillating universe. What would your response be to something like that?

Dr. Craig: I will raise the question in a minute about other models than the standard model. I wanted us to first understand what does the standard Big Bang model say and imply. As you say, there have been over the decades scores of alternative models proposed including oscillating models where the universe wouldn’t actually go down to a singularity. It would kind of be like an hourglass. It would go down and then it would expand out again. That would represent a contracting universe which then somehow reverses itself and expands. That contraction was preceded by a prior expansion, and that by a contraction. So the universe is sort of like an accordion expanding and contracting from infinity past. This model was floated during the 1960s primarily by Russian cosmologists who wanted to restore the eternality of matter and the universe. The singularity theorems that were developed by Stephen Hawking and Roger Penrose (that I’ll talk about and are featured in this movie The Theory of Everything) pretty much put the kibosh on these oscillating models because what it showed was that in a universe that is contracting down like this a singularity is inevitable. You can’t really escape the singularity. Moreover, even if you could, entropy is conserved from cycle to cycle which has the effect of making each cycle longer and larger than the previous cycle so you still couldn’t have an infinite past. You would still have a beginning prior to the smallest cycle. Joseph Silk, who is an astronomer, in his book called The Big Bang says that based on current entropy levels in the universe it couldn’t have gone through more than about one hundred previous oscillations. So there are all kinds of problems with these oscillating models as a result of which they haven’t really commended themselves to the cosmological community at large as more plausible than a more straightforward model.

Student: At the beginning of space and time, my understanding is God put into place a series of events in time and starting at that point. There was nothing prior to that point. No energy. Nothing. Going to a cosmological understanding, what is the difference? In other words, does it state that you have to have a God to start? If you agree the Big Bang,
the collapsing, the coming together of space and time, did in fact happen, how would they address what was the initial cause if you don’t have a God that is outside of space and time to create that initial beginning? Do they have an answer to that or does it get into the oscillating universe and all the String theories?

*Dr. Craig:* Here it seems to me that the scientist, as a scientist, says that *I will simply offer a description of the universe back to its beginning, but beyond that, that is metaphysics not physics.*

*Student:* So it is God-of-the-gap. In other words, they are saying, we don’t know but . . .

*Dr. Craig:* No, I think they are saying that that is not a scientific question unless you are raising an alternative model like an oscillating model to avoid the beginning. But once you have an absolute beginning the question as to why the universe came into being is really a metaphysical question, not one that lies within the province of science. It is important to understand that the theist is not offering here an alternative theory to the Big Bang theory. It is not as though he is offering a theistic creation account or something. The evidence that I’m appealing to simply confirms the second premise of the cosmological argument that the universe began to exist. That is a theologically neutral statement that you can find in any textbook on astronomy and astrophysics. So it is not God-of-the-gaps. God doesn’t come into the picture at all at this point. One is simply saying that the best evidence of contemporary science confirms that premise that the universe began to exist. Whether or not that has theistic implications is a further philosophical question.

*Student:* Is the reason that the scientific arguments are merely confirmations because the kalam must seek to prove a metaphysical beginning to time and not merely a physical beginning? I’ve heard some stress what is really the importance of even studying the scientific arguments if that doesn’t really seek to show the beginning of time that we would need to show in order for the kalam to be successful.

*Dr. Craig:* I think that there is some truth to what you are saying because if you just approach the question purely scientifically then the committed naturalist could just appeal to unknown natural laws, unknown physics, to explain how the universe came into being and resort to a kind of naturalistic metaphysics. For example, someone might say maybe our universe just blew up in the laboratory of some sort of mega-gigantic scientific study somewhere and we are really just a test universe inside of this other greater massive thing. Scientifically, that is a non-starter. How do you even assess something like that? In that sense I think it is true to say that the scientific evidence is confirmatory of an argument that is already reached by philosophical argument, and it will be the
philosophical argument that will exclude these sorts of other metaphysical alternatives. But, again, as one is just doing pure science and not speculating metaphysically, it seems to me that it is virtually undeniable that that premise – the universe began to exist – is more probable than not given the current state of the evidence which is all one is claiming.

**Student:** Wouldn’t the constancy of the CBR temperature speak against any kind of oscillation or even multi-universe? I would think you would see oscillation or perturbation or change in CBR from different directions.

**Dr. Craig:** What you are talking about is a discovery made by a couple of Bell Telephone laboratory scientists in 1965 where they detected a kind of low-grade microwave background radiation in the universe. The same kind of radiation that is in your microwave oven at home. They found that the entire universe is permeated by this background microwave radiation. The best explanation of this is that this is a vestige of a very hot and very dense state of the early universe. This is one of the other pieces of evidence for the Big Bang besides the redshift observed by Hubble. The redshift evidence has been around ever since Hubble in the late 20s, but this cosmic background radiation was only discovered in 1965 and helped put the nails in the coffin of the old steady state model which couldn’t explain why this background radiation [is there].\(^{83}\) Whether or not this is compatible with oscillating models . . .

**Student:** I would say it disproves oscillating models because of the constancy of the temperatures is the same in all directions.

**Dr. Craig:** Yes, right. What you are pointing out is that this is incredibly homogeneous in every direction to one part in a hundred-thousand. It doesn’t vary. It is extraordinarily evenly distributed. The suggestion is that if the universe were the result of a prior oscillation then that contracting phase would create all sorts of black holes and density perturbations that would then be reflected in the microwave background in the next expansion. That is, in fact (I think you are right), a huge problem. A contracting universe would be filled with these black holes and other objects that are formed by gravitational self-collapse that wouldn’t just get smoothed out when the universe starts to expand again. That is one of the challenges, I think.

**END DISCUSSION**

The question then is: is the standard model correct? Or, I think more importantly, is it correct in predicting a beginning of the universe? Despite the empirical confirmation from the redshift, microwave background radiation, and other evidence, the standard model will need to be modified in various ways. The model is based, as I’ve mentioned,
on Einstein’s gravitational theory – the General Theory of Relativity. But the General Theory of Relativity breaks down when the universe is shrunk down to sub-atomic proportions. At that point, you’ve got to introduce quantum physics in order to describe the earliest split-second of the universe. You need a theory that would combine General Relativity (or gravity) with quantum physics to have a quantum theory of gravity to describe the first split-second of the universe. The problem is nobody knows how to do this yet – the theory doesn’t exist. Moreover, the expansion of the universe is probably not constant as it is in the standard model. It’s probably accelerating (as I think someone alluded to with the dark energy). The universe is actually speeding up in its expansion and may have had a brief period of super-rapid (or inflationary) expansion very early on in the history of the universe. So the standard model is going to need to be modified in various ways if it is to be empirically adequate.

But none of these adjustments need affect the fundamental prediction of the model that the universe had an absolute beginning. Indeed, as I’ve mentioned, over the decades physicists have proposed scores of alternative models since Friedman and LeMaître in order to avoid the absolute beginning of the universe. And those models that do not feature an absolute beginning have been repeatedly shown to be untenable. To put it more positively, the only viable non-standard models are those that involve an absolute beginning to the universe. That beginning may or may not involve a beginning point. But even those that do not have a point-like beginning are still finite in the past. The past is not infinite, but finite. On these models (like Stephen Hawking’s so-called “no boundary” proposal) the universe has not existed forever. Rather, it came into existence even if it didn’t do so at a sharply defined point.

In one sense, the history of twentieth century cosmology can be seen as a parade of one failed attempt after another to avoid the absolute beginning predicted by the standard model. That prediction has now stood for nearly 100 years through a period of enormous advances in observational astronomy and creative theoretical work in astrophysics.\(^84\)

With that I will bring it to a close today. Next week we will continue to discuss the significance of more recently discovered singularity theorems that also imply that the universe began to exist.\(^85\)

\(^84\) Total Running Time: 31:04 (Copyright © 2015 William Lane Craig)
Lecture 12: Defending The Premises of the *Kalam* Cosmological Argument

In our lesson we’ve been looking at the first scientific confirmation of the second premise of the *kalam* cosmological argument that the universe began to exist. That confirmation comes from the expansion of the universe. We saw last time that based upon the physical evidence space and time can be represented geometrically as a cone which shrinks as one goes back in time until one reaches an absolute beginning of the universe. The standard Big Bang model predicts a beginning of the universe. Although the standard model will need to be modified in various ways, especially to accommodate a quantum gravity theory to explain the earliest split-second of the universe, nevertheless a prediction of the standard model of a beginning of the universe has now stood for nearly one hundred years and remains the most probable account for the origin of the universe.

I concluded last time by saying, in a sense, the history of 20th century cosmology can be seen as a series of failed attempts to avoid the absolute beginning of the universe predicted by the standard model. We’ve seen theories like the steady state model, oscillating models, vacuum fluctuation models, eternal inflationary models, and so on and so forth come and go. Any model that doesn't involve an absolute beginning of the universe has shown to be untenable in some way. So when someone like Sean Carroll in our debate on the evidence of cosmology for the existence of the universe simply gives a list of beginningless models of the universe, that says nothing about the tenability of those models. Models are a dime-a-dozen. The question is: are these tenable? The fact is that Jim Sinclair in our article in the *Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology* had already discussed most of the models in that list and shown why they were either empirically untenable or in fact did not avoid the absolute beginning of the universe.

In 2012 Alexander Vilenkin, a prominent cosmologist at Tufts University, at a conference at Cambridge University held in celebration of Stephen Hawking’s 70th birthday surveyed the models of contemporary cosmology and concluded, “There are no models at this time that provide a satisfactory model for a universe without a beginning.”

Meanwhile, a series of remarkable singularity theorems has increasingly tightened the loop around empirically tenable models by showing that under more and more generalized conditions, a beginning is inevitable. For example, in 1970 Hawking and Penrose formulated the singularity theorems which bear their name which show that any universe governed by the equations of General Relativity must shrink down to an initial singularity. In 2003 three prominent cosmologists, Arvind Borde, Alan Guth, and Alexander Vilenkin, were able to prove a theorem to the effect that any universe which is, on average, in a state of cosmic expansion over its history cannot be infinite in the past but must have a beginning. That goes for expanding multiverse scenarios, as well. In
2012 Vilenkin showed that models which do not meet this single condition of the Borde-Guth-Vilenkin theorem nevertheless fail for other reasons to avert the beginning of the universe.\textsuperscript{86} He concluded, “None of these scenarios can actually be past eternal.”\textsuperscript{87} “All the evidence we have says that the universe had a beginning.”\textsuperscript{88}

That is a remarkable statement. It would be important if Vilenkin said the evidence for a beginning of the universe outweighs the evidence against a beginning of the universe. But he didn't say that. He said all the evidence we have says that the universe had a beginning. I am not aware of any evidence that the universe is past eternal. There is simply nothing on that side of the scale. The evidence for the beginning of the universe, while not rendering this certain, I think certainly justifies Vilenkin's conclusion that the universe probably did begin to exist.

The Borde-Guth-Vilenkin theorem proves that under a single very general condition classical space-time must shrink down to a boundary at some point in the past. [Dr. Craig draws a diagram on the whiteboard] Let this [pointing to diagram] be classical space-time where you don’t take into account quantum effects. Now either there was something on the other side of that boundary or not. If not, then that boundary simply was the beginning of the universe. If there was something on the other side of that boundary, that will be the quantum gravity regime described by the yet-to-be-discovered quantum theory of gravity. In that case, that will be the beginning of the universe. So the Borde-Guth-Vilenkin theorem shows either that classical space-time began with this past boundary or else, if there was a quantum gravity regime, that regime is the beginning of the universe.

Vilenkin’s confidence in this fact, even though we don’t have yet a quantum theory of gravity, is based upon the fact that a quantum regime like this is radically unstable, or as scientists would say it is metastable. That is to say it cannot endure for very long. Certainly it would be impossible for such a metastable condition to endure for infinite time doing nothing and then suddenly begin to expand about 13.7 billion years ago. Even though we may not have a description of this earliest phase of the universe, we can be confident that if such a quantum regime does exist that it was the beginning of the universe.

The prominent cosmologist Charles Misner once put it this way to me. He said, \textit{It is as though there were a tiny window shade drawn across the first split-second of the}
universe, and we don't know what went on behind that shade. But what we do know is that the universe doesn't come out on the other side. So whether the universe began in the quantum regime or with classical space-time, the universe began to exist.

Of course, scientific results are always provisional. Science doesn't deal in certainties. It deals in probabilities. We can fully expect that new theories will be proposed, trying to avoid the universe’s beginning. These proposals are to be welcomed and tested. But nevertheless I think it’s pretty clear which way the evidence points. Today the proponent of the kalam cosmological argument stands comfortably within the scientific mainstream in holding that the universe began to exist.

On Friday, Chris Shannon, the former executive director of Reasonable Faith, sent me a link to an article by Alexander Vilenkin written just one month ago for the online scientific magazine *Inference* entitled “Did the Universe Have a Beginning?” This is from October 23, 2015. In it Vilenkin interacts with the kalam cosmological argument. I want to read to you from this article. He says,

Richard Dawkins, Lawrence Krauss and Victor Stenger have argued that modern science leaves no room for the existence of God. A series of science–religion debates has been staged, with atheists like Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, and Krauss debating theists like William Lane Craig. Both sides have appealed to the BGV theorem, both sides appealing to me—of all people!—for a better understanding.

Vilenkin is himself an agnostic. He doesn't believe in God. He is rather bemused that he should become the authority for these arguments. He goes on to say,

The cosmological argument for the existence of God consists of two parts. The first is straightforward:

1. Everything that begins to exist has a cause;
2. The universe began to exist;
3. Therefore, the universe has a cause.

The second part affirms that the cause must be God.

I would now like to take issue with the first part of the argument.

He is going to reject one of those two premises in the kalam cosmological argument. But he doesn't reject the second premise that the universe began to exist. Quite the contrary, he affirms this. In the article he says this:

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We have no viable models of an eternal universe. The BGV theorem gives us reason to believe that such models simply cannot be constructed.

This is the strongest statement yet I have read from Vilenkin. Not only does he say we have no viable models today for a beginningless universe, he says that on the basis of his theorem we have reason to believe that such models simply cannot be constructed.

How does Vilenkin then respond as an agnostic to the *kalam* argument? He chooses to reject the first premise – that everything that begins to exist has a cause. He maintains that the universe just popped into being uncaused out of nothing. What justification does he have for such a remarkable hypothesis? Well, he says, in a closed universe (that is, one that is finite in volume), the positive energy and the negative energy in such a universe balance each other out so that the net energy is zero. There is the same amount of positive energy as negative energy so the net energy is zero, and therefore if the universe pops into being uncaused out of nothing the conservation laws of matter and energy are not violated. Therefore the universe can simply come into being uncaused from nothing.

I have to say that I find this difficult to take seriously. Vilenkin assumes that if something doesn't violate the laws of nature then it is metaphysically possible. But there is no reason to adopt such an assumption. Just because something wouldn't violate a natural law doesn't mean that it is metaphysically possible. Just because coming into being uncaused out of nothing wouldn't violate the conservation laws doesn't mean that it is metaphysically possible that something can come into being from nothing. It is easy to think of examples of things that are metaphysically impossible that don't violate the laws of nature. For example, moral truths of some sorts are metaphysically necessary, and therefore it is impossible that it would be good to torture a little child for fun. But doing so wouldn't violate any of nature's laws, would it? That is perfectly consistent with the laws of nature. But I think it is plausible that it is metaphysically impossible that it would be good to torture a little child for fun. That is an ethical truth rather than a scientific or natural truth. Well, what might be another example? How about the statement that no event precedes itself – no event comes before itself. That, I think, is metaphysically necessary. It is impossible that an event precede itself. But no natural law would be violated in such a thing. In fact, what this would be would be if time is circular. If time is circular then event E both precedes and succeeds itself – it comes after itself, it comes before itself. There is no natural law violated in cyclical time. Indeed, scientists will often talk about closed time-like loops. But given the objectivity of temporal becoming, the nature of time, it seems to me that a circular time is metaphysically impossible. So to say that something doesn't violate a law of nature doesn't imply that that thing is metaphysically possible, and coming into being out of nothing would certainly seem to be

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something that is metaphysically impossible regardless of the conservation laws of matter and energy.

In fact, when you think about it, the situation that Vilenkin imagines just seems positively misguided. It is like saying that if your financial assets and your financial debits exactly balance each other out then your net worth is zero and therefore there is no cause of your financial condition. Clearly, that would be a mistake. Christopher Isham, who is Great Britain's leading quantum cosmologist, in his article “Cosmos and Creation” points out that even if the positive and negative energy balance each other out so that the net energy is zero, he says there still needs to be “ontic seeding” to create the positive energy and negative energy in the first place! So, in fact, even if you have the exact balance of positive and negative energy that wouldn't eliminate the need for a cause of the origin of the universe.

**START DISCUSSION**

*Student:* Can I ask for a very basic definition of “metaphysical?”

*Dr. Craig:* Good question, because the metaphysical section in Barnes and Noble is typically going to be your New Age books and other kook things! Metaphysics is that branch of philosophy which investigates questions concerning ultimate reality. What is real? For example, is materialism true? Is everything that exists material or are their minds or spirits in addition to material things? What is the nature of time and space? Questions about mathematical objects. Are there abstract objects like numbers and sets and functions and propositions? Those are metaphysical questions. “Meta” is a Greek prefix meaning “above” or “beyond.” So metaphysics is that which is beyond physics. Physics describes the physical world in which we live governed by the laws of nature. Metaphysics would be philosophical reflection upon the nature of reality that goes beyond just physics. Is that helpful?

*Student:* Yes. To take that one step further – then metaphysical is not necessarily theological?

*Dr. Craig:* No, by no means. For example, a metaphysician who is a materialist would say all that exists is space-time and its contents and there are no spiritual entities. This is a neutral term. It is just a field of philosophy that investigates the nature of reality. Good question.

*Student:* Do you ever meet people who hold to the “universe never began to exist” but then say you shouldn't hold to dogmas, you should just believe whatever the evidence supports.

*Dr. Craig:* Certainly that is true. What I say is, why don't you follow the evidence where it leads with regard to the second premise: the universe began to exist. Notice that this
premise is theologically neutral. It says nothing about God. It is a scientific statement that can be found in any textbook on astronomy and astrophysics. If Vilenkin is right, we have very powerful evidence for the truth of that premise. My question is: why won't you follow the evidence where it leads? The answer, I think, to that question in some cases is that they see the theologically significant conclusion that this is going to lead to once you couple the second premise with the first premise. I want them to follow the evidence where it leads in this regard.

**Student:** How does this relate to the no-boundary model?

**Dr. Craig:** The no-boundary model is an attempt to peek behind the shade and see what lies back there. On the Hartle-Hawking model the idea is that if you peek behind the shade you find that the universe, or space-time, does not go back to a sharp point or singularity at which it begins, but rather the beginning of space-time is rounded off rather like a badminton birdie instead of a cone. This then would say that the beginning point of the universe – the south pole here in this hemisphere [*Dr. Craig points to the rounded edge of the “badminton birdie” on the diagram on the whiteboard*] – is like any other point on the surface. If you go to the north pole or the south pole you wouldn't notice anything different. You would just go right through it. It is like any other point. If successful, the Hartle-Hawking model removes the shade and allows us to describe the universe all the way back to its beginning. That is a beginning that occurs in the finite past. It is supportive of the second premise of the cosmological argument.

**Student:** As a CPA, I liked your analogy of balance sheets. A balance sheet is a picture of two points in time, but it also contains the equity section which contains the profit and loss which explains how you got from one point in time to another.

**Dr. Craig:** In this case, there isn't a separation in time. The positive and negative energy both exist right now. But it is like someone whose assets and debits balance each other out so he has a net worth of zero. But it would be, as you know, foolish to say therefore there is no cause of his financial situation.

**Student:** If you say that there is no boundary on the one end it seems to me you also have to explain the boundary on the leading edge, you'd have a boundary on the edge of expansion, too. I think you'd have to explain that as well.

**Dr. Craig:** No, not in the technical sense in which boundary is being used here. The south pole is not a boundary point in the sense that in a cone you have this boundary point. Neither should you think of these edges here as boundaries. It isn't as though you would go to the edge of space and then fall off and that there would be an edge there. On these models if they are finite (if they are closed, as I mentioned before) then three dimensional
space would be the analog to the two dimensional surface of a sphere like the Earth. The Earth has no boundary. If you start in one place and keep going, you never come and fall off the edge anywhere. You are going to come back to where you started off again. There is no edge or boundary in that sense to the surface of the Earth. Yet, its volume is finite. It has a finite area. Don't think of these models as representing boundaries in the relevant sense.

Student: I wasn't thinking of boundary on, let's say, the sphere in the expansion. I was projecting out from the singularity – the outward boundary – beyond the edge if you are thinking about the blown balloon.

Dr. Craig: Again, I am going to kind of repeat myself. Imagine that this sphere is shrinking as you go back in the past and as you go forward in the future it is getting bigger. There still isn't any boundary to the sphere. It is at all times finite but either growing or shrinking. But you shouldn't think that this sphere is embedded in some higher dimension. That is the key. It is not as though there is something outside of it. This is the analog to three dimensional space. Even though we can't visualize something like that, nevertheless mathematically it is perfectly consistent to describe it. It is not embedded in a higher dimension.

Student: One thing I don't understand about the expansion is . . . particles and universes, all these have space within them as well. Why is it that the galaxies are receding from each other? They, too, seem to be expanding. All our measurement devices it seems they should be expanding, too. I am not quite getting that.

Dr. Craig: There are forces in nature like gravitation that hold things together. So even though space is expanding it doesn't mean this table is expanding or your body is expanding. There are electromagnetic and gravitational forces that keep these things together. As a result, as space expands they become increasingly isolated from each other, and therefore recede from each other even though they are at rest in space. The galaxies are at rest, but they hold together because of gravity. As space expands they recede from each other even though they are at rest because this sphere itself is getting bigger and bigger.

Student: What is the cause of this space expansion?

Dr. Craig: That is a question that is unknown in the standard model. But the attempt to have an inflationary model of the universe that I briefly mentioned would be an attempt to explain that. If there was very early on in the early history of the universe this period of super rapid, or inflationary, expansion, what you have there is what is called a false

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vacuum. In it gravity becomes a repulsive force rather than an attractive force. It would be this repulsive gravity in a sense that would cause the universe to expand.

**Student:** If I am understanding correctly, even though it has the badminton shaped bottom on the cone, as long as that is not open, as long as that is a closed surface, then that means that time had to have started at a certain point?

**Dr. Craig:** Let's be careful. What I point out is that Hawking makes the unjustified assumption that having a beginning entails having a beginning point. That is not true. I gave the example of something that is at rest and has a last instant at which it is at rest, and then it begins to move. There is no first instant of motion in such a case because any instant of motion that you pick is preceded by another instant at which it is already in motion. So even though there would be a last instant of rest, there would be no first instant of motion – no beginning point at which it starts to move. But nevertheless it is clear that that motion had a beginning and was finite. The model doesn't need to have a beginning point in order to have a beginning. Time has a beginning just in case for any interval of time that you pick (a second, an hour, a year) if there are only a finite number of prior such equal intervals then time has a beginning whether or not there is a beginning point.

In his most recent book *The Grand Design*, co-authored with Leonard Mlodinow, Hawking does call the south pole in this model the beginning point of time and the universe. He himself validates the interpretation that that would be the beginning point of time and the universe. But it wouldn't be a singularity. It wouldn't be a singular point as in the standard model – that is to say, a point at which quantities become infinite like infinite temperature, infinite density, infinite pressure. This would be an ordinary point like any other point on that hemisphere, and yet it would be the earliest point, Hawking says in *The Grand Design*.

**Student:** If we were looking at a pool table and [inaudible]...

**Dr. Craig:** Right. The cue ball when struck would have obviously a cause and it wouldn't have an infinite path to take, would it? Yet there need not be a first instant of motion of the cue ball. It could just go back to that limit. Zero would be like a limit at which it is at rest. Then it would begin to move. But it doesn't have to have a beginning point. These are ancient paradoxes that Greek philosophers like Zeno talked about in the ancient world as to whether or not there are paradoxes of starting and stopping. Some of them argued on the same assumption as Hawking that because beginning requires a beginning point and there isn't any beginning point that therefore motion is impossible. Motion is an illusion, Zeno thought. That conclusion is obviously absurd.

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94 Motion is an illusion, Zeno thought. That conclusion is obviously absurd.
Student: So instead of the pool ball being shot by somebody, it explodes from where it is at rest and sends all the others outward.

Dr. Craig: I think we would say that its beginning obviously requires a cause and therefore there was some pool player that struck the cue ball and caused it to move. My only point that I am making here is that “beginning to move” doesn't mean it has a beginning point or instant of its motion.

END DISCUSSION

I think you can see why I was so excited about this article from Vilenkin that appeared last month and his interaction with this argument.95
Lecture 13: Second Scientific Confirmation of the Second Premise / The Nature of the First Uncaused Cause

We’ve been looking at the kalam cosmological argument, particularly the second premise – that the universe began to exist. Last time we finished looking at the first scientific confirmation of that premise which is based upon the expansion of the universe.

If this weren’t enough, there is actually a second scientific confirmation of the beginning of the universe, and this one comes from the Second Law of Thermodynamics. According to the Second Law, unless energy is being fed into a system, that system will become increasingly disorderly.

Now already in the nineteenth century scientists realized that the Second Law implied a grim prediction for the future of the universe. Given enough time, all the energy in the universe will eventually spread itself out evenly throughout the universe. The universe will become a featureless soup in which no life is possible. Once the universe reaches such a state, no further significant change is possible. It is a state of equilibrium. Scientists call this state of thermodynamic equilibrium the “heat death” of the universe.

But this unwelcome prediction of the future raised a further puzzle: if, given enough time, the universe will eventually stagnate in a state of heat death, then why, if it has existed forever, is it not now in a state of heat death? If, in a finite amount of time, the universe will reach equilibrium then why is it not now in a state of equilibrium if it has existed for infinite time? Given infinite past time, the universe should by now already be in a state of thermodynamic equilibrium. But obviously it’s not. We’re in a state of disequilibrium, where energy is still available to be used and the universe has an orderly structure.

The nineteenth century Austrian physicist Ludwig Boltzmann presented a daring solution to this problem. Boltzmann hypothesized that perhaps the universe is, in fact, in a state of overall equilibrium. Nevertheless, by chance alone, there will arise here and there in the universe little pockets of disequilibrium formed by fluctuations in the overall state of equilibrium. Boltzmann referred to these little patches of disequilibrium as “worlds.” He said our “world” (or universe) is just one of these little patches of disequilibrium in the overall sea of equilibrium that prevails. Eventually, in accord with the Second Law, our patch of order will dissolve and the universe will return to the overall state of equilibrium.

Contemporary scientists have universally rejected Boltzmann’s daring Many Worlds Hypothesis as an explanation of the observed disequilibrium of the universe. The fatal flaw in Boltzmann’s suggestion is that if our universe is just a chance fluctuation in an
overall equilibrium, then we ought to be observing a much smaller patch of order than we do. Why is that? Simply because a small fluctuation from equilibrium is vastly more probable than the huge, sustained fluctuation that would be necessary to create the universe we see, and yet a small fluctuation could be sufficient for our existence. For example, a fluctuation from equilibrium that formed a patch of order no larger than our solar system would be sufficient for us to exist and would be incomprehensibly more probable than a fluctuation which formed the entire observable universe that we see!\(^{96}\)

In fact, Boltzmann’s hypothesis, if it is consistently carried out, would lead to a strange sort of illusionism: in all probability on Boltzmann’s hypothesis we in fact do inhabit a smaller patch of order, and the stars and the planets that we observe are just illusions, mere images or pictures on the heavens as it were. For that sort of illusory world is much more probable than a universe which has, in defiance of the Second Law of Thermodynamics, moved away from an equilibrium state for billions of years in order to create the universe that we observe. On the Boltzmann hypothesis we would have to believe that most of what we see in the universe is really just an illusion and that the universe does not really exist.

The discovery during the 1920s (that we already talked about) that the universe is expanding led to a different account of the sort of heat death that the Second Law predicts, but it didn’t alter the fundamental question.

In fact, recent discoveries indicate that the expansion of the universe is actually speeding up – it is actually accelerating. Because the volume of space is increasing so rapidly, the universe actually becomes further and further away from a state of equilibrium in which matter and energy can be evenly distributed. But this acceleration in the universe’s expansion only hastens its demise, for now what happens is that different regions of the universe become increasingly isolated from other regions of the universe in space. Each marooned region becomes dark, cold, dilute, and dead. Again, the question remains the same. Why isn’t our region of the universe in such a cold, dark, dilute, and lifeless state if the universe has already existed for infinite time?

**START DISCUSSION**

*Student:* How do the nonbelievers scientifically deal with the concept of the Second Law of Thermodynamics? Has anybody able to mount a challenge to the Second Law of Thermodynamics?

*Dr. Craig:* Not to the law itself. Thermodynamics is one of the best-understood fields of physics. In fact, from what I’ve read, it is almost literally a closed science, it is so well understood. What they will do is try to find some way to avert the prediction predicted by
the Second Law. There has been a, shall we say, rebirth of Boltzmann’s Many Worlds Hypothesis as an attempt to explain the observed disequilibrium. This is called the “multiverse.” The multiverse hypothesis is a kind of reincarnation of Boltzmann’s Many Worlds Hypothesis instead of saying there are little patches of order throughout the sea of equilibrium, now what is said is that there are other universes, and all of these universes are like bubbles in a kind of overall mother universe. Each of these bubbles is proceeding toward an equilibrium state. But by chance alone there will be universes in the multiverse that are in a disequilibrium state, and lucky us – we happen to find ourselves in one such universe.

The problem with this Many Worlds Hypothesis is the same one that sank Boltzmann’s hypothesis; namely, if our universe is just a random member of a multiverse then it is inconceivably more probable that we should be observing a very tiny patch of order rather than the universe that we observe because that is incomprehensibly more probable than a universe that is in a disequilibrium state like ours. The vast majority of observable worlds in the multiverse will be worlds that are these illusory worlds. This has led to what some theorists have called the Invasion of the Boltzmann Brains. That is to say, the most probable observable world, or universe, would be a world in which a single brain fluctuates into existence out of the vacuum and observes its otherwise empty world with illusions perhaps of an external world. That kind of a world is vastly more probable than a world in which there would be actual stars and planets and galaxies and distant events. On the multiverse hypothesis, you would be obliged to believe that this is really all an illusion – you are actually a Boltzmann Brain and that everything else that you observe, including your own body and people around you, are all just illusions because that kind of observable universe is much more probable than a universe with genuinely distant temporal events and entities.

This 19th century debate has played itself out again on the contemporary scene in respect to this problem – trying to explain why we observe a universe in disequilibrium. I think that the attempt to revise this hypothesis has not proved any more successful than the 19th century Boltzmann hypothesis. In fact, Roger Penrose of Oxford University, one of the most important mathematical physicists writing today, has said that these multiverse proposals are worthless in terms of explaining the orderly universe in which we find ourselves. They really are non-starters.

The problem, again, is: if in enough time the universe will suffer some sort of heat death then why (if it has existed for infinite time) is it not now in such a state? That is the mystery.
Student: Years ago I heard this one objection called the Brownian Ratchet. The idea is theoretically you could reverse the Second Law of Thermodynamics or go against it by creating a ratchet that harvests Brownian motion - it's particles dissolved in water. The thing kind of vibrates, and you can set a ratchet that turns only one way. That way you get energy from that. It goes against the Second Law.

Dr. Craig: I would be very skeptical of those kinds of perpetual motion situations. I’ve never heard that before. All of the reading that I’ve done is that this sort of eventual heat death is inevitable given the Second Law and our universe.

Student: I looked it up on the Internet and found an article by Richard Feynman about that, and he says the problem is the ratchet itself will undergo just as much Brownian motion and therefore it would fail. The ratchet is going to turn both ways. It is a weird objection.

Dr. Craig: OK. Thank you.

Student: [inaudible]

Dr. Craig: What I said to make it very simple is that the Second Law says that unless energy is being fed into a system it will become increasingly disorderly. Very often you’ll hear the word entropy used to characterize that disorder – entropy increases in a closed system. That is just another way of saying the same thing. The system will become increasingly disorderly as long as it is closed – that is to say, there is no energy being fed into it from the outside. It is really a very simple idea. Of course, on naturalism, if there is no God then the universe just is one big gigantic closed system. There is nothing outside of it. So the Second Law would apply to it and imply that in enough time it will eventually reach some sort of heat death condition.

Student: Some people might argue that the Second Law doesn’t apply on a universal scale. Would you have any credibility?

Dr. Craig: I see no reason to think that the Law would not apply to the universe on a universal scale. On the contrary, as I say, physical eschatology is a field of cosmology that explores what will be the future fate of our universe. This is primarily a study based upon the thermodynamic properties of the universe as a closed system. Physical eschatology, as I say, predicts the sort of scenario that I’ve described. The universe, being in a state of acceleration, will not reach an equilibrium state. It will actually go further and further from equilibrium but each part of it will become increasingly marooned and will grow cold, dark, dilute, and dead. The same prediction that was made in the 19th century before the expansion of the universe was discovered still applies.
The obvious implication of all of this is that the question is based on a false assumption, namely, the assumption that the universe has existed for infinite time. Today most physicists would say that the matter and energy were simply put in at the beginning of the universe as an initial condition, and the universe has been following the path plotted by the Second Law ever since its beginning a finite time ago.

The thermodynamic properties of the universe would provide a second scientific confirmation that the universe is not past eternal but had a beginning.

Of course, attempts have been made to try to avert the beginning of the universe predicted on the basis of the Second Law of Thermodynamics. But, as I’ve explained in connection with the earlier question, none of these has been successful. None of them has commended itself to the scientific community as an adequate explanation. Skeptics might hold out hope that a quantum theory of gravity will serve to avert the implications of the Second Law of Thermodynamics. You will recall from our discussion of the explanation of the universe, when the universe was severely contracted in its very early state, you need to have a quantum theory of gravity to describe it which we do not yet have. Someone might say maybe in this quantum-gravity regime the Second Law will not apply. But in 2013, the cosmologist Aron Wall of the University of California in Santa Barbara was able to formulate a new singularity theorem which seems to close the door on that possibility. Wall showed that, given the validity of the generalized Second Law of Thermodynamics in quantum gravity, the universe must have begun to exist, unless one postulates a reversal of the arrow of time (that is to say, that time begins to run backwards!) at some point in the past. On such a model, the universe will shrink back to a certain point at which there is a reversal of the arrow of time and there is a sort of mirror universe with time running in opposite directions. But, as Wall points out, this sort of model still involves a thermodynamic beginning in time which “would seem to raise the same sorts of philosophical questions that any other sort of beginning in time would.”

That is to say, if time actually does reverse then this mirror universe is in no sense in our past. It does not precede our universe. What this model really depicts is two universes that have a common beginning point – a kind of forked universe and they both go back to this common surface. On the basis of Wall’s theorem, the Second Law of Thermodynamics implies the universe began to exist unless you have a reversal of time’s arrow at some time in the past. But in that case you have a thermodynamic beginning in time which is just as problematic as any other sort of beginning in time. Wall reports that his results require the validity of only certain basic concepts, so that “it is reasonable

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to believe that the results will hold in a complete theory of quantum gravity.” So this means of escaping the argument will not be successful.

So once again it would seem that we have good evidence from contemporary science for the truth of the second premise of the *kalam* cosmological argument that the universe began to exist.

**START DISCUSSION**

*Student:* Is Wall’s theory the oscillating universe theory? Is that one and the same?

*Dr. Craig:* No. What Wall is saying is that this conclusion that we’ve talked about – that the Second Law of Thermodynamics implies that the universe is finite in the past – that will hold in a quantum theory of gravity. So you can’t escape the implications of the Second Law by saying maybe in the quantum theory of gravity it won’t hold. What he shows is that this conclusion will imply a beginning of the universe. The only way to avoid that conclusion, he says, is if at some time in the past you say time’s arrow turns around and points in the other direction. This is an extravagance. This is absolutely bizarre. He is saying that only in this bizarre case can you escape the conclusion that the universe began to exist. His further point is, *But wait a minute. Even this isn’t really an exception because you really have here a thermodynamic beginning in time of two different universes because this is not in the past.*

*Student:* What about the oscillating universe? Is that just the expansion and contraction?

*Dr. Craig:* The oscillating universe is the universe that is expanding and contracting, expanding and contracting, from eternity past. I already mentioned some of the problems with that, but actually the thermodynamics of such a universe is also problematic. This was shown by Richard Tolman back in the mid-20th century. What he showed is that entropy (which I’ve already mentioned) is conserved from cycle to cycle. What that means is that entropy gets bigger and bigger with each successive cycle. This increase in entropy has two effects. It makes each cycle longer in duration and has a larger radius. So if you were to plot an oscillating universe in time it would look like this [*Dr. Craig draws a diagram on the whiteboard*]. Such a universe cannot be extended infinitely in the past. On the contrary, there still has to be an origin of universe prior to the smallest cycle. It turned out that the thermodynamic properties of the oscillating model implied the very beginning that its proponents sought to avoid.

*Student:* Speaking of entropy in successive Big Bangs, I’m confused as to how entropy would propagate through a singularity since a singularity to me would either be the ultimate low entropy or high entropy state depending on how you want to look at it.

*Dr. Craig:* The point is you cannot continue space-time through a singularity. So if it shrinks back to a singularity there is no oscillating model. You are quite right. Entropy
can’t pass through it, but neither can anything else. If the universe has a past singularity there is nothing before it. There is nothing on the other side. That is one of the physical problems with the oscillating model. What we show here is that even if the universe could oscillate (maybe there is a non-singular bounce and that it doesn’t actually reach a singularity; it bounces back first) what happens then is the entropy accumulates from cycle to cycle.

END DISCUSSION

Let’s bring this argument to a close.

On the basis, therefore, of both philosophical argument and scientific evidence, we have good grounds for believing that the universe began to exist, which is the second premise of the argument. Therefore, it follows from the two premises that the universe has a cause of its beginning.

What properties must this cause of the universe possess? First and foremost this cause must itself be uncaused because we’ve seen there cannot be an infinite regress of causes. You must have an absolutely first uncaused cause. This First Uncaused Cause must transcend time and space because it created time and space and therefore is beyond time and space. Moreover it would have to be in an absolutely changeless condition because we saw that you cannot have an infinite regress of events. Therefore, it must be immaterial and non-physical in nature because anything that is physical and material is constantly changing and therefore exists in space and time. This First Uncaused Cause must be unimaginably powerful since it created all matter and energy.

Finally, Ghazali argued that this First Uncaused Cause must be a personal being. It is the only way to explain how an eternal cause can produce an effect with a beginning like the universe.

Here’s the problem: If a cause is sufficient to produce its effect, then once the cause is there, the effect must be there, as well. Otherwise the cause wasn’t really sufficient. If the cause is sufficient for its effect then given the existence of the cause the effect must exist as well. For example, the cause of water’s freezing is the temperature’s being below 0 degrees Celsius. If the temperature were below 0 degrees from eternity, then any water that was around would be frozen from eternity. It would be impossible for the water just to begin to freeze a finite time ago. Now the cause of the universe is permanently there, since it is timeless as we’ve seen. So why isn’t the universe permanently there as well? Why did the universe come into being only 14 billion years ago? Why isn’t the universe as permanent as its cause?
Ghazali maintained that the answer to this problem is that the First Cause must be a personal being endowed with freedom of the will. His creating the universe is a free act which is independent of any prior determining conditions. So his act of creating can be something spontaneous and new. That is the nature of free will. Freedom of the will enables you to get an effect with a beginning from a permanent, timeless cause. Thus, we are brought not merely to a first transcendent cause of the beginning of the universe but to its Personal Creator.

This is admittedly hard for us to imagine. But one way to think about it is to envision the Creator existing alone without the universe as changeless and timeless. His free act of creation is a temporal event simultaneous with the universe’s coming into being. Therefore, he enters into time when he creates the universe. The Creator is thus timeless without the universe and in time with the universe.

The *kalam* cosmological argument thus gives us powerful grounds for believing in the existence of a beginningless, uncaused, timeless, spaceless, changeless, immaterial, enormously powerful, Personal Creator of the universe. As Thomas Aquinas was want to remark, this is what everybody means by “God.”

**START DISCUSSION**

*Student:* You’ve got to use the example of when you walk into the room and your mom is boiling water and there are two reasons she could say that water is boiling. I’ve used that example countless times when I have retaught this. It has been the most effective example. You’ve got to share it.  

*Dr. Craig:* Thank you. This is an argument from Richard Swinburne who is professor of philosophy at Oxford University. It is a different argument for the personhood of the First Cause. Swinburne points out that there are two types of causal explanations. One would be in terms of scientific laws and initial conditions. You give the initial conditions, scientific laws, and that will be a causal explanation of why something happens. The other type of explanation would be what he calls a personal explanation. This is given in terms of an agent and his volitions. Not in terms of initial conditions and natural laws but in terms of an agent and his will, his volitions. For example, if I walk into the kitchen and I see that the kettle is boiling and I say to Jan, “Why is the kettle boiling?” she could say “because the heat of the flame is being conducted by the copper bottom of the kettle to the water making the molecules vibrate more vigorously so that it is thrown off in the form of steam.” Or she could say, “I put it on to make a cup of tea. Would you like some?” The one is a scientific explanation; the other is a personal explanation. Both are equally valid modes of explanation. In some contexts one would be utterly inappropriate.
if substituted for the other. When it comes to explaining the first state of the universe – the beginning of the universe – you cannot have a scientific explanation because there are no previous initial conditions on which the laws of nature could operate to produce the beginning of the universe. It is an absolutely first physical state. If it has a cause, as we’ve argued, the only category could be a personal explanation in terms of a free agent and his volitions. This would be an independent argument different from al-Ghazali’s argument for the personhood of the First Uncaused Cause. I think it is a good argument, too.

Student: I don’t really know how to ask this question, but it has been with me all week and your talk kind of leads right to it. Neil deGrasse Tyson was on one of the late night talk shows this week debating the existence of God. The word that he kept coming back to was “benevolence.” A Christian perspective takes all of the existence of the universe and sees sort of a puppet master operating from a position of benevolence. The people he was facing on the talk show seemed as though they were all Christian but nobody could really respond to that. It just left me in turmoil over the concept of benevolence.

Dr. Craig: Yes, this is very disturbing. This is a statement of the classic problem of evil, namely, if you believe that God is a benevolent person (never mind this pejorative language of the “puppet master;” that is loaded terminology) who wants the good of his creatures then why is there so much suffering in the world? That is the question. You can look on the Reasonable Faith website for extensive discussions of this problem where I argue that the problem of suffering neither shows God’s existence to be improbable nor impossible. The atheist in fact has a very, very heavy burden of proof to bear to show that it’s improbable or impossible that God could have morally sufficient reasons for permitting the suffering in the world.

But what makes me impatient is that Tyson takes on Christian pastors and other non-academics in discussing these issues but he will not debate a Christian scholar like myself. For a couple of years now there have been people in Oklahoma trying to arrange a debate with Neil deGrasse Tyson with me on the existence of God. He has declined to do this. It is easy when you take on weak opponents to make your case, and it is more difficult when you go toe-to-toe with a peer. If you want to see more on the problem of evil, take a look at materials on the Reasonable Faith website on this question.

END DISCUSSION
Lecture 14: Teleological Argument

In our study of the doctrine of God we’ve embarked upon an excursus on natural theology or arguments for God’s existence. So far we’ve surveyed the proper basicity of belief in God, the contingency argument for God’s existence, and the *kalam* cosmological argument for God’s existence. Today we are going to turn to a new argument – the teleological argument for God’s existence, or the old argument for design.

The importance of this excursus was brought home to me afresh this week as I watched a video of a Veritas Forum at Ohio State University from last year featuring a Christian scientist and an atheist philosopher. The atheist philosopher’s main point was that there is just no evidence for God’s existence and therefore it would be unjustified to believe in him and therefore we should simply affirm that God does not exist and that there is no ultimate meaning to life in the sense of a point or purpose to our existence. It struck me that he made no effort at all to defend his position. He simply asserted it. He never examined the position that it can be rational to believe in something not on the basis of evidence – that there are properly basic beliefs – and that in fact the idea that only beliefs based upon evidence can be rational ultimately leads to skepticism and is self-defeating. Moreover he never looked at any of the arguments for God’s existence that we’ve surveyed in this class. So it is, I think, extremely important that we as Christians, if we are to commend our faith in a culture that is increasingly secular and skeptical, be able to offer arguments for God’s existence or to defend the rationality of belief in God in the absence of such arguments.

Today we want to turn to the teleological argument, or the argument for design. This is one of the oldest arguments for God’s existence. Ancient Greek philosophers like Plato and Aristotle were struck with the order that pervades the cosmos. The stars and the planets in their constant revolution across the night sky were especially awesome to the ancients. Plato’s Academy lavished extensive time and thought on the study of astronomy because Plato believed it was the science that would awaken man to his divine destiny.

According to Plato, there are two things that lead men to believe in God. First, the argument from the existence of the soul, and secondly, the argument “from the order of the motion of the stars, and of all things under the dominion of the mind which ordered the universe.” Plato employed both of these arguments to refute atheism and concluded that there must be a “best soul” who is the “maker and father of all,” the “King,” who ordered the primordial chaos into the rational cosmos that we observe today.

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104 Plato, Laws 12.966e.
105 Plato, Laws 10.893b-899c; idem *Timaeus.*
An even more magnificent statement of divine design is to be found in a fragment from a lost work of Aristotle entitled *On Philosophy*. Aristotle, too, was filled with wonder at the majestic sweep of the glittering host across the night sky of ancient Greece. Anyone who has personally studied the heavens, I think, has to turn a sympathetic ear to these thinkers of antiquity who gazed up at the night sky, undimmed by pollution and the glare of city lights, and watched the slow but irresistible turn of the cosmos, replete with its planets, stars, and familiar constellations across their view and wondered, *What is the cause of all this?*

Aristotle concluded that the cause was divine intelligence. He imagined in this work the impact that the sight of the world would have upon a race of men who had lived underground their entire lives and never beheld the sky and one day managed to escape from their subterranean prison. He writes:

> When thus they would suddenly gain sight of the earth, seas, and the sky; when they should come to know the grandeur of the clouds and the might of the winds; when they should behold the sun and should learn its grandeur and beauty as well as its power to cause the day by shedding light over the sky; and again, when the night had darkened the lands and they should behold the whole of the sky spangled and adorned with stars; and when they should see the changing lights of the moon as it waxes and wanes, and the risings and settings of all these celestial bodies, their courses fixed and changeless throughout all eternity—when they should behold all these things, most certainly they would have judged both that there exist gods and that all these marvelous works are the handiwork of the gods. (Plato, *On Philosophy*)

In his book *Metaphysics*, Aristotle proceeded to argue that there must be one First Uncaused Cause, which is God—a living, intelligent, immaterial, eternal, and most good being who is the source of order in the cosmos.

Reading the works of these ancient philosophers, one cannot help but think of Paul’s words in his letter to the church of Rome: “Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made” (Romans 1:20 RSV). From earliest times men who were wholly ignorant of the Bible have concluded on the basis of the design in the universe that God must exist. Today many astronomers, as a result of recent discoveries, are coming to a similar conclusion.

Scientists used to think that whatever the conditions of the early universe might have been like, given sufficient time and some luck, intelligent life forms like us would
probably evolve somewhere in the universe. As a result of discoveries over the last fifty years or so, we now know that that assumption was wrong. In fact, quite the opposite is true.

Astronomers have been stunned by the discovery of how complex and delicate a balance of initial conditions must be given in the Big Bang itself if the universe is to permit the existence of intelligent life anywhere at all in the cosmos. This delicate balance of initial conditions has come to be known as the “fine-tuning” of the universe for life. We’ve come to discover that the universe is incomprehensibly fine-tuned for the existence of intelligent life.

This fine-tuning of the cosmos is of two sorts. The first involves the constants of nature and then there are certain arbitrary quantities.

First, the constants of nature. What is a constant? When the laws of nature are expressed as mathematical equations, you find appearing in them certain symbols which stand for unchanging quantities, like the force of gravity, the electromagnetic force, the subatomic “weak” force, and so forth. These unchanging quantities are called constants. The values of these constants are not determined by the laws of nature. There could be universes governed by the same laws of nature as ours and yet with different values of these constants. The actual values of these constants are therefore not determined by nature’s laws. The laws of nature are consistent with a wide range of values of these fundamental constants. Depending upon the values of these constants, universes governed by the same laws of nature will look radically different.

In addition to these constants, there are also certain arbitrary quantities that are just put in as initial conditions on which the laws of nature then operate. Because these quantities are arbitrary, they’re also not determined by the laws of nature. A good example of such a quantity would be the amount of thermodynamic disorder (or entropy) in the early universe. It’s just given in the Big Bang as an initial condition, and then the laws of nature take over and determine how the universe will develop from there. If those initial quantities had been different – if the level of entropy or disorder in the early universe had been different – then the laws would predict that a very different sort of universe would have evolved.

Now what scientists have been stunned to discover in recent decades is that these constants and quantities must fall into an extraordinarily narrow range of life-permitting values if the universe is to permit the evolution and existence of intelligent life anywhere in the cosmos. This is what is meant by the fine-tuning of the universe.
It is important to understand that the term “fine-tuned” does not mean designed. Fine-tuning is a neutral expression which doesn’t say anything about how the fine-tuning is best explained. Fine-tuning just means that the range of life-permitting values for these constants and quantities is exquisitely narrow. If the value of even one of these constants or quantities were to be altered by less than a hair’s breadth, the delicate balance required for the existence of life would be upset and the universe would be life-prohibiting instead.

Let’s look at some examples of fine-tuning. Fine-tuning in this neutral sense is fairly uncontroversial and well-established. Physics abounds with examples of fine-tuning. Before I share a few of these examples, let me just give you some numbers to give you a feel for the delicacy of this fine-tuning. The number of seconds in the history of the entire universe since the Big Bang is said to be $10^{17}$ (that’s 1 followed by seventeen zeroes; an incomprehensible number). The number of subatomic particles in the entire known cosmos is said to be somewhere around $10^{80}$. This is simply an incomprehensible number. We have no idea, really, of what something like this means. It is beyond human imagination.

With these numbers in mind, consider the following. Both the force of gravity and the atomic weak force are so finely tuned that an alteration of their values by even one part out of $10^{100}$ would have prevented a life-permitting universe! Similarly, a change in the value of the cosmological constant, which drives the acceleration of the universe’s expansion, by even one part out of $10^{120}$ would have rendered the universe life-prohibiting.

Here is a real corker! Roger Penrose has estimated that the odds of our universe’s early low entropy condition (that initial condition of the low entropy in the universe) occurring by chance is somewhere on the order of one chance out of $10^{10(123)}$, a number which is so incomprehensibly large that to call it astronomical would be a wild understatement. $^{108}$

Clearly, the fine-tuning that we are talking about here is literally beyond human comprehension. Having an accuracy of even one part out of $10^{60}$ would be like having an aim so accurate that you could fire a bullet at a target on the other side of the universe twenty billion light years away and nailing a one-inch bullseye! That number is insignificant compared to numbers like $10^{120}$ or $10^{100}$. And it is not just each quantity or constant that must be finely tuned. When you multiply these together, that they must all fall into the exquisitely narrow life-permitting range, we are dealing here with numbers that are simply incomprehensible.
The examples of fine-tuning are many and various, and therefore they are not likely to disappear with the future advance of science. Their multiplicity (that is to say, the number of them) and their variety (they are different) make it highly unlikely that these numbers are going to be done away with or disappear with the advance of physics. Like it or not, fine-tuning is just a fact of life which is scientifically well-established.

Now you might be thinking at this point, “But if the constants and quantities had had different values, then maybe different forms of life might have evolved.” But that underestimates the really disastrous consequences of a change in the values of these constants and quantities.

When scientists talk about a universe’s being life-permitting, they’re not talking about just present forms of life. By “life” scientists mean the property of organisms to take in food, extract energy from it, grow, adapt to their environment, and reproduce. Anything that fulfills those conditions counts as life. The point is for life, so-defined, to be possible, whatever form it might take, the constants and quantities of the universe have to be unbelievably fine-tuned, otherwise disaster results. In the absence of fine-tuning not even matter, not even chemistry, would exist, much less stars and planets where life might evolve!

**START DISCUSSION**

*Student*: Just a question about those astronomical numbers – what kind of parameters does somebody use to even calculate those kind of numbers? Is there any rational basis for it?

*Dr. Craig*: There is definitely a rational basis for it. What they do is they simply increase the value, say, of gravity a little bit and what you would discover then when you run the laws of physics with a slightly stronger gravitational constant is that everything will collapse in on itself and the universe will collapse into a black hole. On the other hand if you just marginally weaken the force of gravity a little bit then the laws predict that the universe would just expand so rapidly that stars and planets would never congeal and so there would never be any sites on which life could exist. Because we are talking about universes governed by the same laws, physicists can alter these values and then run the laws and predict what sort of consequences would ensue. What they find is, as I say, if you alter these values by even a hair’s breadth stronger or weaker, then the universe turns out to be life-prohibiting rather than life-permitting in some way or other.

*Student*: I was discussing this argument with some atheists at Georgia Tech once and we kind of came to a stopping point where they were discussing how you would actually come up with this probability.\(^{109}\) It seemed they were making an argument from what you
would call a frequentist philosophy of probability which states that you can’t say something is a possibility until you’ve actually observed it. I wondered if this would be more like an epistemic philosophy of probability where it is a hypothetical reality.

*Dr. Craig:* I’ve dealt with this objection in my chapter on fine-tuning in *Reasonable Faith.* I wasn’t going to say anything about it here, but let me say something about that. Do you understand what the objection is? The objection is that probability means that something will happen, say, one time out of ten. It is a frequentist analysis of what probability is. Therefore, if you’ve never observed, say, ten trials you don’t know what the probability is of something occurring. Obviously there is only one universe so it is meaningless to talk about the probability of the universe being fine-tuned because there is only one trial so to speak. So we can’t speak of the probability of the fine-tuning.

I think this is quite mistaken. In the first place a frequentist analysis of probability is mistaken. Just to give an illustration of this. Scientists are investing thousands of man-hours and millions of dollars in research looking for an event of proton decay. In reactors they are trying to detect the decay of a proton into more fundamental particles. This has never been observed even though physics predicts that it can happen. Now, on the frequentist model, that means that they are looking for an event that has zero probability because it never happens. Yet that is obviously wrong. Scientists are not wasting millions of dollars and thousands of man-hours looking for this because it is an event of zero probability. The analysis that the frequentist gives simply isn’t applicable here.

How should we understand probability? John Barrow, who is a physicist at Cambridge University, gives the following illustration. He says let’s take a piece of paper and put on it a red dot, and let that red dot represent our universe with its values of the constants and quantities. [*Dr. Craig draws an illustration on the whiteboard*] So this is our universe characterized by the constants and quantities that it has. Then, he says, let’s alter those constants and quantities by a tiny amount, and this is a new universe. If it is a life-permitting universe then make another red dot in the vicinity of the first. If it is a life-prohibiting universe, he says, make it a blue dot. Then do it again. And do it again. And do it again until your sheet is filled with dots. What you wind up with, he says, is a sea of blue with only a couple of pinpricks of red. It is in that sense that a finely tuned universe is highly improbable. The values of the constants and quantities are such that only an exquisitely tiny number of values will be consistent with the permission of life. The vast majority of these possible universes are life-prohibiting. I think that gives us a pretty clear sense in which we can say that the existence of a finely tuned universe is incomprehensibly improbable.
Student: Could you also say that some of these numbers were created from simulations that scientists already use for other scientific inquiries that have actually yielded results, and that this would be a lot more favorable calculation therefore?

Dr. Craig: I don’t know the answer to that question. Whether or not by contemplating universes where, say, the weak force in the atomic nucleus had a stronger value this would lead to some sort of fruitful prediction. I don’t know whether these sorts of predictions have that kind of practical value. What they disclose, rather, instead is that these other universes would be life-prohibiting. There wouldn’t be any life as we’ve defined it in these kinds of worlds. It would result truly in disaster, as I say. There wouldn’t even be chemistry in these worlds if you upset the balance of these constants and quantities.\textsuperscript{110}

Student: Has anyone ever attempted to come up with the initial entropy value in contrast with what it is today?

Dr. Craig: Oh, yes, that is what Penrose does in his estimation. He calculates back to the initial entropy condition of the Big Bang and he finds that it is exquisitely low. The early universe has a very, very low entropy condition which is highly improbable, incomprehensibly improbable. It should be much higher than it is. This is something that cries out for explanation, and that scientists have tried to find an explanation of.

Student: If the rate of increase of entropy is consistent, you can almost, if there is initial value versus now, you can calculate the age of the universe.

Dr. Craig: It would be related. What you would do is you would look at the current entropy levels and then run that backwards to a universe that is this old and then stop. That would give you the initial low entropy condition.

Student: I am vaguely familiar with Dembski’s universal probability bound. Could you explain that?

Dr. Craig: William Dembski is an intelligent design theorist who has tried to develop a model for making design inferences. When are we justified in inferring that something is designed? As part of his theory he sets this probability bound where anything that is more improbable than this is so outrageous that it would never happen and therefore you could say that it is impossible. His probability bound is related to that figure of $10^{80}$ subatomic particles in the universe. Anything that has a probability which is less than one chance out of $10^{80}$ is impossible. It just never happens. As you can see, the fine-tuning that we are talking about for even just one constant or quantity exceeds this probability bound that Dembski sets.
Student: Why does he equate that to the number of particles in the universe? How did he arrive that that?

Dr. Craig: I think his idea is that you would look at the chances for something to occur and if you identify a chance with a subatomic particle or position that that would give you the number of chances for this event taking place. I suppose you would have to extrapolate that in time as well, but I don’t remember his exact bound but it is something on this order and is far, far below the odds that we are talking about for fine-tuning. This is in his book *The Design Inference* published by Cambridge University Press if anybody is interested in following that up.

Student: To me, I think what we can accept is the fact that the scientific community agrees that the fine-tuning is a reality. There is no question about that.

Dr. Craig: There are scientists who will want to dispute it, and I think partially because they see where it is leading. But the majority, yes, will say that the fine-tuning is well established.

Student: It is sort of like the elephant in the room. I am not sure how you can dance around it and not see it. Really, it gets down to: it exists, but how it exists, is that where they are coming from? Would they argue around the elephant?

Dr. Craig: Yes, that is what we will be coming to. I am laying out here the data to be explained. As we will see next time there are three explanations that are offered in the current literature as to how best to explain this fine-tuning: physical necessity, chance, or design. So the debate will be, not really about the fact of fine-tuning which is pretty well established, it is going to be about how do you best explain it. As we will see, those who deny design are driven to some rather radical metaphysical hypotheses in order to explain away the fine-tuning.111

Student: If there is a condition that, say, if it is not equal to one then the universe couldn’t exist (I’m just saying it as a hypothetical example) how can you tell the maximum number that you can reach before . . . ?

Dr. Craig: This is a very, very good question that is much discussed. Let’s let this represent the range of values that a constant or a quantity might take. [Dr. Craig draws an illustration on the whiteboard.] What we discover is that the range of life-permitting values is exquisitely narrow – it has to fall within this range in order to be life-permitting. The question is: how far out does this wider range of possible values go? Does it go to infinity? Or is there some finite extent? That question is much controverted. Robin Collins, who is probable the best writer on fine-tuning today, says that the contrast between the life-permitting range and the possible range should be the range of values for

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which we can say physically whether the universe would be life-permitting or not. He calls this the illuminated range. This illuminated range will be the range of values which are possible for which we can make a judgment – yes this would be life-permitting or no this would not be life-permitting. Beyond that is a sort of dark unilluminated range and we simply don’t know what is out there. So he compares the life-permitting range to the illuminated range, and that is how he comes up with these sorts of extraordinary figures about the degree of fine-tuning that is necessary in order for embodied, conscious agents like ourselves to exist.

END DISCUSSION

Next time we will consider a couple more objections to the argument. Then we will state and begin to unfold the premises of this argument.\textsuperscript{112}
Lecture 15: Premises of the Teleological Argument

Last time we began to look at the argument for design based upon the fine-tuning of the universe for intelligent life. We saw that over the last half century or so scientists have been stunned by the discovery that for intelligent life to evolve and exist on any planet anywhere in the universe the initial conditions of the Big Bang have to be fine-tuned with a complexity and delicacy that literally defy human comprehension. In order for the universe to be life-permitting as it is the values of the fundamental constants and quantities of the universe must fall into an extraordinarily narrow range of life-permitting values such that if those values were to be strengthened or weakened by less than a hair’s breadth the balance would be upset and life of any sort would not exist anywhere in the universe.

Sometimes people will object to the fine-tuning by saying, “Maybe in a universe that is governed by different laws of nature these disastrous consequences would not result from an alteration of the values of the constants and quantities.” But this objection betrays a misunderstanding of the argument.

We’re not concerned with universes which operate according to different laws of nature. We have no idea what would happen in universes that are operating according to different laws of nature. Rather this argument is concerned only with universes that are operating according to the same laws of nature as our universe but with different values of the constants and quantities. Because the laws of nature are preserved and merely the values of the constants and quantities are altered, we can predict what would happen if these values were increased or decreased marginally. So our concern is with universes governed by the same laws of nature but with different values of the constants and quantities.

The Canadian philosopher John Leslie gives a very engaging illustration of this point. He asks us to imagine a solitary fly resting on a large blank place on the wall. A single shot is fired, and the bullet pierces the fly. Now even if outside of the large blank area, the wall was covered with flies, so that a randomly fired bullet would probably strike one, nevertheless it remains the case within the large blank area it is highly improbable that a randomly fired shot would strike the solitary fly. In all probability the randomly fired bullet would hit some other portion of the large blank area. That solitary fly is just like our universe, and the large blank area will be other universes governed by the same laws of nature but having different values of the constants and quantities. So we are not concerned what would happen outside the blank area – universes that have different laws of nature. Nobody knows what would happen in those. Rather the question is: in universes governed by the present laws of nature but having different values of the constants and quantities, how probable is it that the universe should be life-permitting?
The answer is that a life-permitting universe is like that solitary fly in the large blank area except incomparably, incomprehensibly more isolated than John Leslie’s fly-on-the-wall. Because the laws are the same we can determine what would happen when you alter the constants and quantities. And, as I said last week, the results turn out to be simply disastrous. A life-permitting universe is incomprehensibly improbable.  

**START DISCUSSION**

*Student:* Would one respond to that in that life (I hate to use the word “evolved”) but life became real in this universe, then of course it would be in those . . . because that is the origin of the life, then of course such a fine-tuning would be obvious or present?

*Dr. Craig:* It would be present. It is not just obvious. Scientists haven’t discovered this until the last several decades that these initial conditions were fine-tuned like this. But, yes, you are absolutely right. Do you see the point she is making? I will reiterate this later on. For life to evolve anywhere in the universe the initial conditions in the Big Bang have to be there to start with otherwise life would never evolve anywhere. So the question of evolution just becomes irrelevant to this version of the argument because these are initial conditions and therefore they are not the product of prior evolutionary processes. This is the way the universe starts out.

*Student:* Would the fine-tuning really deal more with a metaphysical nature than it would a physical one seeing as it is dealing with the initial conditions?

*Dr. Craig:* It is physical. We are talking here about physical parameters that are not discussed in philosophy – this is physics! It is an example of what one cosmologist has called metaphysical cosmology. Modern cosmology has become almost metaphysical in its implications and ramifications. This would be one example of that. But these are parameters that are discovered by astrophysicists – people who study the universe. So this is very much a physical concern or scientific concern.

*Student:* I ran across an objection that I believe was brought up by Victor Stenger when he claimed that the fine-tuning isn’t as extreme as we might think because basically the different constants sort of balance each other out. A large variance of one can be balanced out by another. So the fine-tuning isn’t really as extreme as what it might appear to be.

*Dr. Craig:* Stenger, who was (he has passed away now) an ardent naturalist and atheist. He was very bent on getting rid of this fine-tuning argument and took positions that, I think, are defended by very few. Robin Collins, in particular, has responded to Stenger’s objections in his work, for example in the article in the *Blackwell Companion for Natural Theology.* What Robin points out is that these parameters are distinguished by their
independence from each other. There is no reason that adjusting, say, the proton-to-neutron mass ratio would have an effect upon the low entropy of the early universe or that somehow these are connected. As I said the other day, it is not just the number of these constants and quantities that need to be fine-tuned but also their variety and their independence from each other. But actually the point that Stenger makes I think really reinforces the improbability of the fine-tuning because you have to consider not just these things in isolation but their ratios to one another. If they really are interconnected in the way he imagines that would be even more remarkable, I think, that you would have these sort of interconnected ratios that would be necessary for the universe to be life-permitting. So take a look, if you are interested, at Robin Collins’ responses to Stenger.

END DISCUSSION

The question that we face is: what is the best explanation of this remarkable fine-tuning? Fine-tuning is a fairly uncontroversial fact of nature when understood properly in a neutral sense. Many people today are coming to the conclusion that the reason the universe is fine-tuned for intelligent life is because it was designed to be that way. It was designed to be life-permitting by an intelligent cosmic designer.

But design is not the only alternative. There are also physical necessity and chance. The key to inferring design as the best explanation will be eliminating these other two alternatives.114

In accord with this, we can present a very simple three-step argument that is easy to memorize and to share with another person. It would go like this:

1. The fine-tuning of the universe is due to either physical necessity, chance, or design.
2. It is not due to physical necessity or chance.
3. Therefore, it is due to design.

This is a very simple formulation of the fine-tuning argument. Notice that by focusing on the fine-tuning, this argument does an effective end-run around the emotionally charged issue of biological evolution. The argument from fine-tuning, as I said a moment ago, if it is successful, will show that the evolution of intelligent life anywhere in the universe depends upon the design of the initial conditions of the universe. Any design arguments that you want to float from biology, for example from the origin of life or the development of biological complexity or the origin of consciousness and so on and so forth, will simply layer on more improbability on top of the fine-tuning making it all the more unlikely that this can be explained apart from a designer. So this argument doesn’t rely upon instances of biological design or anti-evolutionary arguments. Those sorts of
arguments will simply strengthen the case for design by making life even more improbable than it already is based upon the fine-tuning.

The first premise of the argument, that the fine-tuning is due to either physical necessity, chance, or design, is unobjectionable because it just lists the alternatives that are available for explaining the fine-tuning. These are the alternatives that are discussed in the literature today. If somebody comes up with a fourth alternative then he’s welcome to add it to the list, and then we’ll have to consider it when we come to premise (2). But there doesn’t seem to be another alternative. These are the three principal alternatives that are discussed in the literature.

So the real question then is premise (2). Is this premise more plausibly true than false? If it is then it will follow that the fine-tuning of the universe is due to design.

Let’s say something about the first alternative, physical necessity. According to this alternative, the universe had to be life-permitting. The constants and quantities must have the values that they do, so that a life-prohibiting universe is literally physically impossible.

Now on the face of it, this alternative seems fantastically implausible. It would require us to believe that a life-prohibiting universe is a physical impossibility. But why take such a radical view? As we’ve seen, the constants and the quantities are not determined by the laws of nature. The laws of nature are consistent with a wide range of values of these constants and quantities. So there is nothing in the laws of nature that would make these constants and quantities necessary in their values. So why couldn’t they have been different? The arbitrary quantities, remember, are just initial conditions on which the laws of nature operate. Nothing in physics is known that would suggest that there are laws of initial conditions that would make these physically necessary. So the opponent of design is taking a very radical line here that would require some sort of proof. But there is none. There is no proof, no evidence, that the values of these constants and quantities are physically necessary. This alternative is simply being put forward as a bare possibility for which there is no evidence and therefore doesn’t commend itself to us.

Sometimes scientists do talk about a yet to be discovered “Theory of Everything” (TOE). But like so many of the colorful names which are given to scientific theories, this label is very misleading. A successful TOE would not, in fact, explain everything. The goal of a Theory of Everything is to provide a unified theory of physics which would unite the four fundamental forces of nature (gravitation, electromagnetism, the strong force, and the weak force) into a single force which is carried by a single particle. But it wouldn’t even attempt to literally explain everything. For example, the most promising candidate

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for a so-called Theory of Everything today is M-Theory or super-string theory. But super-string theory only works if there are 11 dimensions, not 4 dimensions such as we observe. It only works in an 11-dimensional universe. But the theory itself doesn’t explain why there would exist exactly 11 dimensions rather than any other number of dimensions. That is just presupposed by the theory.

Moreover, M-Theory does not, in fact, uniquely predict the values of the constants and quantities that we observe in our universe. M-Theory, in fact, permits a wide range of universes having around $10^{500}$ members with different values of the fundamental constants of nature. These universes are all consistent with the laws of nature but they have different values of the fundamental constants of nature. Almost all of these universes turn out to be life-prohibiting rather than life-permitting. This is sometimes referred to as the cosmic landscape of worlds that are consistent with M-Theory. This cosmic landscape has itself become something of a phenom in popular science articles lately. But it is important to understand that this cosmic landscape is not real. It is just a range of possibilities. Some people have misinterpreted the cosmic landscape to mean that all of these different universes actually exist; that they are really out there. Some people have thought that it therefore undermines the argument for design because if all of these different possibilities exist then there have to be life-permitting universes like ours. But the cosmic landscape is not real. It is just a list of possibilities. It just describes the range of universes which are consistent with M-Theory. That range is so incomprehensibly large ($10^{500}$ different possibilities) that some explanation is needed for why a life-permitting universe exists rather than a life-prohibiting universe since life-permitting universes represent a virtually infinitesimal proportion of the cosmic landscape.

So you can’t say that life-permitting universes are physically necessary on account of this Theory of Everything (or M-Theory) because, quite frankly, that is simply false. It is not true that M-Theory predicts uniquely our universe.

So there is no evidence that a life-permitting universe is physically necessary. On the contrary, in fact, not only does science suggest that such life-prohibiting universes are possible but that they are in fact far, far more likely than any life-permitting universe like ours.

**START DISCUSSION**

_Student:_ I wonder if someone could respond like this. At the beginning you restrict the scope of possible worlds that you are looking at to the nomological possible worlds – the ones with our laws of nature. I wonder if someone could say, “If you are going to restrict it in that way, why can’t I restrict it to the ones with our constants? You are making a
restriction anyway. They both might seem a little ad hoc but . . .” to kind of turn it back on you like that. I am wondering what you would say to that.

*Dr. Craig:* In a sense, that is what the person who is defending physical necessity does. He is saying that the values of the constants and quantities we observe have to be that way so we are just going to restrict our attention to those. But then there isn’t, as I say, any reason to think that, and all of what we know from physics suggest that such a restriction would be unwarranted. It is perfectly possible that the strong force or the weak force had had a different value, so we want to know why is it that it has the value it does. It didn’t have to have this. That sort of restriction would be ad hoc and unjustified.

*Student:* The thought was supposed to be you are already restricting it to the nomologically possible worlds. So if you are restricting it, why can’t the objector just restrict it more?

*Dr. Craig:* I would say that such a restriction results in a triviality. All that would show is that relative to the values of the constants and quantities the universe must be life-permitting. That is trivial. That just is what fine-tuning means. Such a restriction would be trivial it seems to me. It is sort of like saying a hypothesis relative to itself has a probability of 1. Right. So what? That doesn’t seem to address the difficulty.

*Student:* How many physicists or cosmologists would actually hold to this theory that the universe is necessary—that the constants and quantities have the values that they do.

*Dr. Craig:* Hardly anybody. I think somebody like Stenger would want to take this view, but that is clearly born out of a naturalistic prejudice. But super-string theory in particular hasn’t delivered on its promises. I think a good number of physicists now are very disappointed in this research project. And in any case even if this were the correct Theory of Everything, as I say, what it predicts is not a unique set of values but this enormous range of values that are possible. So there would be scarcely anybody, I think, who would be so audacious as to say, “I affirm that the values of the constants and quantities are physically necessary.” At most they would put this forward as a bare possibility; maybe this is a possibility. By far and away the alternative chosen will be the second one—that this is chance. It is simply lucky for us that the values all fell into this life-permitting range.

*Student:* Following up on the first question, I was just going to point out from a scientist’s point of view there is a fundamental difference between forces and constants to begin with. It makes sense to restrict the actual laws of the universe, say that gravity has to be an inverse square law for example, but the constant is simply part of that law. That is a random number. As a scientist, it makes physical sense to say we are only going to
deal with universes that have our same laws or they have the same forms but where constants really could be anything they want to be.

*Dr. Craig:* I like the way of putting that. If you plug in the values to those laws then you really are asking what is the probability of the universe relative to itself because then you’ve just given a description of the laws with the values it has.

**END DISCUSSION**

That then takes us to the second alternative: could the fine-tuning of the universe be due to chance? We will reserve that alternative for our next class meeting together because it would take too long to do in five minutes!\(^\text{117}\)
Lecture 16: Is the Fine-Tuning Explained By Chance?

Today we want to continue our discussion of the design argument for God’s existence based upon the fine-tuning of the universe. We saw that the fundamental constants and boundary conditions of the universe are fine-tuned for the evolution and existence of embodied conscious agents in a degree that is incomprehensibly delicate as well as complex. There are three explanations for this incredible fine-tuning available in the literature. One is physical necessity – that the constants and quantities have to have the values they do. The other is chance. And the third is design. We’ve already seen that the first alternative – that this is a matter of physical necessity – is highly implausible. This is contrary to the best evidence of science. The best evidence indicates that these constants and quantities are independent of the laws of nature, and that there is nothing physically that would determine that they should have the finely tuned values that they do.

That leads us to the second alternative, and that is chance. Could the fine-tuning of the universe just be the result of chance? According to this alternative it is just an accident that all of the constants and quantities fall into the infinitesimal life-permitting range. We just basically lucked out. The fundamental problem with this explanation is that the chances of a life-permitting universe’s existing are so remote that this alternative becomes unreasonable.

Sometimes people will object that it is meaningless to speak of the probability of a fine-tuned universe’s existing because there is, after all, only one universe. So you can’t say, for example, that one out of every ten universes is finely tuned to be life-permitting. I’ve already addressed that question in our discussion time, but I do want to go through it again just to cement the point.

John Barrow, who is a Cambridge University physicist, gives the following illustration of the sense in which it can be said that it is highly improbable that a finely tuned universe should exist. Barrow said let’s imagine a sheet of paper and put on it a dot representing our universe. Now alter some of the fundamental constants and quantities by just tiny amounts. That will then be a description of a new universe. If that universe is life-permitting, make it another red dot. If it is life-prohibiting, we will make it a black dot. Then do it again, do it again, and do it again until your sheet of paper is filled with dots. What you wind up with is a sea of black with only a couple of pinpricks of red in the field. It is in that sense that it is overwhelmingly improbable that the universe should be life-permitting. There are simply many more life-prohibiting universes than life-permitting universes in our local area of possible universes.

Sometimes people will appeal to the example of a lottery in order to justify the chance alternative. In a lottery in which all of the tickets are sold it is fantastically improbable that any one person should win the lottery. Yet, somebody has to win if all the tickets
have been sold! So it would be unjustified for the winner (whoever he might be) to say something like, “Well, the odds of my winning were twenty million to one. The lottery must have been rigged to make me win!”

In the same way, these people will say some universe out of the range of possible universes had to exist, and the winner of the universe lottery would also be unjustified if he thought that because his universe exists this must have been the result of design and not chance. All of the universes are equally improbable, and yet some universe had to exist. So the one that does exist would exist simply by chance alone and it would be unwarranted to conclude that it was a result of design.

This lottery analogy is actually very helpful because I think it enables us to see where the objector has gone wrong – where he has misunderstood the argument from fine-tuning – and then to offer a better and more accurate analogy in its place. Contrary to popular impression, the argument for design is not trying to explain why this particular universe exists. Rather it is trying to explain why a life-permitting universe exists. The lottery analogy was misconceived because it focused on why a particular person won.

The correct analogy to the fine-tuning argument would be a lottery in which billions and billions of white ping pong balls were mixed together with just, say, one or two orange ping pong balls, and you were told then that one ball will be randomly selected out of this horde. If it is orange, you will be allowed to live. If it is white, you will be shot. Notice that any particular ball that is chosen is equally improbable. No matter which ping pong ball rolls down the chute, the odds against that particular ping pong ball will be fantastically improbable. But some ball must roll down the chute. That is the point that is illustrated by the first lottery analogy. Somebody has to win. Just because that particular ball is highly, highly improbable would not justify a design inference. But that point is irrelevant because we are not trying to explain why this particular ball was picked.

The relevant point, rather, is that whichever ball rolls down the chute it is overwhelmingly, incomprehensibly more probable that it will be white rather than orange. Getting the orange ball is no more improbable than getting any particular white ball, but it is incomprehensibly more probable that whichever ball you get it will be white rather than orange. So if the orange ball does roll down the chute allowing you to live, you certainly should suspect that the lottery was rigged to let you live.

If you don’t see the point of this analogy, imagine then that an orange ball had to be picked five times in a row randomly in order for you to live. If the odds against the orange ball being picked even once are great enough, having it happen five times in a row won’t materially affect the probabilities. But obviously if such a thing happened – if five
times in a row the orange ball came down the chute – everyone would recognize that it
did not happen by chance. Somehow this was rigged.

So in the correct analogy you are not interested in why you got the particular ball that you
did; rather, we are puzzled by why, against overwhelming odds, you got a life-permitting
ball rather than a life-prohibiting ball. That question just isn’t addressed by saying “some
ball had to be picked, and any particular ball is equally improbable.” In exactly the same
way, some universe has to exist, but whichever universe exists it is incomprehensibly
more probable that it will be life-prohibiting rather than a life-permitting universe. We
still need some explanation as to why a life-permitting universe exists.119

START DISCUSSION

Student: To comment more on the objector’s analogy that something had to be chosen,
you could say yes one has to be chosen but what about if you had the conditions that the
person selected to win the lottery also had to be a 46-year old male, 5 foot 10, 195
pounds, and on and on and on.

Dr. Craig: Yeah, I use life-permitting but William Dembski, I think, used an example of
what if every time the lottery was won it was won by someone who was a member of the
Mafia. Wouldn’t you get a little bit suspicious? It is kind of similar here. Why is it that
against all the odds it is a life-permitting universe that exists?

Student: On the lottery analogy, don’t you think it is not the case that some lottery player
has to win. I think in, like the Power Ball that we just saw last week, it could be that
nobody matches all the numbers so nobody wins and the jackpot rolls over. On the
universe side of the discussion, it could be that no universe would exist. It is not that
some person had to win. Somebody has to match all the numbers in order to win, and that
may not happen at all.

Dr. Craig: I used the analogy of a lottery in which all the tickets are sold so that a winner
is guaranteed of buying the winning ticket.

Student: That is a different kind of game, though.

Dr. Craig: The reason I did that is because if you say it is not true that some universe has
to exist – there could have just been nothing – it seems to me that that kind of bleeds over
into the Leibnizian cosmological argument asking “why is there something rather than
nothing?” That is a great question – why does a contingent universe exist at all? Couldn’t
there have been nothing? But just for the sake of argument, to keep the fine-tuning
argument as independent from these other arguments as possible, I was willing to
concede for the sake of argument that some universe had to exist. But, as you say, that is not true. If the universe is a contingent being, no universe had to exist.

*Student:* Isn’t it true that there really is no true random lottery? That they use some mathematical algorithm that can be solved? Is that the case that you could reverse engineer any lottery? I thought I read about that.

*Dr. Craig:* I haven’t read about that. In one sense, when we are talking about winning by chance, we don’t mean that it is indeterministic. Obviously there are factors that cause which ball to be chosen than some others. You are dealing with a deterministic situation here. I think that is true. Unless you believe in quantum indeterminacy and had some sort of quantum indeterminacy device be responsible for selecting the winning ball. But if you are dealing with ordinary classical physics then you are quite right in saying that it is by chance only in the sense that independent causal lines come together to produce the effect. But not that it is uncaused or literally indeterminate.

**END DISCUSSION**

Some people have argued that no explanation is needed for why we observe a life-permitting universe because that is the only kind of universe we could observe. If the universe were not life-permitting then we wouldn’t be here to ask about it. This is the so-called *Anthropic Principle* which says that one can observe only properties of the universe which are compatible with our existence. Obviously, it would be impossible for us to observe properties of the universe incompatible with our existence because we wouldn’t be there. So the Anthropic Principle says you can only observe properties of the universe which are compatible with our existence, and therefore since you observe those kinds of properties, you shouldn’t be surprised about it. There is no explanation necessary. ¹²⁰

This reasoning is fallacious. The fact that we can only observe life-permitting universes does nothing to explain why a life-permitting universe exists. The fact that that is the only kind that we can observe doesn’t remove the need for an explanation of why such a universe does exist.

Again, an illustration can help here. Suppose you are traveling abroad and you are arrested on trumped-up drug charges and dragged in front of a firing squad of one hundred trained marksmen at point-blank range, all of them with rifles aimed at your heart. You hear the command given, “Ready! Aim! Fire!” And you hear the deafening roar of the guns. And then you observe that you are still alive! That all of the one hundred marksmen missed! Now, what would you conclude? “Well, I guess I really shouldn’t be surprised that they all missed. After all, if they hadn’t all missed I wouldn’t be here to be

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surprised about it. Given that I am here, I should expect them to have missed.” Well, of course not. It is true you shouldn’t be surprised that you don’t observe that you are dead, because if you were dead you wouldn’t be able to observe it. But you should still be surprised that you do observe that you are alive in light of the enormous improbability of all one hundred marksmen missing. In fact, you’d probably conclude if this happened that they all missed on purpose, that the whole thing was a set-up, engineered for some reason by someone.

Therefore, theorists have come to recognize that the Anthropic Principle will not eliminate the need of an explanation of the fine-tuning unless it is conjoined with a so-called Many Worlds Hypothesis or multiverse hypothesis. According to the Many Worlds Hypothesis our universe is just one member of a World Ensemble of parallel randomly ordered universes, preferably infinite in number. Often this ensemble is called the multiverse. If all of these other universes really exist and they are randomly ordered in their constants and quantities then by chance alone life-permitting worlds will appear in the ensemble. Since only finely tuned universes have observers in them, any observers existing in the World Ensemble will naturally look out and observe their worlds to be finely tuned. So the claim is no appeal to design is necessary in order to explain fine-tuning.

So the conjunction of the Anthropic Principle with the Many Worlds Hypothesis or multiverse is said to eliminate the surprise that we have at observing a finely tuned universe and any need of an explanation beyond sheer chance. Given that there is an infinite number of parallel universes, and that they are randomly ordered in their constants and quantities, life-permitting worlds will exist in the Ensemble and only such worlds will have observers in them. So of course the observers see their world to be finely tuned.

Before I comment on the World Ensemble hypothesis, let’s just be sure we all understand it – how it is an attempt to rescue the alternative of design, and how it explains the fine-tuning of the universe that we observe.

I think it is worth pausing for a moment here to reflect on what is going on. The current debate over the fine-tuning of the universe has now become a debate over the Many Worlds Hypothesis. I am not exaggerating. This hypothesis is at the heart of the discussion today. In order to explain fine-tuning, we are being asked to believe not only that there are other unobservable universes but that there are an infinite number of these universes, and moreover that they randomly vary in their constants and quantities. All of this is needed in order to guarantee that life-permitting universes like ours will appear by chance in the ensemble. This is really extraordinary when you think about it. It is a
sort of back-handed compliment, if you will, to the design hypothesis. Because otherwise sober scientists would not be flocking to adopt so speculative and extravagant a view as the Many Worlds Hypothesis unless they felt absolutely compelled to do so. The fact that many theorists are turning to the Many Worlds Hypothesis to rescue the alternative of chance is perhaps the best evidence that the appeal to chance is in trouble. The odds against the existence of a life-permitting universe are just too great to be faced unless you embrace the hypothesis of a World Ensemble.

In fact, when I was doing the seminar on fine-tuning last summer at St. Thomas University, one of the other professors in the seminar was Neil Manson, professor of philosophy. Neil had done an extraordinary sociological survey of contemporary cosmologists about issues like fine-tuning. I think this is the first and only such sociological survey done by a reputable organization published in a peer-reviewed journal that I know of. What Manson asked the cosmologists was, “Do you think that other theorists who adopt the multiverse hypothesis do so in order to avoid the design hypothesis?” He was very clever to ask it that way. He didn’t ask “Do you adopt it for that reason?” That would make them have to confess, “Yes, I as a scientist am really trying to avoid design, and that is why I believe in the World Ensemble.” No, he said, “Do you think your colleagues who believe in the multiverse are motivated by a desire to get away from design?” He didn’t mention God; he mentioned design. What he found was that over 50% of the respondents said that they did believe that in fact a large part of the motivation among contemporary cosmologists for belief in the World Ensemble or multiverse hypothesis was because they wanted to avoid the idea of a cosmic designer.

The next time somebody says to you, “Oh, well, it could have happened by chance!” or “The improbable happens!” or “It was just dumb luck!” then ask them, “If that is the case, why do the detractors of design feel compelled to embrace an extravagance like the World Ensemble hypothesis in order to avoid design?” The fact that they would resort to such a metaphysical hypothesis I think is, as I say, the best evidence that the chance hypothesis is in deep trouble.

How might one respond to the Many Worlds Hypothesis? At one level, one might think this is a metaphysical view that would not be susceptible to scientific evidence or adjudication. You just have a standoff between divine design and multiverse or World Ensemble hypothesis. But, in fact, I think that there are some real problems with the World Ensemble hypothesis that make it less preferable to the design hypothesis.

One way to respond to the Many Worlds Hypothesis would be to show that the multiverse itself also requires fine-tuning. In order to be scientifically credible, some plausible mechanism has to be suggested for generating the many worlds in the ensemble. But if the Many Worlds Hypothesis is to be successful in attributing fine-tuning to chance
alone, then the mechanism that generates the many worlds had better not be fine-tuned itself. Otherwise, you’ve just kicked the problem upstairs, and the whole debate arises all over again on the level of the multiverse.\textsuperscript{122}

But the proposed mechanisms for generating a World Ensemble are so vague that it is far from evident that the physics governing the multiverse will be free of any fine-tuning. For example, if M-Theory, or superstring theory, which we briefly talked about the other day, is the physics generating the World Ensemble then it remains unexplained, as we’ve seen, why exactly 11 dimensions exist. The mechanism that actualizes all of the possibilities in the so-called cosmic landscape may also involve fine-tuning. So just postulating a World Ensemble isn’t sufficient to get rid of the alternative of design. You’d have to provide a scientifically credible model of the multiverse that doesn’t involve fine-tuning itself. And nobody has been able to do that.

A second response to the Many Worlds Hypothesis is that many theorists are skeptical that these many worlds even exist. Why should we think that a World Ensemble of other invisible universes actually exists? There really isn’t any evidence that the sort of World Ensemble required by the multiverse hypothesis is actually real. Even if there were other universes, there is no reason to think that they are randomly ordered or that they are infinite in number. So, as George Ellis, who is perhaps the most famous cosmologist in the world today, has emphasized, the Many Worlds Hypothesis as it stands today is not a hypothesis that is capable of scientific proof. By contrast with this, we have good independent reasons for believing in a designer of the universe; namely, Leibniz’s cosmological argument and al-Ghazali’s \textit{kalam} cosmological argument. The design hypothesis enjoys independent reasons for thinking that such a being exists whereas there is no independent reason for thinking that the World Ensemble exists. It is simply postulated to explain the fine-tuning without any independent evidence for thinking that there is such a thing.

Moreover, thirdly, the Many Worlds Hypothesis faces what may be a truly devastating objection. Do you remember when we talked about the thermodynamic properties of the universe, we discussed Boltzmann’s Many Worlds Hypothesis? You will remember that the Austrian physicist Ludwig Boltzmann tried to explain away the current disequilibrium of the universe by a kind of Many Worlds Hypothesis. He said that the universe as a whole really is in a state of equilibrium but there are just little pockets of disequilibrium throughout the universe, and these are different worlds. He called them “worlds” and we are one of these little pockets. We are one of these worlds. You will recall what sank Boltzmann’s hypothesis was that if our world is just a random member of a World Ensemble like this, then it’s vastly more probable that we should be observing
a much smaller region of order than the vast universe that we do. In order for us to exist, all you would need would be a small fluctuation from equilibrium, say, enough to produce our solar system and not an entire universe which exists in such a state. It turns out that a parallel problem faces the Many Worlds Hypothesis as an explanation of cosmic fine-tuning.

The Oxford University physicist Roger Penrose has pressed this objection with great force. Penrose points out that the odds of our universe’s initial low entropy condition existing by chance alone are somewhere on the order of one chance out of $10^{10^{(123)}}$. A truly incomprehensible number. By contrast the odds of our solar system’s forming by just a random collision of particles, Penrose calculates to be about one chance out of $10^{10^{(60)}}$. A number which is so tiny in comparison to $10^{10^{(123)}}$ that Penrose calls this number “utter chicken feed” in comparison with $10^{10^{(123)}}$. What that implies is that it is far more likely, incomprehensibly more likely, that we should be observing an orderly universe no larger than our solar system, since a world like that would be unfathomably more probable than a finely tuned universe like ours.

In fact, we wind up with the same sort of illusionism that attended Boltzmann’s hypothesis. A small world with the illusion of a wider universe is more probable than a real fine-tuned universe. It would be more probable that we really do inhabit a little tiny universe and that the stars and the planets we observe are just illusions, pictures as it were, on the heavens and not real stellar extra-nebular bodies that exist out there in the universe. Carried to its logical extreme, this has led to what has been called among physicists “the invasion of the Boltzmann brains” - reminiscent of a 1950s grade-B horror movie. For the most probable universe that could exist would consist of a single brain which fluctuates into existence out of the quantum vacuum by a random quantum process with illusory perceptions of an external world around it! So if you accept the Many Worlds Hypothesis, you would be obligated to believe that you are the only thing that exists and that this class, the people around you, your family, your own body, all of these things are simply illusions that you project. In fact, you are really a Boltzmann brain.

No sane person believes that he is a Boltzmann brain. On atheism, therefore, it’s highly improbable that there exists a randomly ordered World Ensemble. In fact, here is the irony, the best hope for the multiverse or World Ensemble Hypothesis is theism. The best hope for this is to say that God has created the World Ensemble and he has ordered its worlds so that they’re not randomly ordered. God could give a preference to observable worlds which are cosmically fine-tuned. To be rationally acceptable, the Many Worlds Hypothesis really needs God because if there is no God on naturalism alone it would be
highly, highly improbable that we should be observing this fine-tuned universe. It would be far more likely to believe that you are a Boltzmann brain.

START DISCUSSION

Student: I would think another physical objection would be if we have an expanding universe and we have CBR at a certain temperature coming from all directions that you would have an interference with other universes, especially if they were expanding and they were doing similar things.

Dr. Craig: Here, if I could interrupt in the interest of time, the idea is that our universe is like a bubble in a wider mother universe that is also expanding. So the bubbles don’t run into each other because the mother universe is growing so fast that the bubbles don’t collide with each other. They become separated. They can’t keep up. Again, you see a little bit of the way in which the hypothesis needs to be finessed in order to avoid these problems.

Student: I was just wondering about when they postulate the multiverse they say an infinite amount of universes. How do they know it’s an infinite amount? Setting aside the issues I know you have with actual infinities, how do they know it is not just – what if it’s just 100 universes out there? Or maybe there is just 50, or 10 universes?

Dr. Craig: Or even a trillion. That’s not going to be enough given the numbers we are dealing with. I think you are absolutely right. This is a particularly poignant question if the universe-generating mechanism that makes these bubbles has only been chugging away for a finite amount of time. We’ve already seen that the best evidence of contemporary cosmology is that the universe began to exist about 13.7 billion years ago or so. So how do we know, as you say, that there has been enough time for such a World Ensemble to be created? It is completely ad hoc, that is to say contrived.

END DISCUSSION

With the failure of the Many Worlds Hypothesis, the last ring of defense for the alternative of chance collapses. It seems that neither physical necessity nor chance provides a good explanation of the fine-tuning of the universe.

So what about design? Is design any better an explanation of the fine-tuning of the universe? Or is it equally implausible? That will be the question that we take up next week.125
Lecture 17: Objections to the Design Hypothesis

Today we are going to draw our discussion of the argument for a Designer of the universe based on the fine-tuning of the universe to a close. We will probably finish early today unless there is a considerable degree of discussion that you want to have on this material.

We saw last time that neither chance nor physical necessity provides a plausible explanation of the remarkable fine-tuning of the universe for the existence of embodied, conscious observers. These explanations are highly improbable, highly implausible.

But we cannot infer immediately to design because sometimes it can be justified to believe in an improbable explanation. You would be justified in believing in some improbable explanation just in case there were no better explanation available of the phenomenon in question. To borrow an example that David Manley used, imagine someone in a baseball game standing at home plate with his bat and he hits the ball over the fence and hits a pigeon flying by. That would be amazingly improbable. And yet you would probably say that it was just by chance that he hit the pigeon. Why is this chance explanation of this highly improbable event acceptable? Because there is no better explanation available in that case. The idea that the batter aimed at the pigeon and designed to hit it by swinging the bat so the ball would hit the pigeon is even more incredible and unbelievable. You can’t hit a pigeon with a baseball by swinging a bat and trying to hit it. So in the case that there is no better explanation available accepting the highly implausible explanation can be justified.

But suppose a better explanation is available? To illustrate, suppose that there is someone standing with a rifle on home plate and he shoots a pigeon in the distant outfield and kills it. In this case it would be enormously improbable to say he was standing there and just fired randomly into the air and struck the pigeon. You wouldn’t accept that explanation. Why? Because there is a better explanation available, namely, the man aimed to hit the pigeon and could do with a rifle what you couldn’t do with a baseball bat, namely, put your bead on that pigeon and bring it down. In this case, the improbable explanation (namely, it is just by chance that he shot the pigeon) would not be the best explanation because there is a better explanation available.

The question we are facing now with regard to the fine-tuning of the universe is: is design a better explanation than chance or physical necessity? If it is a better explanation then we ought to adopt it. But if it is just as implausible, just as improbable, as chance or necessity then it would enjoy no advantage over them. So let’s ask ourselves what objections might be raised against the inference that there is an intelligent designer of the cosmos who fine-tuned the universe to be life-permitting.

Sometimes detractors of design will object to the design hypothesis because the cosmic Designer himself remains unexplained. It gives an explanation of the design in the
universe, but what about the cosmic Designer? What explanation is there of his design? This is what Richard Dawkins calls “the central argument of my book” *The God Delusion*. He summarizes this argument (which is, again, the central argument of the whole book, *The God Delusion*) in six steps as follows:

1. One of the greatest challenges to the human intellect has been to explain how the complex, improbable appearance of design in the universe arises.

2. The natural temptation is to attribute the appearance of design to actual design itself. (The reason the universe looks designed is because there is a Designer.)

3. The temptation is a false one because the Designer hypothesis immediately raises the larger problem of who designed the Designer.

4. The most ingenious and powerful explanation is Darwinian evolution by natural selection. (There he is talking about biological complexity – the appearance of design in animals and plants.)

5. We don’t have an equivalent explanation for physics. (Here he is talking about fine-tuning. He is no longer talking about those examples of the appearance of design in the animal and plant kingdoms. Here he is talking about physics and the fine-tuning of those fundamental constants and quantities for the universe.)

6. We should not give up the hope of a better explanation arising in physics, something as powerful as Darwinism is for biology. (Don’t abandon hope!)

Conclusion: Therefore, God almost certainly does not exist.

I think everyone in this class will find that conclusion jarring because the atheistic conclusion “Therefore, God almost certainly does not exist” doesn’t follow from the previous six statements even if we concede that every single one of them is true. There are no rules of logic that would permit you to derive such an inference. There are no rules of logic that would draw that atheistic conclusion from the truth of those six statements. Dawkins’ argument is just plainly invalid. The central argument of *The God Delusion* is a patently invalid argument.

At most, what might follow from Dawkins’ argument? At most, I think what would follow is that we should not infer God’s existence on the basis of the appearance of design in the universe. We ought not to infer that there is a cosmic Designer on the basis of the appearance of design in the universe. That would be the most, I think, that his argument would prove if its premises were all true. But notice that conclusion is entirely compatible with God’s existence, and it is even compatible with our justifiably believing...

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in God’s existence. [The idea] that you shouldn’t infer to a Designer on the basis of the appearance of design says nothing about whether God exists or not. It is entirely compatible with the existence of God. Maybe we should believe in God, not on the basis of the design argument, but maybe we should believe in God on the basis of the cosmological argument or the argument from contingency or the moral argument. Maybe our belief in God isn’t based on arguments at all. Maybe it is properly basic, grounded in our religious experience or in divine revelation. The point is that rejecting design arguments for God’s existence doesn’t do anything to prove that God doesn’t exist or even that belief in God is unjustified. Dawkins’ lack of philosophical depth is plainly on display here.128

START DISCUSSION

Student: Often times many theists, when they give arguments for God’s existence, are accused of God-of-the-gaps. When he says “we should hope for a better explanation,” isn’t this atheism-of-the-gaps?

Dr. Craig: I think you are right. Remember statement 6 was “we should not give up hope of a better explanation arising in physics.” I think that is naturalism-of-the-gaps. We don’t have an explanation now, but let’s not give up hope. There is no reason to think such an explanation will be forthcoming. Yeah, I think what is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander here. Notice that what we are using the evidence for is to argue that physical necessity and chance are not good explanations. Many scientists would agree with those conclusions. Dawkins, himself, would agree that physical necessity is not a good explanation. He will present arguments against thinking the fine-tuning is due to physical necessity. By contrast, many astrophysicists will say that chance is not a good explanation. They will hold out hope for a physical explanation and physical necessity. But they will reject the chance explanation or multiverse hypotheses.

Secular scientists themselves will often reject chance and physical necessity as explanations of the fine-tuning. I don’t think that there is an objectionable God-of-the-gaps reasoning going on here. But I do think you are right in seeing this as a kind of naturalism-of-the-gaps.

Student: Two things. I think first of all he jettisons the keystone element to the scientific method which is observation. He says you can’t trust your observations. If the biosystem appears to be designed, you are rejecting observations if you say you can’t presume a design.

Dr. Craig: Let me just say something on his behalf here. He doesn’t deny the appearance of design. He agrees that our observations are that the world is apparently designed. But
as we’ve seen he thinks there is a good naturalistic explanation of this so that you don’t need to punt to a supernatural explanation. Remember he thinks that Darwinian evolution based on natural selection will explain biological complexity. And if it does that then why punt to God? Moreover, as we’ve seen, he’s got an argument – an objection – against the divine hypothesis, namely, it leaves unaddressed the question “Who designed the Designer?” I think he is presenting an argument here. He is not just denying the scientific method that we should go on the basis of observation.

_Student:_ Related to that, why would you have any more confidence in observations related to evolution if you couldn’t draw any conclusions from the weight of your observations? Secondarily, why would evolution or any naturalism or materialism be any better explanation for what you observe? I don’t see how that would follow.

_Dr. Craig:_ Obviously, in this section of the class we are not discussing evidence for a Designer based on biology. We’ve done an end run around that to go back to the initial conditions in physics. When we get to the section of the course on the doctrine of creation, we will take up this question again. It is in the Defenders 2 series, if anybody is interested in looking at that.\(^{129}\) We will revisit it again as we come to it in Defenders 3.

_Student:_ I am befuddled by the conclusion drawn by Dawkins based on these six. What rule of logic is he purporting to be using in this, and what does he say when you say that is not a reasonable conclusion?\(^{130}\)

_Dr. Craig:_ He has never responded to my critiques. I have published them. His response to me is that I am an odious man. [*laughter*] But that is about it.

_Student:_ That conclusion doesn’t follow either!

_Dr. Craig:_ It really is remarkable to think that you could grant all six of these statements and the conclusion doesn’t follow.

_Student:_ By any rule of logic.

_Dr. Craig:_ No. Nothing that would permit that.

_Student:_ Before I ask my question, can you repeat the challenge as he stated it?

_Dr. Craig:_ The challenge, if I think I understand what you mean, is number 3 which says we should resist the temptation to infer a designer because it leaves unaddressed the question “Who designed the Designer?”

_Student:_ The point I was trying to make is I think when knowing Dawkins the real first foundational belief “There is no God” it seems to me therefore he is trying to find out an

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explanation to not contradict his belief. For him, Darwinism was the answer to explain
development of life and its lifeforms. Therefore he thinks for physics there has got to be
an explanation we haven’t seen yet. He says the conclusion is God is not the probable
cause.

*Dr. Craig:* That is not his conclusion though. The conclusion is, “Therefore God almost
certainly does not exist.” If you are right about his presupposing it, he is arguing in a
circle then. It is circular.

*Student:* He is. I think the whole point of it is he has decided that God does not exist,
therefore he is trying to explain circularly why there is no God. We have two areas to be
concerned about – the physical and biological. He has explained it to himself on the
biological side and said, *See, we’ve found Darwinism to explain that side. We just haven’t
come across the other one yet.*

*Dr. Craig:* I can understand someone arguing, “Given naturalism, given atheism, the best
explanation of biological complexity is Darwinian evolution.” In fact, Philip Johnson,
who started the intelligent design movement, agrees with that. He says, *If I were a
naturalist, I would say the best explanation is Darwinism.* But, of course, that begs the
question whether naturalism and atheism is true. The way Dawkins presents this is as an
objection to the argument for design. This is not a discussion of creation/evolution. This
is his chapter on arguments for the existence of God. He wants to refute the design
argument, and you can’t do that by arguing in a circle. Right?

*Student:* I understand that the orthodox theologian David Bentley Hart says that
intelligent design – he doesn’t like it. He doesn’t think it is a solution to your interchange
with Dawkins. I’ve tried to find something in writing, but all we have is a YouTube video
of David Bentley Hart saying he doesn’t like . . . intelligent design is bad theology. I
wonder if you knew more about what he had said.

*Dr. Craig:* Only a little bit. Kevin and I recorded a podcast this week on David Bentley
Hart’s allegation that people like Alvin Plantinga, Richard Swinburne, and myself hold to
something called theistic personalism. That is to say you think of God as a person who
intervenes in the world to bring about, say, intelligent life or something of that sort. Hart
is a Thomist who thinks of God in very abstract terms – as the pure act of being. On
Thomism, we don’t really have any positive knowledge of the essence of God because
God is the pure act of being and so cannot be grasped by the intellect. There is a kind of
agnosticism about the nature of God that attends Thomism. That among other things
disinclines me to Thomism. I don’t like this theology. Probably that is reflected in his
claim that this is an inadequate theology because it is not Thomistic (I suspect).
Student: What is the title of the podcast that addresses that?

Dr. Craig: I don’t know what the title will be.

Student: How will I find it?

Dr. Craig: You will listen to our Reasonable Faith podcasts every Monday over the next several weeks. [laughter] Eventually, in the queue, will appear this podcast recorded about David Bentley Hart and his critique of theistic personalism. But where Kevin puts it in the line up, that is up to him. What is au courant in the culture will come to the head of the queue. It will come sometime. One near the head of the queue I might say that is interesting to watch out for is on the controversy arising from Wheaton College’s firing one of its faculty for saying that Muslims worship the same God that Christians do. The Christian philosopher Frank Beckwith at Baylor University has come to her defense saying that Christians do worship the same God as Muslims. I am responding to Frank’s article in this podcast and showing why I think his argument fails. That will be one, too, that will be interesting to see.

END DISCUSSION

We’ve talked about the invalidity of Dawkins’ argument, that is to say even granted the truth of those six steps the conclusion doesn’t follow. But what about those six steps? Are they true? Does his argument succeed in undermining the argument for design? I don’t think it does at all because I think that some of the steps in Dawkins’ argument are plainly false.

Notice that step 5 (which says we don’t have an equivalent explanation for physics) is a reference to fine-tuning that we’ve been talking about. Dawkins admits that he has nothing by way of an explanation for it, and so the hope that is expressed in step 6 (that we shouldn’t give up hope of a better explanation) is just nothing more than the faith of a naturalist. It is the naturalist’s faith that some explanation will be forthcoming.

Moreover, consider step 3 of the argument. That was that the temptation to infer design is a false one because the Designer hypothesis immediately raises the larger problem: who designed the Designer? His claim here is that you are not justified in inferring design as an explanation of the complex order of the universe because then a new problem arises, namely, who designed the Designer?

I have a couple of problems with this step in the argument. First, this claim is flawed on, I think, at least two grounds. First, in order to recognize an explanation as the best, you don’t need to have an explanation of the explanation. This is an elementary point in the philosophy of science. For example, if archaeologists digging in the ground were to come across things looking like pottery shards and arrowheads and tomahawk heads, they would be justified in inferring that these were indeed artifacts left by a lost group of
people rather than the products of sedimentation and metamorphosis, even if they had absolutely no idea or explanation of who these people were. Similarly, if astronauts were to come upon a pile of machinery on the back side of the moon, they would be justified in inferring that that was left there by intelligent agents, even if they had no idea whatsoever who those agents were or how they got there.

In order to recognize an explanation as the best, you don’t need to have an explanation of the explanation. In fact, if you think about it, that requirement would lead to an infinite regress of explanations so that nothing would ever get explained! For before any explanation could be accepted as the best, you’d need to have an explanation of the explanation, but before you could accept that you’d need an explanation of the explanation of the explanation. And so on and so forth. Nothing could ever be explained and science would be destroyed!

In the case at hand, in order to recognize that intelligent design is the best explanation of the appearance of design in the universe, you don’t need to be able to explain the Designer. Whether the Designer has an explanation can simply be left an open question for further inquiry.

Second problem with step 3, Dawkins thinks that in the case of a divine Designer of the universe, the Designer is just as complex as the thing to be explained, so no explanatory advance is made. This objection raises all sorts of questions about the role played by simplicity in assessing competing explanations. For example, there are many other factors that scientists consider besides simplicity when they weigh the question of which explanation is the best. For example, they will consider explanatory scope, or explanatory power, or other theoretical virtues. An explanation which has broader explanatory scope might be preferred over a simpler explanation simply because it explains more things. So simplicity is not the only, or even the most important, criterion in assessing theories.

But we can just leave those questions to the side. Dawkins’ fundamental mistake lies in his assumption that a divine Designer is just as complex as the universe. This is plainly false. As a pure mind without a body, God is a remarkably simple entity. A mind (or soul) is not a physical object composed of parts. In contrast to the contingent and variegated universe with all of its inexplicable constants and quantities, a divine mind is startlingly simple. Certainly it is true that such a mind may have complex ideas—it might be thinking, for example, of the infinitesimal calculus—but the mind itself is a remarkably simple entity having no parts out of which it is composed. Dawkins has evidently confused a mind’s ideas, which may, indeed, be complex, with a mind itself, which is a remarkably simple entity. So, in fact, postulating a divine mind behind the appearance of design in the cosmos actually does represent an advance in simplicity. It is
a simpler explanation than just saying the universe is fine-tuned the way it is by chance. So his argument fails on multiple accounts. It is not true that simplicity is the most important or only factor in assessing explanations, and moreover the explanation of a divine mind is more simple than the complex and variegated universe.

So it seems to me that of the three alternatives before us—physical necessity, chance, or design—the most plausible of these three is design.

START DISCUSSION

Student: One thing I was pondering . . . I know the argument doesn’t argue to a specific Christian concept of God, but I was still thinking – considering we are Christians here and you were talking about a mind is a simple thing – but we also believe God is a Trinity (three persons, one being). What if somebody says, “You believe God is a Trinity, but that doesn’t sound like a simple explanation – this idea of three persons in one being.” Does that not factor into the argument?133

Dr. Craig: I think you would be unjustified to infer to the Trinity as the best explanation of design. I think that is right. That would be an ad hoc hypothesis for which there is no justification. This gives you a personal, intelligent Designer of the universe, but whether he is a Trinity or not, that is going to depend upon divine revelation or other factors. The argument doesn’t draw the conclusion that therefore a Trinity is the best explanation of the appearance of design.

Student: I am writing a chapter on philosophy of neuroscience right now. It is on my mind. To me it seems that simplicity is rarely even a consideration from both a philosophical point of view (trying to explain physical phenomena) or just a scientific method sort of view. Rather incremental validity or additional explanatory power are offered by an account of some sort of phenomenon or entity is really what matters because that is what avoids just unnecessary, redundant, or contrived details.

Dr. Craig: You’ve said it well. As I indicated, this appeal to simplicity on Dawkins’ part raises a whole host of questions about what are theoretical virtues of scientific theories that would make one preferable to another. I think one of the points that you are spotting here is that Dawkins conflates the simplicity of the hypothesis with the simplicity of the entity that the hypothesis posits. A hypothesis can be very simple in terms of its explanatory power. It doesn’t add these ad hoc devices like the explanation is a Trinity, or that it is purple. Those would be a violation of Occam’s Razor or simplicity. You do not want to posit any more causes than are necessary to explain the effect. That is what you are pointing out. But the causes that you do postulate might themselves be quite
complex entities – DNA molecules, and all sorts of other things. You are quite right in saying there is a confusion, I think, going on here in Dawkins’ mind.

**Student:** The explanation of the explanation argument to me sounds like a three-year old kid just asking his parents over and over, “Why?” But doesn’t he run into the same problem of needing an explanation of the explanation? It doesn’t just apply to the Designer. It applies to the mechanisms of the naturalistic world, too. You end up coming to a beginning somewhere.

**Dr. Craig:** You are absolutely right.

**Student:** Where does Dawkins end up out of the three choices? It is not design. So where does he end up on the other two? Is he going with chance there?

**Dr. Craig:** I don’t think he has any explanation for fine-tuning. All he has is a hope that something will emerge in physics that is comparable in power to Darwinian evolution in biology. He would see Darwinian evolution as a combination of chance and necessity. The mutations I think he would say occur by chance, and then natural selection operates deterministically on the chance mutations to weed out those that are unfit and can’t survive in the struggle for survival. He would see that explanation as a kind of combination of chance and necessity. But he offers nothing with regard to the fine-tuning. He admits he doesn’t have an explanation.

**Student:** I wonder what you think about a potential rejoinder that you might get regarding the idea that the mind is simple. Of course it is not composed of parts. I would agree. But it seems to me that there can be lesser and greater minds in the sense of they can vary in their faculties and how those faculties relate to one another. My beliefs might inform my desires. Perhaps complex isn’t the right word to use, but our minds are certainly more complex in their rational faculties than any animal mind that might exist. Conversely, on the other end of the spectrum, God’s mind is perhaps potentially infinitely more complex (maybe complex isn’t the right word to use) in his faculties and how those faculties might work with one another. Even with a single mind, can you not have varying degrees of complex faculties or additional faculties?

**Dr. Craig:** I would say two things in response to that. First, the way Dawkins himself defines simplicity is in terms of physical composition. If you look at the way in which he discusses his objection, he is saying that things that are composed of parts are more complex than simple things like electrons, for example. It is his own concept of simplicity that is at work here in the objection. But then, secondly, I would say that even though a soul or a mind might have complexity with regard to its faculties like intellect, volition, maybe emotion, still this is not very complex. They might be very powerful.
faculties, but I don’t see that that is a sort of objectionable complexity that would be anywhere like the complexity of a fine-tuned universe. Remember the odds we talked about – 1 part out of $10^{120}$ power and so forth. There is nothing comparable to that in the faculties that God has, I would say. At least, what we could say is there is no reason to postulate that kind of complexity in such a design argument. We are not asserting that, so we get to a relatively simple Designer.

**Student:** I am a little baffled by this simplicity argument. I understand in the design argument we say, we take all these simple parts and we put them together in a unique way that can’t be evolved. None of these parts will do this. None of them have any value whatsoever. But when I put them together in a unique way it has function – like the mousetrap (that is one I always like). His argument that I’ve got to find something to break it all down into simple parts to assemble in a unique way is the idea of design. But the idea of a Designer can go immediately to the complex and not put it together with simple parts. I think he is trying to find a naturalistic solution to saying you’ve got to have all these simple parts that could be put together uniquely and that is design. Well, God didn’t do it that way.

**Dr. Craig:** The objection here is that postulating a divine Designer – God – is somehow postulating a very complex entity and that that is objectionable.

**Student:** Why?

**Dr. Craig:** Because then you’ve postulated something just as complex to explain something complex. He thinks that is illegitimate. As I say, that raises all these questions about simplicity and explanatory power that are wrong. But in any case, it seems to me he is just fundamentally incorrect in thinking that a divine Designer is a complex entity. His thoughts might be complex. His activities could be complex. But a pure mind without any body has no composition. It is not made up of parts. At most maybe you could say it has diverse faculties, but that is still very simple. I am suggesting even on his misconceived argument (and I do think it is misconceived) he hasn’t shown that a divine Designer is a complex entity. On the contrary, theologians and philosophers would typically say that God is very simple.

**END DISCUSSION**

With that we are out of time. We draw our conclusion that the best explanation of the fine-tuning of the universe is design so that now we have a third argument in our cumulative case for the existence of God.\(^{135}\)
Lecture 18: Moral Argument

In our excursus in natural theology, we’ve talked about the proper basicality of belief in God, we have looked at the cosmological argument from contingency, we have examined the kalam cosmological argument, and most recently completed a study of the teleological argument based on the fine-tuning of the universe for a cosmic Designer. Today we want to turn our attention to a new argument which is the moral argument for God’s existence.

We can begin thinking about this by asking ourselves a question: Can we be good without God?

At first blush the answer to this question might seem so obvious that even to pose it is apt to make people angry. For while we Christians find in God a source of moral strength that enables us to lead better lives than we should have without him, nevertheless it would be arrogant and ignorant to claim that nonbelievers do not often lead good moral lives—in fact, lives that sometimes put our own lives to shame if we are honest.

But wait a minute! It would, indeed, be arrogant and ignorant to claim that people cannot be good without believing in God. But that wasn’t the question. The question was: Can we be good without God? When we ask that question, we’re posing in a provocative way a question about the nature of moral values. Are the moral values that we hold dear and guide our lives by just social conventions, like driving on the right-hand versus the left-hand side of the road? Or are they merely expressions of personal preference, like having a taste for vanilla instead of chocolate? Or are they somehow binding and valid independent of our opinion, and if they are then what is their foundation?

Many philosophers have thought that morality provides a good argument for the existence of God. I myself stumbled into the moral argument, so to speak, through the back door. I was speaking on university campuses on the absurdity of life without God. I argued that if there is no God then ultimately life is purposeless, meaningless, and valueless, in particular there is no foundation for objective moral values. Everything becomes relative. To my surprise, the response of students to this claim was often to insist that objective moral values do exist. We know that certain things are right and wrong, and therefore certain moral values really do objectively exist. What the students said didn’t in any way refute my claim that without God there would be no objective moral values. Instead, what they had done was to unwittingly provide a missing premise in a moral argument for God’s existence.

We can now argue:

1. If God does not exist, objective moral values and duties do not exist.
2. Objective moral values and duties do exist.
3. Therefore, God exists.

This simple little argument is logically ironclad. If the two premises are true then the conclusion follows necessarily and logically. Moreover, this argument is very easy to memorize and share with another person. I had argued for the truth of the first premise; the students had insisted on the truth of the second premise. Together the two premises logically imply the existence of God.\textsuperscript{136}

I think what makes this argument so powerful is that people generally believe both premises. In a pluralistic age—a relativistic age—students are scared to death of imposing their values on someone else. The conventional wisdom is that you can’t tell somebody else that they are wrong and you are right. Who are you to judge someone else in that way? So premise (1) seems correct to them. At the same time, certain values have been deeply (indeed I think unconsciously) instilled into them, such as tolerance, open-mindedness, and love. In particular, they think that it is objectively wrong to impose your values on someone else! So they’re deeply committed to premise (2) as well. They’ve just never put the two together to see what the implication is.

This can lead to some very strange conversations. I remember talking once with a nonbeliever who would jump back and forth between the two premises. When we’d talk about the first premise, he’d agree with it but deny the second premise. But then when we’d move on to the second premise, he’d agree with it and deny the first premise! So back and forth we went with him unable to make up his mind which one he believed and which one he rejected. It would have been funny had it not been so pitiful to see someone floundering in this way simply out of a vain attempt to avoid God.

So what I’d like to do is examine more closely each of the argument’s two premises in order to see what defense you can offer on their behalf and also what objections the nonbeliever might raise against them.

Let’s take a look first at premise (1), that if God does not exist objective moral values and duties do not exist.

Before we can say something in defense of this premise, I want to clarify a couple of important distinctions. First, notice that I distinguish between values and duties. Values have to do with whether something is good or bad. Duties have to do with whether something is right or wrong. Now you might think that this is a distinction without a difference. You might think that “good” and “right” mean the same thing, and the same
goes for “bad” and “wrong.” But if you reflect on it for a moment, I think you will see that this isn’t the case.

Duty has to do with moral obligation, what you ought or ought not to do. But obviously you’re not morally obligated to do something just because it would be good for you to do it. For example, it would be good for you to become a doctor, but you’re not morally obligated to become a doctor. After all, it would also be good for you to become a firefighter or a farmer or a homemaker, but you can’t do all of them. So it is simply not true that because something is good to do that it means you have a duty or moral obligation to do it. Furthermore, sometimes all we have is bad choices. Think, for example, of the movie Sophie’s Choice where the poor mother has to choose which of her two children are to be sent by the Nazi soldiers to the concentration camp. No matter what she chose, it is a bad state of affairs. Yet it is not wrong for her to make a choice because she must choose in that circumstance.137

So there’s a difference between what is good and bad and what is right and wrong. Good and bad has to do with something’s moral worth, and right and wrong has to do with something’s being obligatory.

There is a second distinction that I want to clarify, and that is the distinction between something’s being objective versus subjective. By “objective” I mean “independent of people’s opinions.” By “subjective” I mean “dependent upon people’s opinions.” So to say that there are objective moral values is to say that something is good or bad independent of what people think about it. Similarly, to say that we have objective moral duties is to say that certain actions are right or wrong for us regardless of what people think about it.

So, for example, to say that the Holocaust was objectively wrong is to say that it was wrong even though the Nazis who carried it out thought that it was right, and it would still have been wrong even if the Nazis had won World War II and succeeded in brainwashing or exterminating everybody who disagreed with them, so that everyone agreed that the Holocaust was right. Premise (1) claims that if there is no God then moral values and duties are not objective in that sense.

START DISCUSSION

*Student:* I’ve heard some people ask why you define “objective” as independent of persons or human opinion. They will say usually “objective” is defined as mind-independent. But, of course, if it is mind-independent then it can’t be rooted in God at that point.

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Dr. Craig: I think the reason is that when people say mind-independent (I can virtually guarantee this) they are thinking about people. They are not thinking of God when they say, for example, that abstract objects are a mind-independent reality as a Platonist claims. They are not thinking about God. They are thinking about it being independent of human opinion. The reason that that is justified, I think, is if you say that mind-dependent excludes being dependent on God then everything becomes mind-dependent. The distinction becomes trivial; it becomes meaningless. Because then even the existence of the external world is mind-dependent because it wouldn’t exist if God didn’t exist. The intuitively meaningful distinction between mind-dependent and mind-independent collapses if you say that it should encompass God as well.

END DISCUSSION

You might notice that I don’t use the words “absolute” versus “relative.” “Absolute” would mean independent of the circumstances in which one finds oneself, whereas “relative” would mean that what is right or wrong or what is good or bad would be relative to the circumstances. I am not claiming that there are absolute moral values as opposed to values that are merely relative. Rather, in whatever circumstances one finds oneself, there will be a right thing to do and a wrong thing to do. But one isn’t claiming that these are not relative to the circumstances. In some circumstances it will be justified, for example, to take a human life – if there is a terrorist about to commit a suicide bombing. In other circumstances it would not be justified to take a human life – if it is an innocent person, for example. So we are not making a claim here about absolute versus relative. Don’t confuse that distinction with the distinction of objective versus subjective.

START DISCUSSION

Student: Could you tell us about existence? Because I don’t think we have to commit ourselves to be Platonists to keep everything real and say these things exist and therefore they are beings in your ontology.

Dr. Craig: The word “exists” or “existence” in ordinary English has a very light sense. It is that sense in which I am speaking here. You could rephrase it to say something like this, “if God does not exist then there are no objective moral values and duties,” and take again “there are” to be a light sense in the sense in which I say, “There are five Fridays in October.” Nobody who thinks that is true thinks that there are objects or things called “Fridays” which are mind-independent objects in the world. Right? I am using the word in a light sense here, not in a heavy sense that would commit us to Platonic abstract objects.
You could avoid the language of existence or being all together by just saying, “if God does not exist, moral values and duties are not objective.” That will be a restatement of what I want to say. The second premise would be restated, “Moral values and duties are objective.” Therefore, God exists. Then you can just avoid any misunderstanding about positing Platonic abstract objects which are virtues or vices. We will come back to this again later on as an alternative to theism actually.

END DISCUSSION

Let’s move to a defense of premise (1). Let’s begin by considering, first, moral values. Traditionally moral values have been based in God, who is taken to be the highest Good. But if God does not exist then what is the basis of moral values? In particular, why think that human beings have objective moral worth? The most popular form of atheism is naturalism. Naturalism holds that the only things that exist are the things that are postulated by our best scientific theories. But science is morally neutral; you can’t find moral values in a test tube. So it would follow immediately that moral values and duties don’t exist on naturalism; they’re just illusions of human beings.

Even if the atheist is willing to go beyond the bounds of science, why should we think that on atheism human beings are morally valuable? After all, in the absence of God, they are just accidental byproducts of nature which have evolved relatively recently on an infinitesimal speck of dust called the planet Earth lost somewhere in a hostile and mindless universe and which are doomed to perish individually and collectively in a relatively short time. Richard Dawkins’ assessment of human worth may be depressing, but why on atheism is he wrong when he says, “there is at bottom no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but pointless indifference. . . . We are machines for propagating DNA. . . . It is every living object’s sole reason for being.”139

On an atheistic view, moral values seem to be just the byproduct of biological evolution and social conditioning. Just as a troupe of baboons exhibit cooperative and even self-sacrificial behavior because natural selection has determined it to be advantageous in the struggle for survival, so their primate cousins Homo sapiens have similarly evolved this type of behavior for the same reason. As a result of socio-biological pressures there has evolved among Homo sapiens a sort of “herd morality” which functions well in the perpetuation of our species. But on the atheistic view there doesn’t seem to be anything

about *Homo sapiens* that would make this morality objectively true. Charles Darwin himself wrote in his book, *The Descent of Man*,

> If . . . men were reared under precisely the same conditions as hive-bees, there can hardly be a doubt that our unmarried females would, like the worker-bees, think it a sacred duty to kill their brothers, and mothers would strive to kill their fertile daughters, and no one would think of interfering.\(^{140}\)

To think that human beings are special is to succumb to the temptation to species-ism, that is to say, an unjustified bias in favor of one’s own species.\(^{141}\)

So if there is no God, any basis for regarding the herd morality evolved by *Homo sapiens* on this planet as objectively true seems to have been removed. Take God out of the picture, and all you’re left with is an ape-like creature on a speck of solar dust beset with delusions of moral grandeur.

Second, now consider moral duties. Traditionally our moral duties were thought to spring from God’s commandments, such as the Ten Commandments. But if there is no God then what basis remains for objective moral duties? On the atheistic view, human beings are just animals, and animals have no moral obligations to one another. When a lion kills a zebra, it kills the zebra, but it does not murder the zebra. When a great white shark forcibly copulates with a female, it forcibly copulates with her but it does not rape her because there is no moral dimension to these actions. They are neither prohibited nor obligatory.

So if God does not exist, why think that we have any moral obligations to do anything? Who or what imposes these moral obligations upon us? Where do they come from? It’s hard to see why they would be anything more than just a subjective impression arising from societal and parental conditioning.

Certain actions like incest and rape may not be advantageous biologically and socially and so in the course of human development they have become taboo. But that does absolutely nothing to show that rape or incest is really wrong. Such behavior goes on all the time in the animal kingdom. The rapist who goes against the herd morality is doing nothing more serious than acting unfashionably, the moral equivalent, as it were, of Lady Gaga. If there is no moral lawgiver then there is no objective moral law which we must obey.

Now it’s extremely important that we clearly understand the issue before us. I can almost guarantee that if you share this argument with an unbeliever, someone is going to say

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\(^{141}\) 20:14
indignantly, “Are you saying that atheists are bad people?” They will think that you are judgmental and intolerant. We need to help them see that this is a complete misunderstanding of the argument.

The question is not: Must we believe in God in order to live moral lives? There’s no reason to think that nonbelievers cannot live what we would normally characterize as good and decent lives.

Again, the question is not: Can we recognize objective moral values and duties without believing in God? Again, there’s no reason to think that you have to believe in God in order to recognize that, for example, you ought to love your children.

Or again, the question is not: Can we formulate a system of ethics without referring to God? If the atheist recognizes and affirms the intrinsic value of human beings, there’s no reason to think that he can’t work out an secular system of ethics or code of conduct that the believer will largely agree with.

Rather the question is: If God does not exist, do objective moral values and duties exist? The question is not about the necessity of believing in God for objective morality; the question is about the necessity of God for objective morality.

I’ve been shocked at how often even professional philosophers, who ought to know better, confuse these two questions. For example, I participated in a debate at Franklin and Marshall College in Pennsylvania with the late humanist philosopher Paul Kurtz on the topic “Goodness without God is Good Enough.” I argued that if God does not exist then there are no objective moral values, duties, or accountability for one’s actions.

Kurtz, to my astonishment, completely missed the point. He replied,

> If God is essential, then how is it possible for the millions and millions of people who don’t believe in God to nonetheless behave morally and ethically? On your view, they could not. And so, God just is not essential. . . . many people, indeed millions of people, have been optimistic about life, have lived a full life, and find life exciting and significant. Yet, they don’t wring their hands about whether or not there is an afterlife. It’s living life here and now that counts.

Kurtz’s point only shows that belief in God is not necessary to living a moral, optimistic life. It does nothing to refute the claim that if there is no God, then morality is just a human illusion.

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142 25:05
143 A full transcript of this October 2001 debate, along with essays from several people on both sides of the issue, can be found in Is Goodness without God Good Enough?: A Debate on Faith, Secularism, and Ethics (Rowman & Littlefield, 2008).
To repeat: belief in God is not necessary for objective morality; God is.

START DISCUSSION

_Student:_ I have a lot of inner turmoil over this particular discussion. I don’t see the conclusion as proved that God is required for that. I think that there is a leap there that is unsupported.

_Dr. Craig:_ All right. Can you explain why? How would you respond to what I said that if God does not exist then you’ve lost any objective basis for moral values and you’ve lost the source for moral obligation. Where on the atheistic or naturalistic view will moral values and duties be grounded?

_Student:_ From my personal experience . . . I will speak from my relationship with my father because my father would call himself a naturalist – he does not believe in God. He lives in an objective moral framework that is about his respect for however this world happened it is good and should be preserved and protected. However society got to where we are today it should be preserved and protected. But what you are saying is whether he knows it or not, his beliefs stem from the fact that God exists?

_Dr. Craig:_ No, is that what I am saying? Am I saying that whether he knows it or not that his belief that society should be protected and preserved stems from God? Have I made that claim? I’m not asking you, I’m asking the class. No, I haven’t made that claim. What I’ve said is that he is right that objective morality exists and that society ought to be preserved and protected. He is right. That is premise (2)! What I am challenging is, I want to know from his point of view (if atheism is true) why ought society to be preserved and protected? Why think that that is an objective duty that human beings have to preserve this society on this planet?

_Student:_ Pain aversion, I suppose.

_Dr. Craig:_ Now that is a common answer, but then I want to know why should we avoid inflicting pain on other persons in our species? Animals inflict pain upon one another all the time. So why are we different? Why is it wrong for _Homo sapiens_ – this relatively advanced primate – to inflict pain?

_Student:_ OK, I am stunned. From the perspective of my father – I am here because I kind of see both sides. I think I see both sides. I don’t have black and white certainty in either direction.

_Dr. Craig:_ OK, don’t let certainty become a sort of bugaboo here. All that is required for a successful argument is that the premises be more plausible than their opposites. Even if it is, say, 52 to 48 percent you should go with what seems more probably true. I am not
arguing here about certainty. Just that I think the premise is true that if there is no God then moral values and duties aren’t objective.\textsuperscript{144}

\textit{Student:} Here is really my question. It is all very confusing, and like I said it is turmoil and I probably shouldn’t have spoken first, but . . .

\textit{Dr. Craig:} On the contrary, you should!

\textit{Student:} My question then, or what I have been feeling is, are you leading up to a judgment that objective morals are superior to subjective morals? Because then I could say that maybe my dad lives in subjective morality, right? If that is different. Because he has decided not to hurt people because for whatever reason subjectively.

\textit{Dr. Craig:} I think you are construing this again exactly the way I said we should not construe it – that atheists are bad people. That is not the argument. It is not a judgment about your father, or his moral life or virtue. The conclusion to which I am leading is that God exists. That is the conclusion.

\textit{Student:} That is not obvious to me based on the fact that objective morality . . . for me there is something missing between the behavioral reality of . . . I see it with my friends raising children. When “Wait until your father comes home” isn’t scary enough that you have to say “Don’t let God see that!” “Don’t let God see you doing that.” I understand that. From my father’s perspective, and kind of from my perspective too, I want to say almost the question of God is a little bit irrelevant because I am going to behave in a good fashion as I see it. Even if it turns out that there was no God, I am not disappointed in myself. I am still proud of myself for behaving as though there is one.

\textit{Dr. Craig:} I think, again, that you are misunderstanding the argument. There you are asking about the question of moral motivation. Should I be good because, say, God will reward this if I do, and if I don’t he’ll punish me. You are asking about, “What is the source of our motivation for the moral life?” I am not even addressing that question. I tend to agree with you that you do the good for the good’s sake. You do it because it is good.

\textit{Student:} I would consider that under duty.

\textit{Dr. Craig:} What we are asking about: is there a basis or an explanation for why something is good rather than bad, and why we have an obligation to do certain things and an obligation not to do other things. Where do those obligations come from? Are they just fobbed off onto us by the evolutionary process and societal conditioning or are there objective values and duties that are valid and binding independent of our apprehension of them. That is the question.
END DISCUSSION

We come to the end of our time. I don’t want to go beyond that. But next time we will continue our discussion and we will look at some more objections to premise (1) and perhaps this will help to strengthen the case for premise (1) by showing how the objections that are usually lodged against it I think ultimately are unsuccessful.145
Lecture 19: The Euthyphro Dilemma

Today we want to continue our discussion of the moral argument for God’s existence. Last time we looked at the defense of the first premise that if God does not exist then objective moral values and duties do not exist. I finished up last time by emphasizing that we have to correctly understand the question. The question is not “Must we believe in God in order to live a good moral life?” No. I think we all know unbelievers, many of them family members perhaps, who live good and decent lives. Similarly, the question is not “Can we recognize objective moral values and duties without believing in God?” Yes, we can. In fact, the Bible teaches this. The Bible teaches that the demands of God’s moral law are written on the heart of every human being. Even people who have no special revelation from God at all nevertheless have a kind of instinctual grasp of the moral law and its requirements. So you need not believe in God in order to know your moral duties or recognize them. Again, the question is not “Can we formulate a system of ethics without reference to God?” If the atheist is willing to concede the intrinsic moral value of human beings then he can probably work out an ethical code of conduct with which the Christian or theist will largely agree.

Rather, the question before us is, “If God does not exist, are there objective moral values and duties?” I’ve argued that in the absence of God there simply isn’t any plausible foundation for affirming the existence of objective moral values or duties.

START DISCUSSION

Student: To rephrase that, a rose by any other name is still a rose. If they believe in intrinsic moral values – absolute – then wouldn’t that just be a different name for a characteristic of God even though they don’t acknowledge that?

Dr. Craig: Insofar as I think that ultimate moral values are founded in God, yes. I think that would be true. They wouldn’t recognize their source but they would recognize that, for example, love is a virtue and hatred is a vice. In that sense they grasp something of the nature of God – that God is love.

Student: Correct me if I am mistaken but if there is no God, how can there be any objective? Everything then becomes subjective, does it not?

Dr. Craig: I am not claiming that. I think that would need to be argued. For example, is there objective truth if there is no God? It would seem to me, at least at face value, that if God did not exist but the universe still existed there would be objective truths. For example, it would be true that God does not exist. It would be true that you exist. That wouldn’t be in any way subjective or relative or person-dependent. It seems to me there would still be objective truth. But when it comes to things like moral values, there it does seem to me that everything would be subjective. That might also be the case with regard
to aesthetic values – the beautiful versus the ugly. In the absence of God are there objective aesthetic values or is beauty, as they say, merely in the eye of the beholder? I’d be very open to a kind of theistic argument based upon the objectivity of aesthetic values. But I am not running that argument at this point. We are concentrating simply on moral values and duties.

Student: My problem comes with the fact that the universe is not comprised simply of mankind. There are also huge vast numbers of animals who, if there are objective morals, why don’t they have them? They don’t. They do what they have to to survive.

Dr. Craig: I think that’s right. Animals aren’t moral agents. As I said, if God does not exist then we are just a relatively advanced primate species on this little planet somewhat higher than apes. It is difficult to see why we would have moral obligations that they don’t.146

Student: Can you extend this from moral duties to epistemic duties as well? Objective epistemic duties? For example, I ought to believe that which is the case regardless of its utility. It seems like without God we are sort of in a similar situation.

Dr. Craig: Insofar as when one talks about duties it does seem to me that you are talking about moral duties – some of your moral duties would be, as you put it, epistemic. I ought to believe that which is true whether it is useful or not or whether it benefits me or not. That might be a moral duty in the realm of knowledge, I think.

Student: Last week I wanted to ask a question about the mechanism for natural law. Let me frame this a particular way. Perhaps a skeptic might say, “I’ll accept I was affected either by nature or by nurture.” I think you brought up the name of a particular skeptic last week. They may say, as far as nature, maybe they will buy into the Christian doctrine that their nature is corrupted. Then on the nurture side they may say I am a skeptic. I am not being nurtured by the Christian community. I grew up with atheists. I don’t know anything about the Bible. So the question might be from a skeptic, how can we explain the mechanism for how people can know natural law?

Dr. Craig: This isn’t part of the argument. I don’t have any particular view on that. I am totally open to any theories about how we come to know our moral duties: conscience, rational intuition, reflection upon human worth, divine revelation. I am honestly very open to all sorts of moral epistemologies – about how we come to know the content of our moral duties. I am simply not addressing that question in this argument. This is a question about moral ontology; that is to say, are there objective moral values and duties? It is not a question of moral epistemology – how we come to know our moral duties. That
confusion is one that one has to constantly fight against in sharing this argument with people because so often the question will slide into questions of moral epistemology – how do we know the good or how do we know my moral duty? There I have no brief to carry.

Student: I agree. I would always start with an ontology argument first. I am thinking about the curious person who is now at the point of trying to understand that – now curiously seeking and not throwing that as a first objection.

Dr. Craig: Yes, and I say, I am open. I really am. I don’t have any particular theory of how we come to know our moral duties. I suspect that being created in the image of God we have this innate sense of the intrinsic value of human beings so that we have a deep moral sense that some action that is incompatible with treating another human person as intrinsically valuable and treating them as merely a means to an end would be immoral and would be wrong. I think you could do a great deal of ethics and understanding our moral duties simply by rational reflection on how would you treat other people if they have intrinsic moral worth and are ends in themselves rather than means to some other end. Beyond that, I think that divine revelation does tell us a lot about our moral duties as well. God has given us the Ten Commandments, the moral law. This will also supplement any intuitions that may be instinctive within us. But I am very open to whatever someone might want to suggest there.

Student: In dealing with those who are pure materialists that would deny any spiritual aspects we talk about and would claim universality of these moral concepts, coming from very back in what they would call that human tree, or the tree of life, be far enough back that it was embedded at that point therefore it became universal as the tree grew and spread throughout humanity. They are unable, of course, at this time to claim that they have evidence as to what gene or what physical thing could have carried this morality through, but that claim seems to be being made. Do you run into that? If so, how would we best refute that, other than the fact that materialism isn't all there is?

Dr. Craig: As I said last week, I want to affirm that on the atheist view. Given naturalism, what we call moral values and duties are just patterns of behavior ingrained into us by biological evolution and social conditioning, just as in a troop of baboons you see self-sacrificial behavior, evidenced in other forms of cooperative behavior, evidence because natural selection has determined it to be advantageous in the struggle for survival. So there has evolved among Homo sapiens on this planet a similar herd morality which is advantageous in the struggle for survival. But on atheism there doesn't seem to be anything that would make that morality objectively binding and true. If you were to
Rewind the film of human evolution back to the beginning and start over again, a very different sort of creature might have evolved with a very different set of moral values. In fact, you will remember I quoted from Darwin's book, *The Descent of Man*, where he said if human beings had been raised under the condition that bees are in hives then mothers would think it their duty to kill their daughters and no one would think of protesting. I think that this point is actually one that we can use to say that premise (1) is true. If God does not exist then objective moral values and duties do not exist. That sort of thinking supports premise (1).

**Student:** When you did the debate with Sam Harris about the moral argument, do you feel he kind of weaseled out of saying that there is a source of objective morality simply by saying that he doesn't see how your version of morality – or what you were saying is objective morality – he doesn't see why it has to be the God of Abraham? Isn't that kind of like saying it has to be something, but he doesn't think it is the God of Abraham?

**Dr. Craig:** Well, it has been many years since that debate, and my memory is dim of it. What I remember is that of the three objections that I presented against his humanism . . . he affirms the objectivity of moral values and duties. He is not like the naturalist or relativist. He wants to affirm the objectivity of moral values and duties, but he grounds them in human beings that whatever is conducive to human flourishing is good, and whatever detracts from human flourishing is bad. I challenged that on a naturalistic view. I couldn't see any reason to think that that would be the case on naturalism. As I remember, he didn't even address the three criticisms that I gave. I don't recall whether he offered some critique of theistic-based ethics. You'd have to look at the debate again. It is on YouTube. Maybe he gave the Euthyphro Argument that we are going to talk about in a minute. I just don't recall. But what I do remember is that he didn't even try to muster a defense of his view that on naturalism objective moral values and duties would exist.

**Student:** To me it looked like he sort of just by-stepped what you said. He claimed you misquoted him from his book and suggested the audience read it. Then he just said he didn't understand why you took from the position of objective morality coming from God (or a god). He said that it doesn't have to be the God of Abraham which obviously wasn't a logical answer. It doesn't fit to the argument. You weren't saying it was the God of Abraham.

**Dr. Craig:** That is irrelevant because we are defending a generic monotheism, not Christian or Jewish monotheism in that debate. The debate was on, “Is the foundation of

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148 For a video of this debate, see [http://www.reasonablefaith.org/media/craig-vs-harris-notre-dame](http://www.reasonablefaith.org/media/craig-vs-harris-notre-dame)

morality natural or supernatural?” Which is an argument for God, not for the God of Abraham.

By the way, in terms of the misquoting, I had the footnotes to my speech right there with me lest he might say that. After the debate, I showed him the footnotes where in fact this was an accurate quotation of his own work.

*Student:* Given the last two questions and the last session, I am still not convinced that objective morality isn't subjective morality. I am not sure that it is binary. I am not sure that all morality isn't subjective. From last session (and I roped my mom into this — we did review the tape), not to bring back the ugliest of all analogies but the Nazism analogy was the one that said that is the evidence that you use for the existence of objective morality or did I misunderstand?

*Dr. Craig:* Not really. I haven’t defended yet the second premise that says objective moral values and duties do exist. All I’ve defended is the first premise which says that if God does not exist then objective moral values and duties do not exist. The Holocaust illustration was not an illustration, or meant to prove, that moral values and duties are objective. It was to illustrate what one means by objective versus subjective. What I said was to say that the Holocaust was objectively wrong is to say that it was wrong even though the people who carried it out thought that it was right, and that it would still be wrong even if the Nazis had won World War II and brainwashed or exterminated everybody who disagreed with them so that it was universally agreed among mankind that the Holocaust was good. To say that it was objectively wrong is to say that it would still be wrong even if it were universally agreed among human beings that it was OK. That was all that illustration was meant to show — the difference between objective versus subjective. Do you want to follow up?

*Student:* No, I want to get out of the way and go to the next point. [laughter]

*Dr. Craig:* OK! Good!

**END DISCUSSION**

The question still remains: was the Holocaust objectively wrong? We haven’t talked about that yet. But before we come to that, we need to consider objections to premise (1). I’ve given a defense of it, but there are clearly objections to it.

The first objection that will be brought up if you present this argument will be the so-called Euthyphro Dilemma. The Euthyphro Dilemma is really an objection to premise (1). The name comes from a character in one of Plato’s dialogues named Euthyphro. The dilemma basically goes like this: is something good just because God wills it, or does
God will something because it is good? If you say that something is good just because God wills it then what is good and evil becomes arbitrary. God could have willed that hatred is good. Then we would be morally obligated to hate one another and seek to do one another harm. That seems crazy. Some moral values, at least, seem to be necessarily the case and not just arbitrary in that way. But if you say that God wills something because it really is good and because it is good that is why he wills it, then The Good is independent of God contrary to premise (1). In that case objective moral values and duties exist independently of God, and it is not the case that if God were not to exist objective moral values do not exist. So this is the so-called Euthyphro Dilemma.

We don't need to refute either horn of the Euthyphro Dilemma because the dilemma that it presents is a false dilemma. It is not a true dilemma. It is a false dilemma. Namely, there is a third alternative that God wills something because he is good. What do I mean by that? I mean that God's own concrete nature is the standard of goodness, and his commandments to us are in turn expressions of his nature. In short, our moral duties are constituted by the commands of a holy and loving God.

So moral values are not independent of God because God's own character determines what is good. God is essentially compassionate, kind, impartial, fair, and so forth. His nature is the moral standard which determines good and bad. Just as a high-fidelity recording is measured by how closely it approximates to the sound of a live performance (that is what we mean by “high fidelity”) so moral actions are measured by how closely they approximate to God's own nature. God's commands, in turn, reflect his moral character. Therefore, they are not arbitrary.

So if the atheist asks, “If God were to command child abuse, would we then be obligated to abuse our children?” he is asking a question like, “If there were a square circle, would its area be the square of one of its sides?” The question has no answer because what it is predicated on is logically impossible. The Euthyphro Dilemma presents us with a false choice and we shouldn't be tricked by it. You don't have to choose either horn. There is a third alternative, namely, the morally good or bad is determined by God's nature and the morally right or wrong is determined by his will. Moral values are rooted in his nature; moral duties are determined by his will. God wills something because he is good. Something is right because God wills it.

This view of moral theory has been defended eloquently in our day by such prominent philosophers as Robert Adams, William Alston, Philip Quinn, and many others. Yet atheists continue to attack the straw man erected by the Euthyphro Dilemma. For example, in the Cambridge Companion to Atheism published in 2007 the article on God and morality, which is written by a very prominent ethicist, refers neither to the work of
these men nor to the alternative that I've just laid out, but it attacks only the view that
God arbitrarily made up moral values which is a view that I am not acquainted with being
defended by anyone today. No one I am acquainted with defends that view.

START DISCUSSION

Student: Could you please repeat the first alternative?

Dr. Craig: Something is good just because God wills it. That is the first alternative. In
other words, moral values are rooted in the will of God. The other one is that God wills
something because it is good. It is good in and of itself, and God being a good person
wills it. So God wills something because it is good.

You don't need to refute them because it is a false dilemma. If this were a true dilemma,
it would have the form “A or not-A.” Then you are stuck. In a true dilemma where the
alternatives are logical contradictories there is no middle ground. Then you've got to
refute one of the alternatives. Right? But that is not the form of the Euthyphro Dilemma.
The form of the Euthyphro Dilemma is “A or B” because those aren't contradictories,
those two alternatives. They are A or B. With a false dilemma, you escape it by executing
a move known by the logician and the matador alike as going between the horns of the
dilemma or escaping the horns of the dilemma. You suggest some third alternative C.
There is no need to refute the two horns of the dilemma. They are wrong those two
views, I believe. They are false. But the correct one is the third view, C. And that is: God
wills something because he is good. God's own concrete nature is the standard of
goodness, and his commandments then (which constitute our duties) flow out of that
moral nature.

Student: In C. S. Lewis' book Mere Christianity, when he offers his moral argument for
God, he uses an example of trying to explain how God is The Good by saying if you have
two artists and you ask them to paint a picture of New York City, he says the only way
you can judge which one is actually better is if New York City actually exists. There has
to be a standard. Do you think that is a good analogy to say how God is the standard of
right and wrong?

Dr. Craig: It seems like a good analogy. He is saying there that these two representations
are measured in their realism by the actual thing. In the same way, let the artistic
representations be moral actions by human beings and let God be New York City, and the
goodness or the badness of the actions will be measured by how closely they approximate
to God himself. Are they loving? Are they fair? And so forth. That seems to be a good
analogy.
I also like the analogy I gave of the high-fidelity recording. Something is high fidelity insofar as it approximates the sound of a live orchestra. There the moral actions would be like the recordings and the live performance is God.

Student: This commits you to essentialism – that God has essential properties. Right?

Dr. Craig: Yes.

Student: Of course, this would be very difficult in a unitarian-monotheism – that God is one person – to hold that God is essentially good. Because there is some possible state of affairs where God exists without anything else and so his moral properties are hard to see if they are exemplified.

Dr. Craig: If I understand where you are going with this, I think you are suggesting that, on a unitarian view of God where God is just an isolated person all alone by himself, he wouldn't be able to exemplify certain moral properties like “being loving” unless he just loves himself. A trinitarian view of God has a fellowship of divine persons with an inner-trinitarian love relationship between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. So God is essentially loving within his very being with no need of creatures to love in order to be essentially loving. Is that the idea?

Student: Yeah. I have a suspicion that a unitarian-monotheist like a Muslim really couldn't resort to this to get out of the Euthyphro Dilemma.

Dr. Craig: That may well be the case. I think that is one plausibility argument for trinitarianism that I've defended.

Student: I know you said you didn't need to refute the A or the B but just humor me. I wanted to ask a little bit about the voluntarist. God wills something just because God decides that it is good to be loving, but he could have decided that it is good to be hateful. That is the voluntarist view. That is one horn of the Euthyphro Dilemma that I am rejecting. His claim is that certain Reformed theologians seem to favor this voluntarist horn.

Dr. Craig: Let me just interrupt to say – did you notice the word he is using here? We want to highlight that word. Voluntarism – that is the view that moral values are rooted simply in the will of God. God just decides that it is good to be loving, but he could have decided that it is good to be hateful. That is the voluntarist view. That is one horn of the Euthyphro Dilemma that I am rejecting. His claim is that certain Reformed theologians seem to favor this voluntarist horn.

Student: Part of the reason why someone like me or you, I think, may reject that is because of this idea that it seems very counter-intuitive to say that God could have made it our moral duty to, say, rape or kill other people. That seems wrong. A lot of times what they respond with is the only reason you have that intuition is because God has arbitrarily willed that you have it. So therefore they seem to think it seems to defeat the problem.
Dr. Craig: Yes, and I do think that is a powerful response. In other words, what they can say is of course you think hatred is wrong because it is wrong! God has decided that it is wrong. So of course you have the moral intuition that it is wrong. What else would you expect? God has decided that it is wrong and you have this instinctual grasp of the moral law. So that doesn't refute the view that God just sort of made up these moral values.\footnote{152} I think that is a very powerful rejoinder.

But here is how I put the objection. It seems not simply that these things are wrong, but that they are necessarily wrong. That there is no possible world in which it would be good to be consistently hateful and to abuse children and so forth. That, I think, is not so easily dismissed because there we are talking about a modal intuition that isn't grounded in God's will. Right? Because he just decided in this world that it is wrong, but given that moral values seem to be necessary they hold in all possible worlds and therefore couldn't be (it seems to me) simply the result of his will. That would be how I would respond to that attempted defense of voluntarism.

Student: You can have an attribute without necessarily needing to express it if you wanted to take a non-trinitarian point of view. You could have the capacity for love and be stranded on a desert island and not have the ability to express it. But that doesn't mean that it is not there.

Dr. Craig: What you are saying is that something like being loving could be a dispositional property that the unitarian God has; namely, if other persons were to exist then he would love them, just as saying a good-natured person marooned on a desert island would have a disposition to be loving to others even if there isn't anybody there on the island to love. I feel the analogy. I hear it. But it seems to me that we want to say more than that about God. Not simply that God has a disposition to love people if they did exist, but that he actually is loving. His character is such that he gives himself away in love to another person. I think that that demand is better met on a trinitarian view of God than on a unitarian view of God. On the unitarian view of God, God existing along isn't an actively loving person. He would just at best have a disposition. I think that is not fully adequate to the greatest conceivable being.

Student: I would agree. I was just trying to answer for the Unitarian.

Dr. Craig: You were defending the Unitarian!

Student: No, no. I was trying to answer . . . somebody asked how he can have the property of loving if he is a unity. He could have that attribute and still not be able to express it. But I would, of course, accept the trinitarian concept that his goodness is inherent in his being.
Dr. Craig: All right.

END DISCUSSION

What we will do next time is look at another objection to premise (1) – another attempt to have objective moral values and duties apart from God.\textsuperscript{153}
Lecture 20: Atheistic Moral Platonism

We have been talking about the moral argument for God’s existence. Last time we looked at an objection to the first premise which is that if God does not exist then objective moral values and duties do not exist. That objection comes from Plato’s dialogue *Euthyphro* in which Plato says that if you say that something is good just because God wills it then that makes good and evil arbitrary which seems wrong. But if you say God wills something because it really is good then the Good is independent of God and therefore it need not be dependent upon him for its objectivity. I suggested that this is a false dilemma. That what Christians say instead is that God wills something because he is good. That is to say, God is himself the standard of goodness and value. That nature then is expressed toward us in the form of divine commandments which constitute our moral duties. So moral values are rooted in the nature of God; our moral duties are rooted in the commands of God.

START DISCUSSION

*Student:* Would it be correct to say that God then never deliberates over good and evil, but simply is the Good and there is no choice made?

*Dr. Craig:* He might deliberate over right and wrong. Robert Adams who defends this divine command theory of morality would say that not every moral command is necessarily true. God could issue certain commands such as one has, for example, in Old Testament laws that are provisional and temporary. So he could deliberate over that. But in terms of value itself, this is not rooted in the will of God but rather in the nature of God. That is why this isn’t a voluntarist view as is often alleged against it.

*Student:* The thing I struggle with in Euthyphro’s Dilemma is why exactly does saying that something is good because God wills it or commands it . . . why exactly is that wrong other than it is arbitrary? The way I understand it is if something is arbitrary to God then if God is an objective being then to say it is arbitrary to God doesn’t seem that big of a problem to me. It also seems like that would actually flow naturally out of the idea that something . . .

*Dr. Craig:* Somebody asked that question last week. What I said to him was that it seems to me that a voluntaristic view of divine command theory would suggest that no moral values and duties are necessarily true. That seems wrong. It would seem that certain moral duties such as loving God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, all your strength, would be necessarily true. God couldn’t have willed otherwise. If that is the case then these moral duties are not simply rooted in the will of God. They are deeper than that. They would be expressions of his very nature.
Student: Is it necessary then that God be good? Another way to think of it, if God had a nature other than what he is, would that nature then be good?

Dr. Craig: It is necessary that God be good on this view. It is an essential property of God, and God as the greatest conceivable being must be a morally perfect being. So there is no question about this being contingent or happenstance. This is necessary.

Student: This is about duty as well. So God is holding us to his own standard of himself if we had that, which means epistemologically we must also be able to know him as he is. This means we will be transformed in the self-same image. I think all of that flows from that.

Dr. Craig: I haven’t talked about how we know the content of our moral duties. As I said the other day, I am open to any theory about how we come to know our moral duties. But certainly what you said about being conformed to his image, sanctified in Christ, would all be part of the work of the Spirit in our lives as we move toward glory.

Student: As we let his will be ours then we get to walk in his shoes. If we see him clearly and we see somebody outside of you. Him coming in the flesh is him coming mainly in us as believers letting us rest with contentment with his will. That changes us to be the self-same image because now we can really see him because we see his desires, hopes, and goodness.

Dr. Craig: OK.

END DISCUSSION

The mention of Plato brings to mind another possible atheistic response to premise (1). I call this Atheistic Moral Platonism. Plato thought that the Good just exists on its own as a sort of self-existent Idea. (If you find this difficult to grasp then join the company!) Later Christian thinkers equated Plato’s Good with God’s moral nature; but Plato himself thought the Good just existed on its own. So some atheists might say that moral values like Justice, Mercy, Love, and so on, just exist without any foundation. They are not grounded in God, they just exist on their own. We can call this view Atheistic Moral Platonism. It holds that objective moral values do exist but they are not grounded in God. Indeed they are not grounded in anything. They just exist on their own.

What might we say about this view? I have three responses.

First, the view seems unintelligible. What does it mean to say, for example, that the moral value Justice just exists? It’s hard to make sense of this. It’s easy to understand what it means to say that some person is just, but it’s bewildering when somebody says that in the absence of any people Justice itself just exists. It becomes even more
bewildering when you reflect on the fact that Justice itself is not just, anymore that Loyalty is loyal, or Intemperateness is intemperate. So if there were no people around who are just then how could Justice exist? It seems like there wouldn’t be any justice – this abstract object is not just. There aren’t any just people. So Justice wouldn’t seem to exist, which contradicts the view that Justice just exists on its own as an idea. Moral values seem to be properties of persons, so it’s hard to understand how moral values like Justice can exist as an abstraction.

Secondly, this view provides no basis for moral duties. It tries to give a basis for moral values but it has nothing to say by way of an explanation of our moral duties. Let’s suppose for the sake of argument that moral values like Justice, Loyalty, Mercy, Forbearance, and so on just exist. How does that result in any moral obligations for me? Why would I have a moral duty to be, say, merciful? Who or what lays such an obligation upon me? Notice that on this view moral vices such as Greed, Hatred, Rapacity, Selfishness, and Sloth also exist as abstractions. So why are we morally obligated to align our lives with one set of these abstractions rather than with some other set of these abstractions? Atheistic Moral Platonism, lacking a moral lawgiver, has no grounds for moral obligation.

Finally, third, it’s fantastically improbable that the blind evolutionary process should spit forth precisely those sorts of creatures who correspond to the abstractly existing realm of moral values. This seems to be an utterly incredible coincidence when you think about it. Remember that this realm of moral values as an abstract realm is utterly independent of the natural realm. It is causally unconnected with the natural realm. So how is it that exactly that kind of creature should emerge from the blind evolutionary process that corresponds to this independently existing moral realm? It’s almost as if the moral realm knew that we were coming. I think it is far more plausible to think that both the natural realm and the moral realm are under the authority of a God who gave us both the natural laws and the moral law than to think that these two independent realms of reality just happened by coincidence to mesh.

For those reasons I think that Atheistic Moral Platonism is a less plausible theory of ethical values and duties than is theism.

**START DISCUSSION**

*Student:* Are there any atheist philosophers who defend Atheistic Moral Platonism, and if so how do they usually respond to these criticisms?

*Dr. Craig:* I think there are. I sort of just invented this view on my own as a possible response, but I think someone like Erik Wielenberg would affirm something close to this.
But I do not know how they would respond to these three points. I find it, as I say, just an unintelligible view. Many people have made the point that it seems to lack a basis for moral obligation and prohibition (having no lawgiver). The third point is a point made in the literature that I haven’t seen a good response to. So I can’t say.

*Student:* It seems to me that Atheistic Moral Platonism worldview on morals would almost be a Star Wars universe where you have a light and dark side but you don’t really have a moral obligation to be on one side or the other. You just pick whatever side you want.

*Dr. Craig:* That is an interesting analogy. This light and dark side isn’t rooted or based in anything deeper on this view.

*Student:* There is the Force that has both light side and dark side, but it doesn’t command anyone to do one thing or another thing. You just kind of do what you want on whatever side you want to do.

*Dr. Craig:* That is a kind of sci-fi analogy to this view.

*Student:* In this kind of Platonic idea where the Good is this abstract, would that also apply to non-sentient beings? Would animals be therefore somehow under this moral code as well?

*Dr. Craig:* I guess there you have to ask yourself since it doesn’t have a basis for moral duties in it you’d have to ask yourself to what extent it would apply to animals. I suspect that those who hold to this would say that because animals are not rational therefore they are not moral agents. So they have no moral duties. When a wolf eats a lamb, it harms the lamb but it doesn’t do anything wrong. It doesn’t violate the lamb’s moral rights or do anything wrong. But these people might say if you were to eat the lamb then you would be doing something morally wrong to the lamb because you are a rational agent. At least that is the best sense I could make of it.

*Student:* In response to the Star Wars analogy, I would just like to point out that the Force does indeed favor the light side because the dark side tends to have violent repercussions for the user. Like Darth Plagueis – he was so hungry for power that eventually . . .

*Dr. Craig:* We will give Kevin one chance to respond and then I am going to bow out of this debate because I am not a Star Wars aficionado.

*Student:* From my understanding, what the Force really wants is balance. Balance doesn’t mean getting rid of the dark side. It just means that there is an equal amount on both sides. So you may have one side that is being really destructive . . . we may do this later. We are going to debate this later! [laughter]
**Dr. Craig:** It is remarkable how much this sounds like Manichaeism, which was an ancient heresy that St. Augustine encountered, which was that the world is divided into light and dark and you have to decide which side you are on.

**Student:** Has anyone gone the Aristotle route with this? With Aristotle the universes aren’t in some heaven. They are like around or in this table. I am wondering has anyone gone that way saying that moral values supervene on physical states of affairs and maybe our obligations are in our natures.

**Dr. Craig:** I’ll say something about a view kind of like that later. But I would alert you to a philosopher named Richard Taylor who is very interesting on this. Taylor argued very strongly that in the absence of God there are no objective moral duties. In the absence of a lawgiver there is no right and wrong. He said we are just like animals, and animals aren’t moral agents. But Taylor’s response was to adopt an Aristotelian view of ethics where he said ethics, or virtues, are sort of like skills. Just as, say, a carpenter can be very skilled at his carpentry or a plumber very skilled at his plumbing, so humans can be morally skilled and live lives that are virtuous in highly developed skillful ways. Not that this is right to do or wrong not to do, but it is just a sort of skill you develop – living well, sort to speak. I had a debate with Richard Taylor on this subject. I believe it is on YouTube, and I’d commend it to you because I thought it was a very interesting debate where I pointed out on the one hand on atheism it was hard to see why you would call these virtues at all, and then on the other hand I argued that you could have a theistic-based virtue ethics where God is the source of certain virtues and that therefore it really is good and obligatory to develop these virtues in your life. You are right that there is that alternative, and Taylor would be a representative of it.

**Student:** I’ve always thought Plato was addressing the little gods that his society was . . . and that he was thinking that is really kind of like the ultimate God. But they didn’t see. He may be intimately involved and ongoing . . .

**Dr. Craig:** This is a fair comment. The Euthyphro Dilemma was about the gods (plural) of Greece. Do the gods will what is good, or is the Good just what the gods will? For Plato, in a sense, the Good is a kind of God surrogate. It is the sort of metaphysical ultimate from which the world flows and is the ultimate standard of goodness and so forth. But I think it is fair to say it is not a personal being. In that sense this is different than theism. But certainly early Christians found in Plato inspiration. They identified the Good as God.

**Student:** To him it would be the unapproachable.

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Dr. Craig: All right.

END DISCUSSION

Let me look at one final objection which I call Stubborn Humanism.

So what’s the atheist supposed to do at this point? Most of them want to affirm the objective reality of moral values and duties. It is not true that most ethicists or philosophers are relativists or moral nihilists. They want to have objective moral values and duties. So most of them simply embrace Humanism and just stop there. Whatever contributes to human flourishing is good, and whatever detracts from it is bad, and that is the end of the story. This would be the position of someone like Sam Harris, for example, who is very strong on objective moral values and duties and simply roots them in human flourishing.

What might we say in response to this? I would argue that just taking human flourishing as your ultimate stopping point seems to be premature because of the arbitrariness and implausibility of such a stopping point.

Given atheism, why think that what is conducive to human flourishing is more valuable than what is conducive to the flourishing of ants or mice or chimpanzees? Why think that inflicting harm on another member of our species is wrong? When I put this question to the Dartmouth ethicist Walter Sinnott-Armstrong in our debate on the existence of God, he replied, “It simply is. Objectively. Don’t you agree?”\textsuperscript{158} Of course, I agree that it is wrong to harm another human being, but I pointed out that that wasn’t the question. The question is: why would it be wrong if atheism were true? Given an atheistic worldview, picking out human flourishing as morally special seems to be arbitrary.\textsuperscript{159}

Moreover, it seems implausible as well. Atheists will sometimes say that moral values simply attach necessarily to certain natural states of affairs. The technical term here is “supervene.” These moral properties supervene on natural states. An example of supervention would be the property of wetness supervenes on hydrogen and oxygen when it is combined in a certain way. Neither hydrogen nor oxygen are wet, but if you combine hydrogen and oxygen as H\textsubscript{2}O then wetness is a property that necessarily attaches to that substance. It supervenes on that state of affairs.

The claim is that moral properties in a similar way supervene on natural states of affairs. So the property of goodness naturally attaches to a mother’s nursing her infant. The property of badness necessarily supervenes on a man’s beating his wife. Atheists will say that once all of the natural properties are in place then the moral properties just sort of


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come along with them necessarily. Now on atheism this seems to me to be extraordinarily implausible. Why think that these strange, non-natural properties like “goodness” and “badness” even exist, much less that they necessarily supervene on various natural states of affairs? I can’t see any reason to think that on atheism a full description of the natural properties involved in some situation would determine or fix any of the moral properties of that situation.

These humanistic philosophers have simply taken a “shopping list” approach to ethical questions. Because they hold to Humanism, they simply help themselves to the moral properties that they need in order to do the job. They just wheel their shopping cart down the moral isle and pick the moral properties that they want to be part of their view. But what is needed to make this view plausible is some sort of explanation for why moral properties would necessarily supervene on certain natural states of affairs. Again, it’s inadequate for the Humanist to assert that we do, in fact, see that human beings have intrinsic moral value because that’s not in dispute. Indeed, that’s the second premise of the moral argument! What we want from the Humanist is some reason to think that human beings would be morally significant if atheism were true. As it is, I think their Humanism is just a stubborn moral faith.

Somebody might persist: “but why is God the ultimate standard of moral value?” In a certain sense this question is just misconceived. Anybody has the right to present his moral theory and to explain its parameters. The apropos question will be whether that moral theory is plausible. In particular, whether its moral ultimate or its explanatory ultimate is a non-arbitrary and adequate stopping point. I’ve argued that on Humanism that stopping point is premature. It is arbitrary and implausible. In contrast to Humanism, I think that theism has a [inaudible] or adequate stopping point. For God, by definition, is the greatest conceivable being. A being that by definition is worthy of worship. Anything that does not have that property just is not God. So nothing higher could be imagined. Identifying the Good with God himself, I think, supplies a foundation for a plausible moral theory.

With that we are out of time.160
Lecture 21: The Second Premise of the Moral Argument

We’ve been talking about the moral argument for God’s existence. I’ve completed my defense of the first premise of that argument that if God does not exist (that is to say if atheism is true) then objective moral values and duties do not exist. We looked at some objections to that premise, and I answered those as best I could.

Today we want to move to the second premise of that argument, that objective moral values and duties do exist. I initially thought that this would be the weak and more controversial premise in the argument. In my debates with atheistic philosophers, however, I find that virtually nobody denies this premise. Virtually everyone affirms that some objective moral values and duties do in fact exist. In fact, it might surprise you to learn that actual surveys taken on university campuses indicate that faculty professors are more likely to believe in the objectivity of moral values than students, and that of the faculty, philosophy professors are more likely to believe in objective moral values and duties than professors in other disciplines!

So it is not the case that students get their relativism from university professors as is often thought. The professors are more objectivist than the students, and of the professors the philosophers are the ones who affirm moral values and duties are objective in the clearest way.

Why is that? Philosophers who reflect upon our moral experience would say that just as I believe my five senses (that there is a world of physical objects around me that I am sensing) unless and until I have some overriding reason to distrust my senses, similarly, in the absence of some overriding reason to distrust my moral experience I should also accept what my moral experience tells me, namely that some things at least are objectively good or evil, right or wrong.

Notice that this doesn’t require that our moral experience is infallible in telling us which moral values and duties exist or that we have. Neither are our fives senses infallible. The stick that is in the jar of water looks bent. The highway appears to have water on it in the distance on a hot day. Our senses can mislead us. Nevertheless unless we have some sort of overriding defeater or reason to distrust our five senses, we generally believe what they tell us – that there is a world of physical objects around me which I perceive. In exactly the same way we may grow in moral sophistication and apprehension as we discern certain things to be right or wrong that we didn’t see before. I think in the history of mankind there has been moral progress. But what that presupposes is is that objective moral values and duties do exist which we fallibly and defeasibly apprehend. In the absence of some sort of overriding defeater or reason to doubt our moral experience we should also believe that there are objectively existing moral values and duties.
I think that most of us recognize this. Most of us would agree that in moral experience we apprehend a realm of moral values and duties that impose themselves on us as objectively binding and true. For example, several years ago I was speaking on a Canadian university campus, and I noticed a poster on the wall put up by the Sexual Assault & Information Center. It read as follows: “Sexual assault: No One Has the Right to Abuse a Child, Woman, or Man.” I think most of us would recognize that that statement is true. Sexual abuse of another person (actions like rape or child abuse) aren’t just socially unacceptable behavior—they’re moral abominations. Some things at least are really wrong. By the same token, love, generosity, and self-sacrifice are really good. People who fail to see this are just morally handicapped. They are like the person who is vision-impaired and can’t tell the difference between red and green. There is no reason to let their impairment cause us to call into doubt what we clearly perceive.

I’ve found that although many students give lip-service to relativism, 95% of them can be very quickly convinced that some moral values and duties do objectively exist. All you have to do is produce a few illustrations, especially those that are tailored to the person you are talking to, and let them decide for themselves. For example, you can ask them what they think of the Hindu practice called suttee (which was the practice of taking a widow and burning her alive on the funeral pyre of her deceased husband) or what do they think of the ancient Chinese custom of tightly binding the feet of female babies thereby crippling them for life because they wanted to make them resemble lotus-blossoms. You can especially make this point effectively by appealing to examples of atrocities perpetrated in the name of religion. Ask them what they think of the Crusades or the Inquisition. Ask them if they think that it’s all right for Catholic priests to sexually abuse little boys and then for the Church to try to cover it up by moving the priest to another diocese. If you’re dealing with someone who is honest and not just trying to have an argument, I can guarantee you that almost every time that person will agree that there are some objective moral values and duties.

Of course sometimes you may encounter hardliners who will just dig in their heels. But usually their position is seen to be so extreme that other people are just repulsed by it. For example, many years ago I attended a meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature which featured a panel discussion on “Biblical Authority and Homosexuality.” All of the panelists endorsed the legitimacy of the homosexual lifestyle. One panelist dismissed the biblical prohibitions against this activity on the grounds that they reflect the cultural context in which they were written. Since this is a case for everything that Scripture says—it wasn’t written in a vacuum after all—he concluded that, “There are no timeless, normative moral truths in Scripture.” In the discussion from the floor, I pointed out that

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such a view leads to socio-cultural relativism which makes it impossible to condemn a society which has moral values that include the abuse and the persecution of homosexuals. Who is to say that that society’s values are wrong? He responded with a fog of theological double-talk, and then claimed that there is no place outside of Scripture either where we can find timeless moral values. And I responded, “But that just is what we mean by moral relativism. In fact, on your view there is really no content to the notion of the goodness of God. He might as well be dead. And Friedrich Nietzsche recognized that if God is dead that leads immediately to nihilism.” At that point one of the other panelists jumped in with the knock-down refutation, “Well, if you are going to get pejorative, we might as well not talk about it!” So I sat down. But the point wasn’t lost on the audience. The next man who stood to his feet said, “Wait a minute. I am rather confused. I am a pastor, and people are always coming to me, asking if they have done something wrong and whether they need forgiveness. For example, isn’t it always wrong to abuse a child?” I couldn’t believe the panelist’s response to this pastor’s question. She said, “What counts as abuse differs from society to society. So we can’t really use the word ‘abuse’ without tying it to a historical context.” Well, the pastor was insistent. He said, “You call it whatever you like, but child abuse is damaging to children. Isn’t it always wrong to damage children?” And she still wouldn’t admit it! This sort of hardness of heart ultimately backfires, I think, on the moral relativist and exposes in the minds of most people the bankruptcy of such a worldview.

So I think that on the basis of our moral experience we are justified in affirming a realm of objective moral values in the same way that on the basis of our sense experience we are justified in affirming a world of physical objects around us.

START DISCUSSION

Student: My experience on the Internet when talking about this argument is most people will deny the second premise of the argument. My experience has been they usually do it in the same way that they deny the existence of God – by saying there is no evidence for the existence of God, that is why we don’t believe. It is almost like the default position. What I am trying to say, would you compare our belief in God being properly basic (and our experience of him) . . . would that be in the same category as our moral experience of objective moral values and duties? Would that be a properly basic thing?

Dr. Craig: Exactly. I am glad you discerned that. That shows that you understand what we were talking about when we talked about the proper basicality of belief in God. There is no way to prove that you are not a brain in a vat of chemicals wired up with electrodes by some mad scientist being stimulated to think that you are here in this room listening to this lecture. There is no way to prove that you are not a body lying in the Matrix

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inhabiting some virtual reality. Rather, as I say, we are justified in believing in the world of physical objects around us on the basis of our experience of the world unless and until we have some overriding reason to doubt that experience – to think that I am a brain in a vat or a body lying in the Matrix. In the absence of such an overriding defeater, I am perfectly justified in accepting what my sense experience tells me – that there is a world of physical objects around me. I would say exactly the same thing about our moral experience. This is a properly basic belief grounded in our experience of moral values and duties, and unless and until some overriding reason is given to me to think that that experience is utterly delusory I am justified in thinking that there are objective moral values and duties.

Student: This could not be more timely because this week I am writing a rebuttal to post-structuralism. I am the only one in the entire group who actually thinks there is a foundation to belief! I have a sneaking suspicion I am going to be pummeled for the next few days. One of the things I wrote in my stance against post-structuralism is the only truth post-structuralists recognize is oppression and marginalization and corruption of power. Yet by their own floating definition of truth they must leave open the possibility that people are only marginalized because they perceive the words and actions of others to be oppressive. This, of course, is ridiculous. If, however, oppression and marginalization are real and tangible wrong truths then there must be actual right truths. So pray for me this week!

Dr. Craig: OK. Good!

END DISCUSSION

Now the question arises: Do we have some overriding reason to distrust our moral experience? To think that we are the victims of some gigantic illusion?

Some people have claimed that the socio-biological account of the origins of morality undermines our moral experience. Remember, according to that account, our moral beliefs have been ingrained into us by biological evolution and social conditioning. Does that give us reason to distrust our moral experience that there are objective moral values and duties?

The socio-biological account clearly does nothing to undermine the truth of our moral beliefs. For the truth of a belief is independent of how you came to hold that belief. In fact, this objection seems to be a textbook example of what is called the genetic fallacy, which is trying to invalidate a person’s point of view by showing how that person came to hold that point of view. For example, someone might try to indict your belief that representative democracy is the best form of government by saying the reason you

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believe that is because you were born in the United States. But if you were born in another country you would have held another belief. That is the genetic fallacy – trying to invalidate the truth of a belief by showing how the person came to hold it. You may have acquired your moral beliefs through a fortune cookie or through reading tea leaves, but they could still happen to be true. In particular, if God exists, then objective moral values and duties do exist regardless of how we come to learn about them. The socio-biological account (or as it is sometimes called the evolutionary-psychological account) at best proves that our perception of moral values and duties has evolved. But if moral values and duties are gradually discovered, rather than invented, then our gradual and fallible apprehension of the moral realm no more undermines the objectivity of that realm than our gradual, fallible apprehension of the physical realm undermines the objectivity of the physical world.

Taken as an objection to the truth of premise (2), this simply commits the genetic fallacy.

START DISCUSSION

_Student_: Perhaps one way they could get around the genetic fallacy part is . . . you know there is Alvin Plantinga’s evolutionary argument against naturalism. That is not genetic fallacy. But there he tries to show that if you believe evolution, you believe this is how your cognitive faculties have evolved, then you have a good reason to doubt all of your other beliefs. What if they try to do that for this? I just want to make a comment. I find it funny the same people who bring this objection by the way will say this undermines our moral intuitions, but somehow it doesn’t undermine the rest of our cognitive faculties.

_Dr. Craig_: Yeah. That is just hypocritical, isn’t it? OK, your point is an excellent one and will form the segue to the very next point that I am going to make.

_Student_: It is interesting when we talk about the existence of objective moral truths and is there a God because it seems to expose, I think, a certain part of human nature that we want to have the privilege of having our lives be objectively meaningful, but at the same time we don’t want to be responsible to a higher power when we really can’t have it both ways because only the existence of a higher power can ensure that our lives are objectively worth something. So we can’t have the privilege of having a meaningful life without the responsibility of the moral obligations that are involved in attaining that.

_Dr. Craig_: I agree with you 100%. What these people would have to say is that not only are the lives of other people morally worthless, but that their own life is morally worthless, and that other people are at liberty to treat them anyway that they want – treat them as dirt, persecute them, abuse them – and no moral protest could be raised. I think
you are quite right in saying that that is not how people want to live. They do recognize their own self-worth, at least, and that such activity would be wrong.\textsuperscript{164}

\textit{Student:} Just to add onto that good point – Ravi Zacharias says that if you are truly an atheist, that is a life that is truly devoid of meaning, purpose, and hope ultimately. The first question to ask college students, or anybody else, if they say they are atheists is to say, “Why are you here?” You are going to be a doctor? Who cares.

\textit{Dr. Craig:} In a sense that was the first premise of the argument. You will remember I shared that initially when I was speaking on university campuses I just talked about that first premise – that if there is no God then ultimately our lives are absurd. They have no ultimate meaning, value, or purpose. But then the students began to respond by saying, “But there are things that are valuable and good and so forth.” It hit me that they had supplied this missing premise in a moral argument for God. As I say, I think that most people will grant the truth of premise (2) if you just probe a little bit and use telling examples with them.

\textbf{END DISCUSSION}

Let’s go on by saying that perhaps the socio-biological objection – or the objection from evolutionary psychology – is not intended to undermine the truth of our moral beliefs, but rather our justification for holding such beliefs. If your moral beliefs were based on reading tea leaves, they might accidentally turn out to be true, but you wouldn’t have any justification for thinking that they were true. So you wouldn’t know that they were true.

Similarly, the objection here could be that if our moral beliefs have been produced by evolution then we can’t have any confidence in the truth of those beliefs. Why? Because evolution aims merely at survival, not at truth. Our moral beliefs are selected for their survival value. The fittest are the ones that survive. If having moral beliefs will be conducive to the perpetuation of your species then these moral beliefs will be selected for in the process of evolution. And since evolution is aiming merely at survivability, not truth, we can’t trust our moral experience. So we can’t know that premise (2) of the argument is true. This is the objection that was suggested just a moment ago. The objection is aimed not at the truth of premise (2) but at your justification for believing premise (2).

My claim is that we are justified in believing premise (2) on the ground of our moral experience unless and until we have some overriding defeater of that experience just as we are justified in believing that there is a world of physical objects around us on the ground of our sense experience unless and until we have an overriding defeater of that experience. Such a defeater would have to show not merely that our moral experience is
fallible or defeasible, but that it is utterly unreliable – that we may apprehend no objective moral values and duties whatsoever.

Our moral experience is so powerful, however, that such a defeater would have to be incredibly powerful in order to overcome our moral experience just as our sense experience is so powerful that a defeater of my belief in the world of physical objects I perceive would have to be incredibly powerful in order for me to believe that I might be a brain in a vat of chemicals or a body lying in the Matrix. But as Louise Antony, an atheist philosopher, put it in our debate on the foundations of moral values, any argument from moral skepticism will be based on premises which are less obvious than the existence of objective moral values and duties themselves. That is to say, any argument for moral skepticism will rely upon premises which are less obvious than premise (2) of the moral argument, and therefore could never be justified.

So what is then this allegedly powerful defeater of premise (2) that shows that my moral experience is utterly untrustworthy? Is it just that our moral beliefs are the result of evolutionary development, and therefore they are aimed at survival, not at truth? Is that the whole objection? If that is it, we need to ask ourselves what is the evidence for that? In fact, there is no compelling evidence that our moral beliefs are the products of biological evolution.

In a complex survey of literature on this topic by the biologist Jeffrey Schloss, Schloss examines contemporary work on evolutionary theories of morality and he reports, “not only do we lack currently a fully adequate evolutionary account of morality, but the manifold accounts we do have are also disparate and are often represented by prominent exegetes as having resolved issues that are still in dispute.” In other words Schloss is saying that these accounts offered by evolutionary psychology are mutually contradictory and that the proponents of these theories are making claims that in fact they cannot support. In personal correspondence, Sloss elaborated,

the evolutionary debunking argument . . . assumes that moral beliefs are in fact adequately explained by natural selection. . . . there is little question that they are not. Dispositions toward certain behaviors . . . (reciprocity, parental care, etc.) do have fairly compelling evolutionary explanations. But . . . we don’t actually have a plausible evolutionary proposal for the moral beliefs associated with these behaviors. I’ve done a fairly recent review of the literature. . . , and I can’t find any coherent account for moral beliefs or even normative intuitions.

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\[\text{\small 167} \text{Jeffrey Schloss to WmLC, Sept 17, 22, 2015.}\]
Yet how easily we allow the evolutionary debunker to get away with mere hand-waving and generalizations in trying to undermine the veridicality of our moral experience. The powerful defeater of our moral experience of premise (2) simply does not exist.

Secondly, moreover, the assertion that because our moral beliefs have evolved they are aimed at survival not at truth presupposes atheism. For if God exists then plausibly our moral beliefs, though evolved, will be generally reliable. God would want us to hold generally reliable moral beliefs. The defeater presupposes that naturalism is true. That begs the question in favor of atheism. Only assuming that atheism and naturalism is true is it the case that our moral beliefs are aimed at survival rather than at truth. It is actually the debunker of our moral experience who has the burden of proof here to give a sufficiently powerful defeater of our moral experience. He needs to prove that our beliefs are not aimed at truth if they are evolved, and that is obviously not the case if God exists. You have to presuppose atheism in order for this argument to get off the ground, and that is question-begging.

Finally, the objection turns out to be self-defeating. On atheism and naturalism, all of our beliefs, not just our moral beliefs, are the product of evolution and social conditioning. Thus, the evolutionary account would lead to skepticism about knowledge in general. But this is self-defeating because then we should be skeptical of the evolutionary account itself, since it, too, is the product of evolution and social conditioning! Therefore the objection undermines itself. This, as someone earlier reminded us, is Alvin Plantinga’s evolutionary argument against naturalism – naturalism has a built-in defeater. If our beliefs are aimed at survival rather than truth then the naturalist can have no confidence in the truth of naturalism. Therefore this objection would undermine not only our moral beliefs but all of our beliefs including the belief in naturalism and atheism.\footnote{168}

It seems to me that given the warrant for premise (2) provided by our moral experience, we are justified in thinking that objective moral values and duties exist.

**START DISCUSSION**

*Student:* I am going to have to dumb this down a little bit. Premise (1) – if God does not exist objective moral values do not exist. Premise (2) – objective moral values do exist. Premise (3) – therefore God exists.

*Dr. Craig:* Right – (3) is the conclusion, not a premise.

*Student:* Right now we are talking about (2). Right?

*Dr. Craig:* Yes.
Student: Personally, I am not convinced that objective moral values do exist. The argument then to me doesn’t . . . if objective moral values do not exist, I don’t go to “God does not exist.” It is just not a meaningful argument for me. I can see that objective moral values do not exist, and yet God exists.

Dr. Craig: Oh, really?

Student: Yes.

Dr. Craig: How could you affirm that God exists and objective moral values do not exist when one of the essential attributes of God is goodness?

Student: I think that morality is by definition subjective, not objective. Even though I know we talked about in prior weeks the Nazi argument and all of that stuff, but the thing is for us in this room to look back on that and say even if they had won we still think it is wrong, that is still my subjective experience. That is not evidence for me that there is objective morality. I don’t make a conclusion that because there is no objective morality there is no God.

Dr. Craig: You just want to undermine our justification or, it sounds to me like you are saying even the truth of premise (2).

Student: The truth of premise (2) is my problem.

Dr. Craig: Again, here let me step back from the argument and just say that if you believe in God you are committed to the truth of premise (2) because God has as an essential attribute goodness. God by definition is a being that is worthy of worship, and nothing would be worthy of worship if it isn’t good. So every theist is committed to the objectivity of moral value because he believes in the goodness of God. That is not going to rescue the argument, but I just want to speak to you as a sister in Christ that if you believe God exists you have to believe in the objectivity of moral values. Don’t you believe God is good?

Student: Yes.

Dr. Craig: If you worship him you must believe that otherwise how could you worship something you don’t think is good? Just as a Christian you are committed to the truth of premise (2). But you can perhaps role play here the role of the atheist and say, “All right. I believe in premise (2), but as an argument for theism this isn’t very good because I, playing the devil’s advocate as the atheist, I don’t think premise (2) is true.” But then I’ve already responded to that. As I say, if you believe in the world of physical objects around you on the basis of your sense experience, you have exactly the same sort of reason for believing in a realm of objective moral values and duties because you have an experience of that realm. Unless and until you have some overriding defeater of that experience you are justified in believing in it just as you are justified in believing in the external world.
Student: You are using the word “objective” and the word “experience” – to me the word “experience” takes me out of objective and into subjective. That’s my subjective experience.

Dr. Craig: Ah. OK. Yes, I’ve heard other people say something like this and I think this is based on a confusion. Obviously my experience is subjective. Right? That is what experience is! But the object of the experience isn’t therefore subjective. If I have an experience of the external world, that doesn’t make the external world subjective. If I experience Ben Jones, that doesn’t make Ben Jones a product of my consciousness even though my experience of Ben Jones is my experience and is subjective. In exactly the same way, say I have an experience of pain. That is obviously subjective. Right? A pain experience is my inner experience. I have a pain experience. But that isn’t to deny the objective truth, “He is in pain.” Somebody stuck a knife in his leg and is twisting it around and look at him – he is writhing and screaming. It is obviously true that he is objectively in pain even though his experience is subjective. So of course our experience of everything is subjective because it is experiential. But the object of the experience can be objective. And I’d say that is what moral values and duties are.

Student: Let’s use an analogy that is a little less physical, medical, and a little more abstract. Because we are talking not about injury or of pain but more about beliefs. The one that comes to my mind is the flat Earth. For many, many centuries the commonly held belief was that the Earth was flat. Many people – we could take you to the mountaintop and you could see the edge. There was evidentiary support for that belief. Objectively the world was round whether we believed it was flat or not.

Dr. Craig: Good. I’m glad this is what you think.

Student: The thing is though that it doesn’t lead to any conclusion for me that . . .

Dr. Craig: Wait a minute. Don’t you believe that the Earth is round?

Student: I do.

Dr. Craig: It is spherical isn’t it? I assume you believe this on the basis of evidence, right?

Student: Right.

Dr. Craig: So on the basis of the evidence, you think that these people in the past were wrong in what they said. They were objectively wrong. The Earth is objectively spherical. Even though your experience of that is subjective. You have a subjective experience of the evidence – you see it and so forth. But you believe that the Earth is round. The subjectivity of your experience doesn’t mean that the fact you believe in is
subjective. Why isn’t it just as objectively true to say that torturing a little girl and raping her is wrong as to say that the Earth is round?

**Student:** Your last point – you made a point and I just wanted to explore it a bit – the belief that evolutionary forces led us to these things, that if our beliefs are based on survival rather than truth. I am going to ask you a question. What is truth? I probably shouldn’t phrase it that way but.

**Dr. Craig:** Truth is the property of a proposition that corresponds to the world as it actually is.

**Student:** So if the evolutionary forces say I am going to continue the human animal structure and by doing that we kill children that are weak and eat them or whatever things that are repugnant to us but it does result in more survival and protects the Earth we should kill one-third of the population because the Earth is important and we need to have a sustainable environment. I hear this all the time. Is that truth, and how do we argue that truth (if it is) against our objective moral values and say, “Yeah, that may protect the Earth but that is against my objective moral structure.”

**Dr. Craig:** It would be objectively morally wrong to do that. Nobody is claiming – not even atheists – that you can just read moral values off of the evolutionary process. Nature is red in tooth and claw, so no one claims that whatever helps you to survive is good because lots of things are violent and wrong.\(^\text{170}\) So there isn’t any claim that evolution teaches us what is good and evil. The claim that we are exploring is whether or not my moral experience of right and wrong and good and evil is undermined by the fact that moral values have evolved – or my perception of moral values has evolved over time. I gave three responses to that. Let me just review these three responses before we conclude today.

The first response is that in fact there is no such account in the literature. There is no coherent compelling account recognized by biologists that would explain how moral beliefs or normative beliefs arise from biological evolution.

The second point is that that would undermine the objectivity of these beliefs only if atheism is true because only if naturalism is true would our beliefs be shaped by survival value and not by truth. The argument begs the question. It assumes that atheism is true.

The third response was that if this objection is true – if this would undermine our moral beliefs – then it undermines everything we believe because all of our beliefs then are selected by evolution for survivability, not for truth. But if everything we believe is

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unjustified then belief in the evolutionary account itself is unjustified. So it is inherently a self-defeating objection.

END DISCUSSION

We can resume this discussion next time.\textsuperscript{171}
Lecture 22: The Moral Argument’s Conclusion

Last week I was at Ohio State University for a Veritas Forum which turned out to be unexpectedly significant. I had a debate scheduled with an atheist philosophy professor at OSU named Kevin Scharp. The subject was “Is there evidence for God?” I thought like most of these Veritas Forum events that this would be a sort of friendly dialogue where we would each speak for 15 minutes and then we would have a moderated conversation.

Well, I have not experienced such ferocity in a critic since I had those dialogues with Lawrence Krauss in Australia. Kevin Scharp had prepared very, very well for this dialogue. He made a point of letting me know before the event began that he had listened to all eight years of our Reasonable Faith podcasts – all of them! He was familiar with the debate with Sean Carroll, with Alex Rosenberg, as well as other material. He had PowerPoints and charts to show. He went a mile-a-minute, and attacked not only the six arguments that I presented in my opening statement but all the other arguments I’ve ever presented anywhere! So it was really a very good contest. Many people have asked me, “What would it be like if you were to have a debate with someone who really took the time to prepare?” Well, this is your chance to find out because this is going to be on YouTube as soon as it’s edited. I think that it will be a great tool for dissecting and talking about, hitting the pause button, replaying, thinking about it. It was a very substantive discussion. I will say something more about the content of it later on in the class today because I want that to be part of the podcast because we can benefit from Scharp’s critique of all of my arguments.

Today we are going to wrap up our discussion of the moral argument for God’s existence. The last time we looked at a defense of premise (2) that objective moral values and duties exist and responded to some objections to that premise. In particular, the objection from evolutionary psychology which says that because our moral beliefs are the product of evolution, and evolution (or natural selection) is aimed at survival value, not a truth, we can have no confidence in the truth of our moral beliefs and therefore could not be justified in believing premise (2).

I responded to this in a three-fold way. First I pointed out that, in fact, there is no plausible coherent socio-biological account of our moral beliefs. This defeater really does not exist, and we shouldn’t let people bluff us by asserting that it does.

Secondly, I pointed out that the objection assumes that atheism is true and therefore begs the question. Yes, if God does not exist then our beliefs are shaped by a mechanism that does not aim at truth but mere survival. In fact, that is the first premise of the argument – if God does not exist, objective moral values and duties do not exist. But the atheist cannot be justified in simply assuming that therefore God does not exist. If God does exist then he might well guide the evolutionary process so that we would arrive at moral
beliefs that are for the most part true as well as have survivability. So the objection that because our moral beliefs have evolved – they are aimed at survival not at truth – presupposes the truth of atheism, and that begs the question.

Finally, number three, I argued that the objection is ultimately self-defeating. All of our beliefs on naturalism are the product of evolution and therefore are selected for by their survival value, not for their truth. That would include the belief in naturalism itself. So the objection is self-defeating – it contains within itself its own defeater.\textsuperscript{172} You cannot be rational in affirming naturalism because if naturalism is correct all of your beliefs are unreliable including your belief in naturalism. This is, of course, Alvin Plantinga’s famous evolutionary argument against naturalism.

So I do not think that the objection to the second premise from socio-biology or evolutionary psychology is a good one.

We finished our class last time by talking about an objection, or a concern, that someone raised based upon the subjectivity of our moral experience. Since our moral experience by definition is subjective, doesn’t that mean that moral values and duties are subjective? And I suggested that that doesn’t follow. My experience of the physical world around me is subjective – feeling certain things, seeing certain things, hearing or smelling certain things. Those are all subjective experiences. But that doesn’t mean that the external world of objects which I experience is therefore subjective. The object of experience can be objective and real and mind-independent even if the experience itself is something that is by definition subjective.

I want to share with you a letter that I received the day after our Defenders class. I want to emphasize that this letter does not come from a beginner – a novice. This comes from the man who is responsible for transcribing all of our Defenders podcasts. He has been doing this for years. He has transcribed all of Defenders 2 and each week he does another lesson in Defenders 3. So this is a person who has a good grasp of apologetics material. But listen to what he writes.

\begin{quote}
Bill,

Just wanted to give some feedback on Defenders and suggest you add something to your moral argument premise 2 presentation when you talk about this in the future to clear up a confusing matter. Now, realize I’ve read and listened to your material on this countless times over the years. Yet, I’ve been misunderstanding this for a long time now (and in a similar way Michelle seemed to be). I have to believe this is something a lot of people are confused about. It was the confusion\end{quote}

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equating the words "experience" and "subjective" - specifically equating "moral experience" to "subjective morality".

But the light bulb finally went on for me when I heard you explain this in the following way (I've not heard you put it quite like this before, maybe I just missed it). You said: “Obviously my experience is subjective. That is what experience is! But the *object* of the experience isn’t therefore subjective.” You only needed to say those three sentences - now I finally get it! What I think needed to be explicitly explained when going over premise 2 is this distinction between the moral experience itself and the OBJECT of that experience. It is implied in your analogy with the five senses and the physical realm, but for dolts like me you have to spell it out :) Seeing a chair with my eyes is just as much a “subjective experience” as sensing that murder is wrong - but that does not mean the OBJECT of those experiences are subjective (murder is objectively wrong just as the chair is objectively real even though I had a subjective experience of both). It all makes sense now.

Knowing this also helped with the “flat Earth” analogy Michelle brought up. I finally realized that this wasn't a question about subjective vs. objective at all, but rather was merely dealing with INCORRECT versus CORRECT belief regarding an objective truth. Just as flat-Earthers had an incorrect belief regarding the objective truth of a round Earth, so too the slave traders of the 18th century held an incorrect belief regarding the objective truth that slavery is wrong.173

P.S. tell Michelle “thank you” for me. I hope she doesn't feel she was asking a question no one else cared about - because it was the one I was waiting for and the answer was definitely helpful (to me anyway). It solves a nagging problem for me because I never fully “got it” until now.

It just goes to show that when you’ve got a question, it is probably something that somebody else is bothered by as well. So don’t be afraid to speak up.

**START DISCUSSION**

*Student:* It is interesting that the Chinese character for “soul” is “Devil-says” – two characters: “devil” and “says.” That gives us an understanding that the fall of man when they ate the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil . . . our soul has realigned from “God says” to “Devil says.” It is all about alignment issues – our subjectivity and the objective truth is an alignment issue.

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Dr. Craig: Very nice. That is nicely said. Our subjective beliefs can be misaligned, can’t they? Or they can be correctly aligned with the objective truth about these matters which is supplied by God himself – his nature and his commands that express that nature.

Student: It is interesting that that was brought up because I was wanting to ask a question concerning humanity’s history. We know that humanity is separated in different cultures and things like that. Today when we find tribes in other countries we find that certain acts that they do are horrific so, for example, tribes that practice cannibalism and things like that. I was wanting to ask that question. If we separated so much but we believe that objective moral values exist then I am guessing you answered my question. We have a subjective experience of those moral values so therefore different cultures are unaligned correctly with those morals.

Dr. Craig: That’s right. And it is no part of the moral argument to say that our moral faculties are infallible any more than our sense faculties are infallible. You see water on the highway ahead on a hot day and it turns out to be a mirage. The stick in the jar of water looks bent but you know it is not. There are optical illusions and auditory illusions. So it is no part of the moral argument to say that our moral perceptions are infallible. This is especially true when you think of the sinfulness and the fallenness of man. It is no wonder that people would be involved in perverse practices given their alienation from God and their estrangement from him.

Nevertheless, I am told by anthropologists that the commonality of the moral codes among the peoples of the world is really quite striking. They may differ in ways in which these fundamental values come to expression culturally, but at root there is a large dimension of commonality. Take cannibalism, for example. From what I’ve been told, tribes in New Guinea, for example, that practice cannibalism agree with the Christian ethic that you should love your neighbor as yourself. Therefore they would never cannibalize a member of their own tribe. But they just didn’t regard people in other tribes as neighbors. These were foreigners or strangers and so they could be subject to cannibalism. They were enemies. But there was the underlying value of loving your neighbor as yourself. Similarly, a value like modesty is probably universal but in some cultures a woman’s going bare-breasted is not immodest, but in others just showing her bare arms is considered to be immodest or showing her earlobes is immodest. So there can be different cultural expressions of underlying commonalities, I think.

Student: Another thing is that concerning . . . we have that many cultures or many places share commonalities in their morals, but what about the punishment when they go against those morals? For example, in some countries if someone murders then they put them to death.174 But in countries like here you might be put to death or you could be in prison for

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fifty years or things like that. In other countries, in some Muslim countries, for being
immodest you get harsh punishment, but yet here which is more liberal we don’t get any
punishment at all.

\textit{Dr. Craig}: That is obviously a reflection of people’s different conceptions of what
constitutes justice and what would be an appropriate punishment for the crime.

I would say, however (and here is a caution), especially in Western society, many people
have given up the idea of retributive justice all together. When a criminal is punished it is
not to pay him back for his crime. It is either to reform his character so that he gets better,
or it is to sequester him in jail so that he can’t hurt anybody else. But the purpose of the
punishment is not retributive. That would obviously affect what sort of punishment
would be doled out for different sorts of criminals.

\textit{Student}: Something I’ve learned reading Thomas Aquinas and the Scholastics:
experience doesn’t exist in a vacuum. It is not like you just have experience simpliciter.
Experience is always experience of something. It is essentially intentional. It is outward
directed. So when you are having a moral experience, what are you experiencing? You
are pointing outside already. It seems that the very claim of moral experience seems to
imply some sort of . . . if you don’t believe in objective moral values, what is it you are
experiencing?

\textit{Dr. Craig}: Yeah, what are you experiencing? Notice the word that he used –
intentionality. That is a technical term that is worth adding to your vocabulary if you
don’t know it already. This is the “of-ness” or “about-ness” of something. Thoughts have
intentionality. I can think “of” my wife, or I can think “about” my summer vacation. His
point is that subjective experience exhibits intentionality as well – it is an experience of
something else. So there is an object of that experience.

\textit{Student}: I know you kind of touched on this in your newsletter, but it has to do with
defending a premise. You were saying you were going into how, as long as you can show
that there is a greater probability that is correct rather than incorrect, then you can use
that as a way to prove that it is true. I am just wondering if you could expound on that
because . . . I guess I know the person you debated must have brought that up. But I was
wondering about that myself.

\textit{Dr. Craig}: Yes, I will when I finish this argument. Then I am going to reflect on the
objections raised by Professor Scharp.

\textit{Student}: I just wanted to touch on the idea that evolution caused moral fiber within the
human. It seems to me if really we are saying survival of the fittest is the origin of our
moral standard, it doesn’t seem at all to add up. For example, in certain species of fish
they eat their young as a means of survival. In fact, that helps the population of the fish.
But I can’t think of any example in human culture where they would eat their young as a normal course of a day’s events. It just seems there is so many examples where if you are looking at only survival of the fittest so many behaviors would be the norm that are not the norm. It just speaks again to something beyond just that objective of survival.

*Dr. Craig:* I think you are right to challenge this. In the article that I quoted from by Jeffrey Schloss, he particularly looks at evolutionary explanations of altruism where someone does some self-sacrificial act for a person or organism that is not its own progeny and therefore has no evolutionary interest whatsoever in it. Yet, altruism has evolved among human beings. How do you explain that in purely evolutionary terms? Jeff says there is no explanation in the literature that effectively explains the value of altruism.

*Student:* I do think in most cultures if a mother dies it is common for another woman to assume the responsibilities of the mother and not just let the infant die.  

*Dr. Craig:* That would be altruistic behavior because she has no genetic investment in that other woman’s child.

*Student:* In fact it would be quite a burden as we all know.

*Dr. Craig:* Right. Exactly. It actually places a burden on her. That is true.

END DISCUSSION

Let’s draw our conclusion. From the two premises of the argument it follows that God exists. The moral argument complements the contingency and cosmological and design arguments by telling us about the moral nature of the Creator and Designer of the universe. It gives us a personal, necessarily existent being who is not only perfectly good but whose nature is the standard of goodness and whose commands constitute our moral duties. So it really rounds out the case for theism in a way that the other arguments do not.

I have to say that in my experience the moral argument is probably the most effective argument for the existence of God. I say this somewhat grudgingly because my favorite is the cosmological argument. But the fact is that cosmological and teleological arguments don’t really grab people where they live. You can dismiss or ignore the cosmological evidence for the beginning of the universe or the fine-tuning of the universe, but the moral argument on the other hand is not so easily brushed aside. Every day you get up you answer by how you treat other people whether you think there are objective moral values and duties. It is an unavoidable question.
In answer to the question that we began with several weeks ago – can we be good without God? - I think the answer is “no.” We cannot truly be good without God, but if we can in some measure be good then it follows logically that God exists.

**START DISCUSSION**

*Student:* I’d like to try to point out that it seems like the moral argument . . . our obligation is God’s character and nature. Therefore, for him to be just he has to make a way for us . . . because you wouldn’t hold somebody accountable to being something they are not. That is what he is doing for a fallen nature. Therefore, for him to still maintain the moral obligation means he has provided a way to us for us to partake of his nature and be transformed.

*Dr. Craig:* I think this does have intimate connections with the doctrine of salvation and the doctrine of the atonement where you have the demands of God’s justice need to be met but then also his love which would bring reconciliation.

**END DISCUSSION**

In our closing minutes, let me say something about the critique that Professor Scharp offered at Ohio State University of my arguments for God’s existence. It was a very odd critique because for the most part he didn’t attack any of the premises in the arguments. Instead, what he argued is that all of the arguments – all ten or so of them – suffer from what he called “weakness.” That is to say, they don’t inspire sufficient confidence for belief in God. It wasn’t that they have false premises or are illogical, it is just that they’re weak. They don’t give you sufficient confidence for belief in God.

Now, why did he think that? It had to do with the criteria that I give for what constitutes a good deductive argument. Does anybody remember what I said the criteria are for a deductive argument to be a good one?

*Student:* You had described how you weren’t looking for it to be absolutely 100% guaranteed by all to say this is absolutely true. Just that it was more plausible than implausible. And the premises had to follow.

OK, very good. Excellent. A good deductive argument needs to be logically valid (that is to say, from the premises the conclusion follows by the rules of logic). Secondly, the premises need to be more plausible than not. The premises need to be more plausible than the negation of those premises. If those conditions are met then I said you have a good argument.

Scharp attacked this by saying, *Suppose that the premises are more plausible than not so they give you a 51% confidence in the truth of the premises. That is not enough to*
engender confidence to believe in God. If you have only 51% confidence that God exists, that is not enough to believe in God. So the arguments are all too weak, in his view, even if they are successful.

What is wrong with that response? A couple of things.

When I said that for an argument to be a good one it had to be logically valid and its premises need to be more plausible than not, I was setting a minimum for what an argument needs to be to be a good one. I wasn’t in any way suggesting that the arguments that I offer have premises that are merely 51% probable. What I am saying is that they are at least that. I would say that these premises in many cases are extremely probable. So this just sets a lower threshold for goodness of an argument. But it isn’t inaudible premises that are only 51% probable. Think of the premise that “if the universe began to exist, the universe has a transcendent cause.” I think that is 100% probable. That has a probability of 1, I would say. I couldn’t imagine why he thought that I was doing anything more than setting a minimum floor for what constitutes a good argument.

Moreover, and here is the second point, in a deductive argument the probability of the premises taken together is not equal to the probability of the conclusion. Rather the conclusion will be at least as probable as the premises. It will be equal to or greater than the probability of the premises. Even if the premises are only 51% probable, that doesn’t mean the conclusion is only 51% probable. It means a conclusion is at least 51% probable. I would say in the arguments I gave it is considerably more than that.

**START DISCUSSION**

**Student:** I know, with arguing over the Internet, I just find that people who are really dogmatically committed to a position can find some way to harmonize, some way of absolutely forcing the facts to fit their worldview. You can, of course, resort to some hardcore *ad hoc* harmonization. But that doesn’t rescue your argument. It doesn’t mean that therefore you are right or you have been proven correctly. People just don’t get that.

**Dr. Craig:** I think that is quite right. What was odd to me is that he didn’t dispute really the cogency of any of the arguments. On his view, it seems to me, I had demonstrated that it is at least 51% probable that God exists. Here is an atheist who thinks that it is probable that God exists. The title of the debate was “Is there evidence for God?” The answer would be “yes,” and he would admit it. It was really odd.

**Student:** Two things. You could probably add to the good argument its explanatory value which would enhance the probabilities.

**Dr. Craig:** I think that would be relevant to an inductive argument, but here I am talking about a good deductive argument. I think this is all you need for a deductive argument to be good. If you’ve got these two things then you should accept the conclusion.
Student: The second thing would be: then he is at less than 50% for believing you should be an atheist.

Dr. Craig: Yeah, that’s right. Atheism is improbable on his view. Atheism is probably false.

Student: I think it is interesting – didn’t you say he is a philosophy professor? The simple things that you pointed out as far as a deductive argument are pretty much the standard. That is with people being in philosophy at all, whether a Christian or otherwise. I think that is why so many non-Christian philosophers have actually given respect for your arguments and the way that they have to attack your premises because if your premises are true then it follows. He just basically says philosophy isn’t OK.

Dr. Craig: These are not strange criteria. These are, as you say, the standard sorts of criteria.

Student: Basically he is attacking his own field. That’s the way it looks like to me.

Dr. Craig: I think he misunderstood me. I can’t prove that, but I think that he did not understand I was setting a minimum floor for the argument to be good. He thought I was claiming that my arguments have premises that are merely more plausible than not. But obviously a premise can be more plausible than not by being 70%, 80%, 95%. All of those meet the standard.

Student: For me, you are not basing your belief in God on just one of these arguments. Let’s just say it was only 51%. And then you add to it another one that is 51%. Now you are at maybe 75%. A third one you are at 85%. By the time we get to ten arguments we are at 99.9999%.

Dr. Craig: Do you hear what he is saying? I didn’t think of this in the dialogue, so I didn’t say it. But afterwards, this is exactly right, and it occurred to me. Timothy McGrew, who is a professor of philosophy at the University of Western Michigan, emphasizes that even deductive arguments that, say, make God’s existence 20% probable (that’s all, just 20%), if you accumulate these arguments – 20%, 15%, 30%, 35% - pretty soon, as you say, the cumulative probability of these independent arguments is way over 50%. This is the way a cumulative case is built in a court of law, isn’t it? No single piece of evidence might be enough to convict beyond reasonable doubt, but when you put all of the cumulative evidence together then it can be beyond reasonable doubt that the accused is guilty. So the very fact that I got around ten arguments, each of which increases the probability of God’s existence, would, I think, make it very plausible to think that this does give you great confidence that God exists.
We are out of time. Next time we will wrap up our discussion of natural theology by looking at the famous ontological argument for God’s existence.\textsuperscript{178}
Lecture 23: The Ontological Argument

In our excursus on natural theology we’ve talked about a number of arguments for God’s existence such as the argument from contingency, the *kalam* cosmological argument, the argument from the fine-tuning of the universe, the moral argument. Today we turn to a new argument (and the last that we’ll be surveying in our class), and this is the ontological argument for God’s existence.

In the year 1078 a Benedictine monk by the name of Anselm, who later became the Archbishop of Canterbury, formulated a new and bold argument for the existence of God which has now fascinated philosophers for a millennium. A year earlier in 1077 Anselm had finished writing a treatise called the *Monologium* in which he presented cosmological and moral arguments for God’s existence. But Anselm was dissatisfied with the complexity of the case for theism that he had developed, and he wanted to find a single argument which would prove that God with all of his attributes in all of his greatness exists. He had pretty much given up on the task when he came upon the definition of “God” in Latin as *aliquid quo nihil maius cogitari potest*. The Latin is so great. You can learn this phrase and impress your friends when they ask you for a definition of God! That is to say, God is something than which nothing greater can be conceived, or, in more idiomatic English, God is the greatest conceivable being.

Anselm argued in his treatise that followed – the *Proslogium* - that once you understand the definition of God, once you understand what God is, then (if you’ve really understood it) you will see that God must exist because if God did not exist he would not be the greatest conceivable being. A greatest conceivable being must be an existent being. Otherwise it wouldn’t be the greatest. So God’s existence is inconceivable for anybody who really understand the word “God” and understands what God is.

Anselm says that is why Psalm 14:1 says, “The fool has said in his heart there is no God” – because if that person really understood the word “God” then he would see that God must exist. So he is a fool for saying that the greatest conceivable being does not exist.

Anselm’s argument came to be known as the ontological argument which is from the Greek word *ontos* meaning “being.” It went on to assume a variety of different forms, and has been defended by some of the greatest thinkers in the history of philosophy, for example John Duns Scotus, Rene Descartes, Benedict de Spinoza, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, and so on.

What is the common thread in all of these different versions of the argument that unites them and makes them ontological arguments? I think the common thread among these various ontological arguments is that they all try to deduce the existence of God from the very concept of God together with some necessary truths. Proponents of the ontological argument in its various forms maintain that once we understand what God is (once you
have an adequate conception of God – whether the greatest conceivable being, or the most perfect being, or the most real being) then we will see that such a being must in fact exist.\textsuperscript{179}

This argument has tended to sharply polarize philosophers. For example, the 19\textsuperscript{th} century German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer characterized the ontological argument as “a charming joke.” That opinion is certainly shared by many other philosophers today. On the other hand, the argument has been taken very seriously and in fact defended as sound by quite a number of 20\textsuperscript{th} century philosophers who are of some prominence as well, notably Norman Malcolm, Charles Hartshorne, and Alvin Plantinga.

Since Plantinga’s version of the argument is, I think, the most sophisticated and the most recent development of the argument, we’ll use it as the springboard for our discussion of the ontological argument. In Plantinga’s version of the argument he appropriates the insight of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz that the ontological argument assumes that the concept of God is possible. That is to say, the argument assumes that the concept “God” or “the greatest conceivable being” is a coherent concept. Or, using the semantics of possible worlds, it assumes that there is a possible world in which God exists.

For those who are unfamiliar with the semantics of possible worlds, let me just say a word of explanation about this lest we be misled. When we talk about possible worlds, we do not mean planets or even other universes. Rather, a possible world is simply a maximal description of reality. It is a way reality might be. I think the easiest way to think about a possible world is as a huge conjunction of propositions – p and q and r and s and so on. These individual conjuncts (p, q, r, s) are propositions which can be true or false. A possible world is a conjunction which comprises every proposition or its contradictory so that it yields a maximal description of reality. Nothing is left out of such a description. By negating different conjuncts or propositions we can arrive at different possible worlds. So, for example, we could call W1 this description of the world:

\[
W1 = p \& q \& r \& s \ldots
\]

But other descriptions of the world could be:

\[
W2 = p \& \neg q \& r \& \neg s \ldots
\]

\[
W3 = \neg p \& q \& \neg r \& s \ldots
\]

\[
W4 = \neg p \& \neg q \& r \& \neg s \ldots
\]

These would continue being the range of possible worlds. Only one of these descriptions will be comprised of propositions or conjuncts all of which are true and so is the true description of the way reality actually is. That description we will dignify by saying it is
the actual world. One of these will have all true conjuncts, and that will be the actual world.\textsuperscript{180}

**START DISCUSSION**

*Student:* This has always been the argument for God that I’ve had the hardest time wrapping my head around. I just want to be sure that I am clear so far. This is different than the multiworld hypothesis because we are not saying each of these are actual worlds out there somewhere. We are talking about one single actual world, and these are all the different ways it could have been although only one of them is correct. So it is completely different than the multiworld.

*Dr. Craig:* Right. This is different than the multiverse hypothesis or the Many Worlds Hypothesis in cosmology or quantum physics. Here, as I say, just think of these worlds as descriptions – just big conjunctions like “Ben Jones exists. Cindy Fox exists. Bryant Wright exists. William Craig exists.” That is all this is. It is just a big description, and the description that is true is the actual world.

*Student:* In order to get rid of a possible world as a possible world – is the only way that we can do that is to find a contradiction within . . . ?

*Dr. Craig:* That is a good question. I will say something about that in a minute. These propositions obviously have to be compossible – they have to be able to both be true in the same world. Right? Otherwise that is an impossible world. So that is not a possible world. But they also need to be possible in and of themselves. The proposition itself needs to be possible. I’ll say something about that in a moment. You need to have both each conjunct being possible in itself, and then you need their combination to be possible to be a possible world as well.

*Student:* I was going to ask “what do you mean by possible?” What are the underlying assumptions of “possible?”

*Dr. Craig:* This is a really good question, and it is probably impossible to define it! Because it is sort of a primitive concept. The idea would be actualizable or realizable. This is something that really could exist – really could be actual. Does that help?

*Student:* Given maybe the laws of physics of this universe?

*Dr. Craig:* No, no. Not the laws of physics. OK, good question. There are different types of modality, aren’t there? One of these would be what we might call physical modality. You say that something would be physically possible if it is consistent with the laws of nature, be physically impossible if it contradicts the laws of nature. But that is a fairly narrow kind of modality. There are things which might not be physically possible but
they are still logically possible. The kind of modality that is at play here is, again, this sort of ill-defined type of modality called broadly logical modality. We are talking about broadly logical possibility and necessity. Again, what does one mean by that? One means that something is broadly logically possible if it is actualizable or realizable. If it could really be real then that will be something that is broadly logically possible. Sometimes this is called metaphysical possibility and necessity. That is another label. But it is still the same idea – it is something that is realizable.

**Student:** As you will probably remember, I never thought this was a very good argument. I guess my core complaint is that other so-called possible worlds are not possible. There is only one world possible, and that is this one. The only way you could get another world would be to get a creator (as a theist) to do that. To try to get God to make another possible world, say that had an orange sky instead of a blue sky or which one of us didn’t exist, I would say is imaginative and fanciful. In other words, just because you can imagine (which is what these philosophers are doing) these other worlds doesn’t mean there is any way that any other world but this one could possibly be a reality. That is why I would never evoke this argument.

**Dr. Craig:** We’ve been around this block before. I think you just don’t get it. What you are expressing is a kind of a logical fatalism where everything that is true is necessarily true and there are no possibilities. On your view it is impossible, for example, that God might have refrained from creating the world, or it is impossible that Peter not deny Christ three times, or it is impossible that the second person of the Trinity take on a human nature one second later than he did in Mary’s womb. Those just seem to be utterly implausible sorts of assertions and would really deny God’s freedom. It would mean that God has no logical possibilities either. So as long as we are not conceiving of these things as actual worlds some place but simply as ways the world could have been, surely there are contingencies, there are possibilities. Some of these concern God himself. If you deny that you land in a kind of logical fatalism even concerning God where everything that happens happens necessarily. That to me just seems obviously mistaken, and also theologically pernicious. It would make evil necessary, for example.

**Student:** Those are not my attitudes, and I don’t think that they necessarily flow from my position. I don’t see how that flows – how a logical fatalism flows from my view.

**Dr. Craig:** But you said there is only one logically possible world – this one.

**Student:** I don’t know what you mean by logically possible.

**Dr. Craig:** Right! That’s why I said, I don’t think . . .
Student: Logic is of this world.

Dr. Craig: That is why I said I don’t think you get it here. The idea is, as I said earlier, we are talking here about something that is realizable. It is actualizable. This reality could be that way. Freedom on God’s part would surely necessitate that there are other . . .

Student: Of course my God has the freedom to create any world he wanted. But the fact is he did not. That is what I’m saying. Any of these others he did not do that for various reasons known only to him and his sovereignty. He chose not to do that. I can imagine “what if he did?” or “what if he didn’t?” That’s fanciful to me and not really based in reality.

Dr. Craig: These other worlds are not real. That’s right. But they are ways the world could have been. I think you want to admit that. You want to say God has the freedom to do differently and to have done differently.

Student: I would say they could not have been because he chose not to do it, and therefore they could not have been. Had he chose to do it then yes it would be reality.

Student: My understanding of this is that it is just a concept for philosophical discourse. It is to answer the “what ifs” of your debate opponent. Because otherwise it would not be possible to argue the ontological argument unless you can answer the “what ifs.” If your debate opponent says, “How can you say there is a maximally great being if the world could have made itself?” Or something like that. If we lived in a universe where things popped into existence out of nothing and we could demonstrate that then . . . I’m saying what a debate opponent might say about that. It answers the “what ifs.”

Dr. Craig: It seems to me that whether in debate or even just in your own thinking we entertain possibilities all the time. This is especially true when we deliberate about what we are going to do. We think that there are real possibilities that we have the freedom to actualize or not. Possible worlds, as you say, is just a way of conceptualizing this. I look at it as a sort of heuristic device. It plays the same role that diagrams do in mathematics textbooks. They simply are ways of representing it. To say that something is possible like “It is possible that Christ could have been born one second later” - to represent that you say there is a possible world in which Christ was born one second later. It is just a visual aid, if you will, of thinking about possibilities and necessities. It is a very helpful heuristic device because many of these questions would be very difficult to entertain and think about without these sorts of illustrations.

Student: It is a way of considering counterfactuals.

Dr. Craig: Those play a role in this, too. That is right. Counterfactuals, like you said, “If I were rich then I would do this or that.” Those involve possible worlds. That is right.
Student: I’m just wondering if it is not the use of “worlds” which is tangible causing confusion.\(^\text{182}\) It is possible that God created this planet – our existence – without mongooses. He didn’t, but he could have. I think that would be an example of a possible world, but is it because we are using that word that is causing confusion. We are not thinking of it as a concept anymore. We are trying to put reality into it.

Dr. Craig: That is absolutely right. That is why I said when we talk about possible worlds we don’t mean planets or universes. We just mean a description. Just think of this list and these are just propositions. It is a big, long conjunction of everything that is true or false. That is what it is. And you call that “a world.” And one of those is true. One of these conjunctions has all true conjuncts in it, and you call that one the actual world. So it is just a description.

Student: Well, to you it is a world. To me it is a possibility.

Dr. Craig: That’s fine! It is a possible world. Right. In the Zangmeister video that Zangmeister is developing right now for the ontological argument, the way he has chosen to portray possible worlds (in order to avoid this misunderstanding) is very clever. Rather than using circles or globes that look like worlds, he uses doors. He shows how you open one door and inside there is unicorns and pink elephants, and you open another door and there is something else in there. I thought that is very nice because it avoids this idea of universes or multiverses, that kind of thing.

Student: At this point in the discussion, do any of those p’s and q’s and r’s include God’s existence?

Dr. Craig: Yes, quite definitely. Now we haven’t gotten to that yet, but let’s let r equal the proposition “God exists.” In W1 that proposition is true, right? Because it says “r”. But in W3 that proposition is false because it says “not-r.” Here we have a case where in possible world 1 God exists, but in possible world 3 God does not exist. That is quite right. It is a maximal description of reality, so it will include propositions like “God exists.”

Student: How, with the ontological argument, do you stay on track with it being ontological? I think if you go to the worlds thing everybody thinks of it as a physical world. If you go to, say, God exists like for instance in a world designed can’t exist without a designer therefore it is God. But then you have the design argument. If you go into cosmological where there is a universe and not nothing then you have the cosmological argument. I think one of the biggest difficulties that I’ve seen with the ontological argument is that it is difficult to stay strictly philosophical.
Dr. Craig: Well, I hope that when we look at the premises of Plantinga’s argument that that will help us to stay on track because he lists the steps very explicitly. The way the argument moves is that if it is possible that God exists then God does exist. That will be the move that it makes. From the mere possibility of God’s existence it will follow that God actually does exist. That is how it will reason. We’ll see whether or not that is a good argument.

Student: I thought you said earlier that Anselm was saying that God is the greatest conceivable being. Then I looked up what I had written – the translation from Anselm – and it said greater than can be conceived. Did I hear that wrong?

Dr. Craig: God is that than which nothing greater can be conceived. That was his definition. *Aliquid quo nihil maius cogitari potest.* More idiomatically, a greatest conceivable being. That is what God is. If you can conceive of something greater than God then that would be God. So by definition, Anselm says, God is the greatest conceivable being.\(^\text{183}\)

Student: So the conceivability limits God?

Dr. Craig: Yes, insofar as if the concept of God is incoherent then God cannot exist. If the concept of God is like the concept of a married bachelor then God cannot exist. That is the insight that I mentioned that Leibniz had. Leibniz said the argument is assuming that the concept of God is a coherent concept. It assumes that the concept of God is possibly instantiated. There is a possible world in which “God exists” is true.

Student: What I am trying to say is conceivability is a human element. So basically that is the limitation.

Dr. Craig: Here I want to go back to what Bob said because he made a distinction that I think is a nice one between what we can imagine and what we can conceive. We are not saying that God is the greatest imaginable being because that would be limited to human imagination. But the idea of greatest being conceivable is the idea of a being which it is logically impossible for there to be something greater than it. There is a difference between imaginability and conceivability. For example, I can conceive mathematically of a thousand-sided polygon. I can think of a geometrical figure that has one thousand sides. It is not difficult to conceive. But I can’t imagine such a thing. I can’t form any kind of visual image of a thousand-sided polygon. That would be an example of something that is conceivable even though it is unimaginable. We are not saying that God is limited by human imagination, but simply that God is the logically greatest being that can exist. If that concept is incoherent then God cannot exist. We’ll see how that actually plays a very, very crucial role in the argument.

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END DISCUSSION
Lecture 24: Premises of the Ontological Argument and its Defense

Last time we introduced the concept of possible worlds in order to help us better understand the ontological argument for God’s existence. I emphasized that possible worlds are not any sort of concrete object – a planet or a universe. The easiest way to think about a possible world is just as a list of statements – a sort of massive conjunction:

\[ W_1: p \land q \land r \land s \ldots \]

so that this massive conjunction includes every proposition or its opposite. Thus it yields a maximal description of reality. Nothing is left out. That is what a possible world is. It is just a sort of a maximal description of reality. Reality could have been different ways. So different descriptions will make different possible worlds. For example:

\[ W_2: p \land \neg q \land \neg r \land s \ldots \]
\[ W_3: \neg p \land q \land r \land \neg s \ldots \]
\[ W_4: \neg p \land \neg q \land \neg r \land s \ldots \]

So you have various descriptions of the way the world could have been. The description which has only true conjuncts (that is to say the description every conjunct of which is true) will be the description of the actual world. That will be the true description. That will be the actual world.

What the ontological argument wants to show is that if God’s existence is possible – if God exists in one possible world – then he exists in all of them.

Last time someone raised the idea that maybe these other worlds really aren’t possible. Maybe there is only one possible world, and that is the actual world alone. I think that is a mistake. But suppose we, for the sake of argument, agree that there is only the actual world. How would that affect the ontological argument? Would that mean that the ontological argument goes through with a vengeance! Why is that? Remember the ontological argument wants to prove that if God exists in one possible world then he exists in all of them. If there is only one possible world, it follows immediately that if God’s existence is possible then it’s actual because that is the only world there is – the actual world. So far from invalidating the ontological argument, this view actually makes the ontological argument all that much easier.

The challenge in the ontological argument for the person who thinks that there are lots of possibilities is how do you get from the fact that God exists in one possible but non-actual world (like, say, W5) to existing in the actual world? That is a challenge. How do
you get from God’s existing in some possible but non-actual world to the actual world? But if you think there is only one world (there is only the actual world) then that obstacle no longer presents itself, does it? Then the inference is immediate. If God’s existence is possible then God actually exists because there is only one possible world – namely, the actual world. So I think that if you do hold to that view the ontological argument should be very congenial to you and would be one that you would readily support.  

When we talk about possible worlds, as I said in response to another person last time, these various conjunctions need to be not only compossible (that is to say, they need to not only be possible together) but each one of them individually needs to be possible as well. For example, take the proposition, “The prime minister is a prime number.” That proposition isn’t even possibly true. The prime minister is a concrete object – a flesh and blood human being. Therefore it is impossible that he could have been a prime number. There is no way that a prime number could be the prime minister. That means that no possible world will include that statement as one of its conjuncts because it is impossible. That will be false in every possible world. It is necessarily false. So a proposition which is necessarily false will be one that is false in every possible world.

By contrast, the proposition, “George McGovern is the President of the United States” is false in the actual world. But there are possible worlds in which it is true. McGovern could have been elected President of the United States. So that is a possible proposition, and it will be a conjunct in some possible worlds. To say that McGovern is the President of the United States in some possible world is simply to say that there is a maximal description of reality that has that relevant proposition as one of its conjuncts. That isn’t the actual world (that would be a non-actual possible world – a possible world which isn’t actual. One in which that conjunct is true).

Leibniz’s insight into the ontological argument is that the argument assumes that the proposition “God exists” or “A greatest conceivable being exists” or “A perfect being exists” is possibly true. That is to say that God exists in some possible world. In some possible world that statement, that conjunct – “God exists” or “A maximally great being exists” or “A perfect being exists” – that proposition is true in some possible world.

If the concept of God is incoherent or impossible then God would be like that prime minister that is a prime number. It would be a metaphysical impossibility. He would not exist in any possible world. The word “God” in that case (if the concept of God is incoherent) would refer to nothing anymore than the words “a square circle” refers to something. In both cases the words “A greatest conceivable being” or “a square circle” would just be an incoherent combination of words. They don’t refer to anything.
Leibniz says, the ontological argument assumes that the concept of God is a coherent concept – it is possible for God to exist.

In his version of the argument, Alvin Plantinga (whose version we are examining) conceives of God as a being which is maximally excellent in every possible world. What does he mean by that? By maximal excellence, Plantinga takes this to entail such excellent-making properties as being all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-good. A being which has those properties will be more excellent than a being which is limited in knowledge or strength or goodness. So a maximally excellent being will be one that has omnipotence, omniscience, and moral perfection.

A being which has maximal excellence in every possible world has what Plantinga calls maximal greatness. There is a difference between maximal greatness and maximal excellence. Maximal excellence is the property of being all-knowing, all-powerful, all-good. Maximal greatness is the property of having maximal excellence in every possible world.¹⁸⁶

Now, Plantinga says, the property of maximal greatness is possibly exemplified. That is to say, this is a coherent concept. There is a possible world in which a maximally great being exists. But if a maximally great being exists in every possible world then if it exists in one possible world it exists in all of them, including the actual world. Therefore, God exists.

Although Plantinga thinks that the ontological argument is a sound and non-question begging argument for God’s existence, initially at least he did not regard it as a “successful piece of natural theology.” Why not? Why isn’t this a successful piece of natural theology? He said it is because the key premise, “Possibly maximal greatness is exemplified” can be rationally denied. You can be rational and deny that maximal greatness is possibly exemplified. Or, in other words, you can be rational and deny that it is possible that a maximally great being exists.

But Plantinga later confessed that he had set the bar for “success in natural theology” unreasonably high. This is what he later came to say,

I employed a traditional but wholly improper standard: I took it that these arguments are successful only if they start from propositions that compel assent from every honest and intelligent person and proceed majestically to their conclusion by way of forms of argument that can be rejected only on pain of insincerity or irrationality. Naturally enough, I joined the contemporary chorus in holding that none of the traditional arguments was successful. (I failed to note that

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no philosophical arguments of any consequence meet that standard; hence the fact that theistic arguments do not is of less significance than I thought.) 187

So Plantinga says he initially thought to be a successful piece of natural theology these arguments had to compel assent from any rational person. He came to see that if you hold that standard then there are no sound philosophical arguments for anything (or no good philosophical arguments for anything). Plantinga now believes, “The ontological argument provides as good grounds for the existence of God as does any serious philosophical argument for any important philosophical conclusion.” 188 George Mavrodes, who was a professor of philosophy at the University of Western Michigan rightly remarked on Plantinga’s assessment, “But if natural theology can be that good, as good as the best arguments anywhere in serious philosophy, . . . why should we not put forward these powerful arguments as proofs of God?” 189

We can formulate Plantinga’s version of the ontological argument as follows:

1. It is possible that a maximally great being exists (in other words, maximal greatness is possibly exemplified).

2. If it is 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. If a maximally great being exists in the actual world then a maximally great being exists.

6. Therefore a maximally great being exists.

You might be surprised to learn that premises (2) through (5) of this argument are relatively uncontroversial. The real point of contention is premise (1) – that it is possible that a maximally great being exists. 190 This is the principal question which needs to be settled with regard to Plantinga’s version of the ontological argument. What warrant

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188 Alvin Plantinga, “Reason and Belief in God,” typescript dated October 1981, pp. 18-19. This paragraph was inadvertently omitted in the published version of the essay, with the result that Mavrode’s reference to it has no referent. Fortunately, a nearly identical paragraph appears in Alvin Plantinga, “Self-Profile,” in Alvin Plantinga, ed. James E. Tomberlin and Peter van Inwagen, Profiles 5 (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1985), p. 71.
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exists for thinking that this key premise “It is possible that a maximally great being exists” is true?

In dealing with this issue it is very important that we keep firmly in mind the difference between what we could call epistemic possibility and metaphysical possibility. “Epistemic” derives from the Greek word *episteme* or “knowledge.” Epistemic possibility indicates what is possible with respect to your knowledge. So, in response to the ontological argument’s key premise, one is tempted to say, “Well, it is possible that God exists, and it’s possible that God does not exist.” That is true only with respect to epistemic possibility. What you are saying there is: “For all I know God exists or he doesn’t exist. It is possible with respect to what I know. It is epistemically possible. I don’t know which is right. For all I know, God may or may not exist.”

But if God is a maximally great being then his existence, if it is metaphysically possible, it will be metaphysically necessary. This type of possibility has to do with what is actualizable or what is real independently of what you think about it. In God’s case his existence is going to be either necessary or impossible. It can’t be merely contingent. It will not be true to say it is possible that God exists or it is possible that he doesn’t. That would be to say that God exists in some possible worlds but he doesn’t exist in other possible worlds. That would be metaphysically incorrect. The concept of a maximally great being is such that it either exists in all possible worlds or it exists in none of them. But you can’t say it exists in some of them and does not exist in others of them.

Let me give an illustration of this difference between epistemic possibility and metaphysical possibility that will help to make the point clear.

There is a mathematical proposition known as Goldbach’s Conjecture that remains unproven in mathematics today. Goldbach’s Conjecture says that every even number greater than 2 can be expressed as the sum of two prime numbers. So take any even number greater than 2 – that will be equal to the sum of two prime numbers. Although Goldbach’s Conjecture has been tested to enormous lengths, no mathematician has ever been able to prove it or disprove it. We don’t know whether Goldbach’s Conjecture is true or not. So in this epistemic sense one can say (epistemically) Goldbach’s Conjecture could be true or it could be false. We just don’t know which. But as a piece of mathematics, Goldbach’s Conjecture is either necessarily true or necessarily false. It is either necessary that Goldbach’s Conjecture is true or it is impossible that it is true. It cannot possibly be true and possibly be false in this metaphysical sense. It is either impossible or necessary. One or the other. But it cannot be both possibly true and possibly false. It is necessarily true or necessarily false.

In the same way, although the key premise of the ontological argument could be epistemically uncertain – we don’t know whether it is possible that a maximally great
being exists or not. Nevertheless, the epistemic entertainability of the key premise or of the denial of the key premise doesn’t guarantee that it is metaphysically possible.\textsuperscript{191}

The question we are asking here is: is it metaphysically possible that a maximally great being exists? Not is it epistemically possible, which I think it certainly is. But is it metaphysically possible?

Think about it – the concept of a maximally great being seems intuitively-speaking a coherent idea and therefore possibly instantiated. The idea of a being which is all-knowing, all-powerful, all-good in every possible world seems to be a perfectly coherent idea and therefore possibly instantiated. In order for the ontological argument to fail the concept of a maximally great being would have to be logically incoherent. It would need to be like the concept of a married bachelor. The concept of a married bachelor when you think about it is not a strictly or explicitly self-contradictory concept as would be, say, the concept of a married unmarried man. That would be strictly contradictory. But nevertheless once you understand the concept or the meaning of what a bachelor is you can see that it is impossible that there could be something corresponding to that concept – that that concept could be possibly exemplified or that property possibly instantiated. By contrast to that, the concept of a maximally great being doesn’t seem at all incoherent. Quite the contrary, it seems perfectly coherent to talk about a being which is maximally excellent in every possible world. That would go some distance, I think, to warrant the first premise that it is possible that a maximally great being exists.

Some of you might be thinking, “But doesn’t this lead to a kind of ontological overkill?” One of the most important strategies that detractors of the ontological argument adopt is to provide parodies of the ontological argument that would lead to all sorts of absurdities that nobody would think exists. These go back to Anselm’s fellow monk Guanilo. You remember Anselm was asking the question, “Why does the Scripture say ‘the fool hath said in his heart there is no God?’” Why does the Scripture call the atheist a fool? Anselm’s answer to that was because once you properly understand the concept or the word “God” you can see that God must exist. Therefore the fool is saying something incoherent in saying God does not exist. Guanilo, his fellow monk, wrote a treatise called \textit{On Behalf of the Fool} in which he criticized Anselm’s argument. The way he did so was to construct parodies of the argument where you would try to construct parallel ontological arguments for absurd conclusions. For example, it has been suggested that you could prove that a most-perfect island exists in this way by saying a most-perfect island must have all of these properties in every possible world, and that is possible, therefore a most-perfect island actually exists. Or a necessarily existent lion – a lion that has the property of necessary existence would exist in every possible world and therefore

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there must be a necessarily existent lion. Those seem to be coherent concepts, and yet they would lead to the postulation of entities which nobody would accept. In my debates on the existence of God, some of my opponents have suggested, for example, the idea of a necessarily existent pizza or a most-perfect pizza would be one that exists in every possible world. Therefore if the ontological argument is sound we should believe in the existence of the most-perfect pizza or necessarily existent pizza.

What might the defender of the ontological argument say in response to these parodies? Quite a bit, I think. I think that the proponent of the ontological argument can plausibly claim that the concept of God differs from these supposedly parallel concepts like a most-perfect island or a necessarily existent lion or necessarily existent pizza.

1. The properties that go to make up maximal excellence that Plantinga talks about have intrinsic maximum values. For example, omniscience is the property of knowing only and all truth. You can’t get any more knowing than that if you know all the truths there are. So there is an intrinsic inherent ceiling on this property of omniscience. Similarly for the other properties like moral perfection and omnipotence. But that is not the case with things like islands. Islands don’t have sort of intrinsic maximal properties. As Plantinga says, there could always be more palm trees and native dancing girls to improve the island. It really is an incoherent concept to talk about a most-perfect island in a way that isn’t incoherent to talk about a maximally great being.

2. It is far from clear that there really are objective excellent-making properties of things like islands. Are there really objective properties that go to make up the excellence of islands? It seems not. That is a very subjective thing dependent upon your personal preference. Do you prefer a desert island or one that is crowded with the finest resort hotels? It depends on your tastes which one of these you think is the better island. Right? So there really aren’t these sort of objective excellent-making properties that go into islands in the way that omniscience, omnipotence, and goodness seem to be objective great-making properties.

With respect to the parody of the island, there are two problems – the lack of intrinsic maximum values and the lack of the objectivity of there even being excellent-making properties of islands. As for the idea of something like a necessarily existent lion or a necessarily existent pizza, this also (when you think about it), I think, is incoherent. For as a necessary being, such an animal would have to exist in every possible world that we can conceive. But any animal which would exist in a possible world in which the universe is comprised of a single infinitely dense space-time singularity just is not a lion. That is not what you mean by a lion. Similarly, it is not a pizza either. By contrast, a maximally excellent being could be immaterial and therefore transcend the physical

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limitations of space and time and so could be necessarily existent. It could exist in a possible world in which the universe is a space-time singularity. Lest you think that a pizza, say, could be immaterial – that wouldn’t be very satisfying, would it? It wouldn’t satisfy your appetite. A pizza is something that you can eat, and you can’t eat an immaterial object. Again, the idea of a necessarily existent pizza or necessarily existent lion upon closer reflection really does turn out to be incoherent and therefore doesn’t exist in other possible worlds.

Perhaps the greatest challenge to the appeal to our intuitions to justify premise (1) (and by appeal to intuition, what I mean is that it just seems clear that it is possible that maximal greatness is exemplified. This looks coherent to us. This looks like a coherent idea, and therefore one that is possibly exemplified.) The greatest challenge to that appeal, I think, would be to say that it is intuitively coherent in exactly the same way to conceive of what we might call a quasi-maximally great being. That is to say, a being which is in every other respect maximally excellent except that in one of those excellent-making properties it is a little deficient. For example, imagine a being which is morally perfect, omnipotent, but it is not quite omniscient because it doesn’t know future contingents. It is the God of open theism who knows all past and present propositions but he doesn’t know the truth value of future tense propositions about contingent events.

Why is the premise of the ontological argument more plausible than a parallel argument that says it is possible that a quasi-maximally great being exists? If we are warranted in thinking that a maximally great being exists, wouldn’t we be equally warranted in thinking that it is possible that a quasi-maximally great being exists? If you think that then you’ve got to think that such a being does exist. It wouldn’t deny the existence of God per se but it would mean that in addition to the maximally great being you are going to populate your world with all sorts of quasi-maximally great beings. That would surely be implausible and undesirable.

If the key premise of the ontological argument is possible or is true, isn’t it also true that it is possible that a quasi-maximally great being exists? I am not so sure. I think not because maximal greatness, I want to argue, is logically incompatible with quasi-maximal greatness. Think about it. A maximally great being is by definition an omnipotent being. It is all-powerful. That is part of what goes to make up maximal greatness. So no concrete object could exist independently of its creative power. As an omnipotent being, a maximally great being would have to have the power to freely refrain from creating anything at all. Therefore, there must be possible worlds in which nothing but the maximally great being exists. But that entails that if maximal greatness is possibly exemplified then quasi-maximal greatness is not. There might be quasi-excellent

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beings in many worlds—worlds in which the maximally great being has chosen to create quasi-excellent beings. Maybe they would be like angels that would be supernatural, superhuman, but not like God. But those beings would lack necessary existence. They would be created by the maximally great being, and therefore they would not be quasi-maximally great. They could be quasi-excellent but they wouldn’t be quasi-maximally great because they wouldn’t exist in every possible world. So if maximal greatness is possibly exemplified, which I think is intuitive, that means that quasi-maximal greatness actually turns out to be impossible because a quasi-maximally great being would be a being that has necessary existence and therefore would exist in every possible world. He would be outside the omnipotent power of the maximally great being.

So our intuition that a maximally great being is possible is not undermined by the claim that a quasi-maximally great being is also intuitively possible because the latter intuition—the intuition that quasi-maximal greatness is exemplified—depends upon the assumption that a maximally great being cannot possibly exist. And that would beg the question. So long as maximal greatness is possible then it would follow that quasi-maximal greatness is not.

Still, skeptics might insist that we don’t have any way of knowing a priori or in advance whether it is maximal greatness or quasi-maximal greatness which is possibly exemplified. The argument that I’ve just given shows that it can’t be both. You can’t have both a maximally great being and a quasi-maximally great being. They would be incompatible with each other because one would escape the omnipotence of the other. So you can’t have both. But the skeptic might say we don’t know if either one is possible. Our intuitions about modality are unreliable guides.¹⁹⁴

I do think we can say here that the intuition that a maximally great being exists trumps any intuition that we might have that quasi-maximal greatness is possibly exemplified. You only arrive at the idea of quasi-maximal greatness by subtracting something from the concept of maximal greatness. In a sense it is parasitic on the concept of maximal greatness. If quasi-maximal greatness seems possible, all the more so maximal greatness would seem possible. That would give reason then for thinking that priority should be given to maximal greatness and not quasi-maximal greatness.

But could we say anything more in defense of the ontological argument’s key premise? Can we say something more than just modal intuitions—that it seems intuitive that this is a coherent concept? Plantinga, I think, provides a clue when he says that if we carefully ponder the key premise and the alleged objection to it, if we “consider its connections with other propositions we accept or reject and still find it compelling, we are within our rights in accepting it.” That is a far different story than the sort of a priori speculation

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that the skeptic denounces. Even if you cannot determine *a priori* (that is to say, in advance) whether or not maximal greatness is possibly exemplified, what Plantinga is suggesting is that we could come to believe that it is possible that a maximally great being exists on the basis of *a posteriori* considerations. That is to say on the basis of evidence and argument independent of our modal intuitions. What I want to do next time is to look at some of those considerations that might lend support to our modal intuitions that maximal greatness is indeed a coherent concept. If that is the case then the basis for affirming premise (1) will not simply be our modal intuitions that this is a coherent concept or idea, but that we also have some extra additional reasons for thinking that premise (1) is true.
Lecture 25: Review of a Defense of the Ontological Argument

We’ve been talking about the ontological argument, and I hope today to bring our discussion of that argument to a close. The last time we saw that the crucial premise in the argument is the first one. If you grant that premise then the rest of the argument just follows automatically. If it’s possible that a maximally great being like God exists then it follows necessarily that God does exist and therefore God exists in the actual world. So the question is what warrant there is for that first premise, and I argued that we can see that the concept of a maximally great being (that is to say, a being that is maximally excellent: omniscient, omnipotent, morally perfect in every possible world) is a coherent concept. It’s not like a square circle or a married bachelor. This is a coherent notion that could possibly be instantiated. Therefore we have a prima facie warrant for thinking that that first premise is true that it’s possible that a maximally great being exists.

Then we looked at a number of objections to this premise. For example, we looked at attempts to parody the argument by saying wouldn’t it also lead to the existence of a maximally great pizza or the existence of a necessary lion or things of that sort which are obviously absurd? I think we saw clearly in each case that these were actually incoherent concepts. The idea of a maximally great pizza or necessarily existent lion are incoherent concepts and therefore not possibly instantiated and therefore quite different from the concept of a maximally great being.

Finally we closed by looking at the suggestion that maybe it’s possible that a quasi-maximally great being exists – a being who is very, very great, perhaps omnipotent and morally perfect, but maybe limited cognitively (maybe he doesn't know future contingents like the god of open theism). So he’s only quasi-maximally excellent, not maximally excellent in every world. What I suggested there was that if a maximally great being exists or is possible then it’s impossible that there be a quasi-maximally great being because as an omnipotent being a maximally great being would have to have the ability to annihilate or create anything other than himself including a so-called quasi-maximally great being. So if it’s possible that maximal greatness is instantiated, it follows that it is impossible that there be a quasi-maximally great being because such a being would be independent of the maximally great being and that’s impossible since he’s omnipotent. Since our intuitions about the possible existence of a quasi-maximally great being are parasitic or depend upon our intuitions about the possibility of a maximally great being, it’s plausible that we should think that it is possible that a maximally great being exists but it’s not really possible that there be a merely quasi-maximally great being.

START DISCUSSION
Student: Whenever I talk to a lot of people about the ontological argument lately, one of the things I keep hearing from them is they will say the whole idea even of what makes a maximally great being – great-making properties – is just subjective. How do you really know it has to be omnipotent? What if I say a maximally great being is some kind of . . . insert some other property here that is not omnipotence, omniscient, and omnibenevolence?

Dr. Craig: I don't find that a persuasive objection. I think it's obvious that a being is greater if it has omnipotence than if it's weak and limited in its power. It is greater if the being is morally perfect than if it's morally defective in some ways. Similarly it is greater if it knows everything – is all-knowing – than if it's limited in its knowledge and only knows some things. So I am persuaded that people who take that route are just looking for an escape route from the argument rather than honestly appraising whether or not it is greater to be omnipotent than limited in power, whether it is greater to be all-knowing rather than limited in your knowledge, whether it's better to be morally perfect than morally defective. I think those are clearly great-making properties. By contrast, in the debate I had at the University of Cambridge someone suggested from the floor that maybe this would lead to the existence of a greatest smelliest being. And as my colleague Peter Williams pointed out, clearly being smelly is not a great-making property in the way that these others are. So I don't think this is at all subjective.

But never mind that. Suppose it were. Still, that really doesn't matter. Anybody is free to propose what he takes to be the qualities of this being and then ask, “Is this a coherent notion?” And if it is coherent then it's possible, and therefore it exists. So really I don't think that the identification of these properties lies at the heart of the issue because you can just stipulate the properties that you want to go to make up maximal greatness and then ask, “Is this a coherent idea?” And if it is then the argument follows.

Student: You know how it starts with “It is possible God exists” and then from there you get the rest of the argument. There is this other objection which I guess relates to the quasi-maximal being objection but I think Peter van Inwagen calls this “the correct atheist argument.” Let’s say you substitute “It is possible God does not exist” and then you get the argument from there. Then the question would be like . . . surely it seems equally plausible – intuitively plausible – that he could not exist. How do you really break the stalemate between the two?

Dr. Craig: There I want to revert to what I said about the difference between epistemic possibility and metaphysical possibility. Certainly you can say it is possible epistemically that God does not exist. For all we know God does exist or doesn't exist. That's agnosticism, right? But that sort of epistemic possibility goes no distance toward showing
that God's non-existence is metaphysically possible. If the notion of a maximally great being is coherent then the idea that this being does not exist is incoherent – it's impossible. Think again about Goldbach's Conjecture. If it's true, it's necessarily true. Only epistemically can we say it's possible that it's true and it's possible that it's false. If it's true then it's impossible that it be false. And I would say similarly it is impossible metaphysically that God not exist.

Student: I think what they try to say to that is that you ultimately can’t get beyond epistemic possibility in the sense that you still have to judge which one do you go with – not possible or possible.

Dr. Craig: That’s right. Here, again, I want to appeal to the evident coherence of the idea of maximal greatness – that we have a kind of intuitive insight into this notion and we can see that this is a coherent notion. So while this isn't a knockdown argument obviously, it gives us, as I say, some prima facie or face-value warrant for thinking that this is possible.

Student: A friend of mine at Georgia Tech and I were talking about this argument. He was having difficulty really spelling out how sure can we be about a maximally great being and coming up with all these different things. He said what if we just said it is possible that a necessarily existing being exists and then just let it go from there? In that way you wouldn’t have all-knowing, all-powerful, all-present, but you would have a necessarily existent being which would kind of be like God. 197

Dr. Craig: I think that argument would be sound as well. Unfortunately it doesn't tell you a whole lot about the nature of the necessarily existent being. Could it be matter, for example, as Aristotle thought? For Aristotle it was merely temporally necessary that matter exists. He didn’t have the idea that it was logically necessary. You would still then need to know something about the nature of this being. But you’re right. That would be a step in the direction of theism to say contingent reality is not all there is. There’s some necessarily existing reality.

Student: In The Nature of Necessity, Plantinga states that this argument really doesn't prove or even establish its conclusion, but he says that mainly it just establishes that it’s rational to assent to the conclusion. In debate you’ve used the argument as an argument for the existence of God, and so I’m wondering if you differ from Plantinga on that.

Dr. Craig: I addressed that in our previous lesson, and pointed out that in The Nature of Necessity, Plantinga set the bar for success in natural theology far too high. He later retracted that statement. Here's what he later said, and I’ll quote this again:

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I employed a traditional but wholly improper standard: I took it that these arguments are successful only if they start from propositions that compel assent from every honest and intelligent person and proceed majestically to their conclusion by way of forms of argument that can be rejected only on pain of insincerity or irrationality. Naturally enough, I joined the contemporary chorus in holding that none of the traditional arguments was successful. (I failed to note that no philosophical arguments of any consequence meet that standard; hence the fact that theistic arguments do not is of less significance than I thought.)

Then he went on also to say,

The ontological argument provides as good grounds for the existence of God as does any serious philosophical argument for any important philosophical conclusion.

That is quite a ringing endorsement of the argument on Plantinga’s part. If you're interested in those references I can give them to you after class.

Student: Last time you mentioned towards the end of class these analogies that people throw out like a maximally great island or pizza or bird. I guess I was left wanting – can we not more forcefully and emphatically reject these analogies by way of saying the second someone posits a physical analogy like an island or a bird or a pizza it is immediately not a good analogy? It’s a horrible analogy because it’s dependent upon space-time.

Dr. Craig: I think you are right. Any physical analogy can be immediately rejected because, for example, as I said it’s possible that the universe exists as a space-time singularity and nothing else, in which case there couldn’t be something like a bird, a lion, a pizza, or anything. Absolutely, I think these physical analogies are really very unscientific. They can be immediately ruled out.

Student: They try to squirm out of it by saying, “I’m talking about a non-physical island.” Then it’s not an island!

Dr. Craig: That is so perceptive. You are absolutely right. Then you have incoherence because what is a non-physical island? This happened in my debate with Lewis Wolpert in London where he says, Maybe it was a computer that made the universe. And I said that’s impossible – a computer is a spatio-temporal object that is material. And he said, I’m talking about an immaterial computer beyond space and time. And I said, Well that’s

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just another name for God! You’ve got to have coherent concepts if you are going to oppose these two.  

Student: It seems to fall down between (2) and (3) in this particular argument as far as I can see. It says here that a maximally great being exists in some possible world. Because it may exist in some possible world doesn’t mean that particular world actually would exist.

Dr. Craig: Right. That's correct. It can be a non-actual possible world.

Student: So if you move on to (3), “If it exists in some possible then it exists in every possible world.” If that possible world didn't exist then it wouldn't exist in every possible world.

Dr. Craig: The reason that (3) follows is because the definition of maximal greatness is “maximally excellent in every possible world.”

Student: But if the possible world doesn’t exist then it essentially breaks the possibility.

Dr. Craig: No, because when you say it exists in a possible world all you are saying is “possibly, a maximally great being exists.” To say it exists in a possible world is just a heuristic device – an illustration of saying possibly a maximally great being exists. So the idea that is if it is possible that a necessary being exists then it exists necessarily in every possible world because that is what the definition is. It just follows from the definition of maximal greatness that if it is possible then it exists in every world.

Student: Maybe I am just not particularly sold on the definition of God as a maximally great being. Maybe this is because I’m a physicist and not a philosopher. But the term seems a bit fuzzy to me because it would seem to me that, say, a Calvinist could say that our version of God isn’t maximally great because he has sovereignty but doesn’t exert it. A Muslim could say our version of God isn’t maximally great because he is not transcendent completely above humanity the way Allah would be. It seems to me that there is this fuzziness in this definition.

Dr. Craig: I think what you are saying is that the concept of maximal greatness that Plantinga lays out is incomplete, and that's true. But Muslims, Calvinists, Armenians would all agree that the idea of God as a being which is omniscient, omnipotent, and morally perfect. And that's the bare-boned definition of maximal greatness. Maximal greatness will go far beyond that, as you say. There there may well be dispute about the nature of the maximally great being. But what Plantinga is giving is some necessary conditions of maximal greatness, but he's not saying that these are all of the properties.

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200 To see this exchange, skip to the 1 hour and 23rd minute of the Craig-Wolpert debate found here: http://www.reasonablefaith.org/media/craig-vs-wolpert-westminster-hall-london (accessed May 7, 2016).

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Those properties seem to be pretty clear to me. As I said earlier, they seem to pretty clearly belong to the notion of maximal greatness and would be acknowledged by all the people that you mentioned.

Student: I wonder if part of the reason we are kind of stuck on this is that our Western mindset wants empirical data for everything, and this is a non-empirical argument.

Dr. Craig: It sure is!

Student: I wonder if this argument is more acceptable to people with an Eastern mindset where scientific data is not quite as important.

Dr. Craig: I wouldn’t know. I don’t have enough experience in the Orient to be able to answer that question. Certainly, in Oriental religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, you do have the idea of an absolute reality which is, I think, metaphysically necessary.

Student: I wonder though if this argument for God would work better for people who are already thinking in that term as opposed to the Western Enlightenment thought.

Dr. Craig: The difficulty is - here we are just talking sociology, right? - the difficulty for the Eastern mind would be while it resonates with the idea of metaphysically necessary existence, it tends to view that existence as impersonal and so would be reluctant to say that this absolute reality is omniscient or morally perfect because those are attributes of a person, and they don’t want the metaphysical absolute to be personal. But then again, I want to revert to what I said earlier. It’s better to be morally perfect than not and that this does plausibly belong to maximal greatness despite the Eastern mindset. But you’re certainly right in saying that this argument would be more appealing to people who think in abstract ways of mathematicians, philosophers, maybe engineers, information technologists, as opposed to people who grub around in physical science.\textsuperscript{202}

Student: I think the argument stands whether you can know the attributes or not. The argument still stands. But take omniscience and Molinism. To me, omniscience means he knows all that is known, but he has reserved free will for himself so he does not predestine everything. He is with us in time. Therefore it goes against Molinism, but I think that is a superior maximal being.

Dr. Craig: We are not doing theology here. We are not trying to talk about the difference between Calvinism and Molinism or anything of that sort. We are working with a very bare-boned concept.

Student: Even though it is not compatible with my theistic beliefs, let’s stipulate that worlds outside this actual world exist. We’ve been over that. We have a disagreement about that. Let’s stipulate they exist. Let’s also stipulate that we’ve gotten an atheist to
accept premise (1) saying that it is possible for a maximally great being to exist. I would find that remarkable and somewhat surprising, but that is fine. Now let’s go down to (3) which I consider the most objectionable aspect of this whole argument. It is, “If a maximally great being exists in some possible world then it exists in every possible world.” I believe that statement is false on its face. I believe even cursory inspection would say that that would show that that is a false statement. A maximally great being would certainly not exist in every possible world because being maximally good he could exist only in a minority of worlds because he would find the others absolutely appalling.

Dr. Craig: Ah. Let me just ask you a question first. Last time I commented on how, on your view that there is only one logically possible world, you should love the ontological argument because if it is possible that God exists then he does exist because there is only one possible world. What did you think about that? Did you resonate with that point that I was making?

Student: I must admit I didn’t take it to heart. Would you state that again? Maybe I just don’t completely understand it. Say it again one more time.

Dr. Craig: Remember I said that the challenge of the ontological argument is that if there is a plurality of possible worlds and it is possible that God exists in one, the challenge is: how do you show that he exists in the actual world? Let’s let that be W0. That is the actual world. How do you get from God’s existence in W3 to God’s existence in W0. That’s the challenge of the ontological argument. But if you say that there are no other logically possible worlds – that there is only one possible world, the actual world – then it follows immediately that if God is possible then God actually exists because this is the only possible world. That is why I was saying you ought to love this argument!

Student: Well, let’s extend that a little further. Let’s say if any world at all exists then God exists. Because as I say, I’m a theist and I don’t believe it is possible for any world to exist unless God created it. That is why I am saying that we could think about worlds with orange skies and all this kind of stuff. Those worlds were possible up to the moment of creation but God obviously rejected them. Therefore they are forever impossible.

Dr. Craig: OK, good. Thank you. Let me now respond to the question that you raised which I think is a very important question. What you point out is that it seems intuitively that there could be worlds that are possible in which God doesn’t exist. Why? Well, let’s imagine a world in which the highest form of life is rabbits which exist in a state of disease and unremitting misery. That seems intuitively possible. But I think you would argue (and I would agree) such a world is incompatible with the existence of God because God is too good to allow there to be a universe in which there is nothing but
rabbits in a state of unremitting misery. You can draw two conclusions from this. You could say, “A-ha! I guess that shows that there are logically possible worlds in which God does not exist,” which is what you suggested, in which case God is not maximally great. Or you could say (and this is what I would say) such worlds are not in fact really possible. They are actually impossible because they are inconsistent with the existence of God, as you quite rightly point out. What this means is that given Anselm’s view of God there will be worlds that are not really possible after all, though at face value (if you don’t think about God; if you put God aside) it would seem like there could be a world like that. It would mean that the existence of God will sort of scramble your modal intuitions and show that some things are not really possible after all. Another example would be, say, a world in which everybody goes to hell and nobody is saved. Surely such a world would be incompatible with God’s existence and therefore he wouldn’t create it. But such a world, I would say, is impossible therefore and cannot exist. It is not really a possible world.

**Student:** I would say that this concept of other possible worlds would be much more acceptable to atheists because they have no clear idea where the world came from. A lot of times they will just put that off – so, sure, anything is possible. But to a theist, the only way a world can exist is if there is a God to make it.

**Dr. Craig:** There you are reverting back to the cosmological argument, which I endorse and have defended. So I agree with you on that, but I want to see if this argument also can’t supplement or complement the cosmological argument by saying that this is a coherent idea – a maximally great being – and if it is a coherent idea then it’s possible and therefore it’s actual. While this is not perhaps the knockdown argument that Anselm thought it was, I think that it does have some *prima facie* plausibility and can be part of a cumulative case for theism.

**Student:** Well, your reputation is well established, and who am I to give you advice?

**Dr. Craig:** I appreciate your interaction. That was a very good question.

**Student:** I would suggest that this one would be kind of at the bottom of the stack.

**Dr. Craig:** OK. Fair enough! Actually, as you’ll see when I finally get to our conclusion, I’ll say something almost like that.

**Student:** If people are getting caught up on the idea of maximal greatness, what about Anselm’s idea of something’s existing only in the understanding alone is not as great as something that exists actually in the world? Why can’t we use that?

**Dr. Craig:** If I understand you correctly, you were asking about Anselm’s argument that something that exists in the mind only is not as great as something that exists in the mind and in the world as well. And therefore God’s existence is real in the world. Plantinga
discusses that version of the argument, and I think ultimately it doesn’t go through. You still need this crucial premise that it is possible for something like God to be not only conceived in the mind but to exist in reality. That is the crucial insight that Leibniz had – that Anselm’s argument assumes that it is possible for such a thing to be real, to exist not only in the mind but also in reality. That is why, again, the first premise of the argument is, I think, the crucial one.

_Student:_ I actually really like the argument. I think for apologetics it is just kind of like the pill to give to atheism and it trumps all, but they also have to accept it. I think problematically (semantically or philosophically) it is kind of hard to digest for everybody. The problems that I am running into are how to articulate answers for Kant’s response to it saying that existence can’t be a property or Geach’s saying that you can’t quantify identity by words. I think if you keep it on a philosophical level and you can answer at a philosophical level and you don’t get into the cosmological and stuff like that . . . that is where I am having trouble keeping it when I discuss this argument at a philosophical level. Everybody wants to run into something physical or non-metaphysical or whatever. It is hard to keep their brains on something philosophical.

_Dr. Craig:_ Yes, it does require the ability to do abstract reasoning or philosophical reasoning. With respect to the objection by the German philosopher Immanuel Kant, who was one of the most important Enlightenment critics of natural theology and theistic arguments, Plantinga’s version of the argument is immune to Kant’s objection. That is why I just jumped over several centuries – from Anselm to Plantinga – rather than go through all of the convoluted history of the argument. What Kant said is that existence is not a property. If I have a concept in my mind of one hundred dollars, it is not that a hundred dollars in reality has some additional property – namely, existence – that the hundred dollars in my mind doesn’t. They are exactly conceived the same as to what it is. It is just that the one is real – instantiated in reality – and the other one isn’t. But you can argue about that. Some people say, “Yes, existence is a property. The real hundred dollars has the property of existence and the imaginary one doesn’t.” You can argue about that. But you can just circumvent the whole issue because with Plantinga’s argument it doesn’t assume that existence is a property. What it says is that necessity is a property. I think there it is pretty widely agreed that there is a distinction between something’s being contingent and something’s being necessary. So even if existence itself isn’t a property, contingent existence or necessary existence is a property. What Plantinga’s argument says is that a maximally great being is one that has maximal excellence necessarily in every possible world. He just circumvents Kant’s objection.

I didn’t expect to have questions about Kant in our Defenders class. This group is getting more and more sophisticated all the time!
Student: Let’s go back to the suffering rabbits world. It seems that someone could accuse you of using circular reasoning. You are excluding the worlds in which God doesn’t exist in your definition of possible worlds, and only allowing the worlds in which God does exist to define which worlds are possible. Therefore, of course the argument works. How would you respond to that?

Dr. Craig: I think that is a powerful objection. That is a little bit similar to the objection about quasi-maximal greatness. In other words, I can see that the idea of a world in which the highest life form is rabbits in unremitting misery is possible, but that is incompatible with the existence of God so it is possible that God not exist. I guess what I would say is that any intuitions that you have that such a world is possible are parasitic or depend upon the assumption that maximal greatness is impossible. It admits it is impossible to reconcile with maximal greatness. It just pushes it back to that question again. Is maximal greatness possible or impossible? All you’ve done is just shown a scenario that is incompatible with maximal greatness, but you haven’t shown that maximal greatness is impossible and that therefore this world is really possible. That’s what I would say.

Student: I’m wondering if the distinction between possible worlds and conceivable worlds can make the issue about worlds with suffering rabbits helpful in that it is conceivable that God could exist in such worlds but it is not possible.

Dr. Craig: Yes, this is a helpful point that he is making, though I want to put conceivability on the side of metaphysical possibility. What I would contrast with metaphysical possibility or conceivability is imaginability. I can imagine a world in which the highest life form is rabbits in unremitting pain, but that doesn’t show that a world like that is really possible. Similarly, you can imagine that Goldbach’s Conjecture is false. Right? That’s easy to do. I can imagine it, but it can’t be real. Similarly, I can imagine things popping into existence uncaused out of nothing. I can, in my mind, picture a rabbit popping into being without a cause. But that goes no distance towards showing that such a thing is metaphysically possible. So I think you are right. We mustn’t confuse the imaginability of such a world with its metaphysical possibility. That is a good point that is helpful.

Student: The ontological argument . . . is there a limit to these possible worlds? With the existence of God as, like you said . . . such a world wouldn’t be compatible with God being the amount of suffering? Or is there actually an infinite amount of worlds that we could pick from?
Dr. Craig: If I understood you correctly, you are asking, “Are there possible worlds which are incompatible with the existence of God?” Is that what you were saying?

Student: Yes, and also going off the ontological argument, is there a limit to these possible worlds?

Dr. Craig: The second one is “no.” The logical possibilities are unlimited. They would be infinite. But then, on traditional theism – wholly apart from the ontological argument, let’s just talk about theism – theists take necessity or aseity to be an essential attribute of God. He exists in every possible world. His non-existence is impossible. Therefore, there are no possible worlds where God does not exist.

Student: Accuse me of being metaphysical (but that’s OK, I think), it seems that this world, which has fallen according to Genesis to sin, has a lot of suffering, a lot of rabbits running around with disease and everything else. And we are promised a world where there isn’t sin and it is perfect. When we look at this world we go, wait a minute, if God is all-great, why do we have suffering?

Dr. Craig: That will be the topic to which we shall turn after we finish the ontological argument! We’ve been looking at arguments for God’s existence, but of course on the other side of the scale will be arguments against God’s existence. And the most important of these will be the problem of innocent suffering. If there is an all-powerful, all-loving, morally perfect being then why is there so much innocent horrible suffering? Here one could go on and on with examples of little children starving to death or dying of horrible disease or in fires and things. That will need to be addressed. With respect to my rabbit example, the key word in the rabbit example was the word “unremitting.” That they are in a state of unremitting suffering. That is to say, God doesn’t do anything about it like send a redeemer or something like that. I think that God will not allow that to be unremitting suffering. A good God will provide a solution. That was key in my example of this world.

**END DISCUSSION**

OK, that was a very good discussion today.

What we’ve been looking at up to this point in defense of the first premise of the ontological argument are *a priori* considerations. You can remember what that means by the word “prior” in it. It is prior to any experience you have of the world. So as someone was saying, this is an argument that doesn’t appeal to empirical facts. It is an *a priori* justification for premise (1). But what Plantinga suggests is that there could also be some
*a posteriori* reasons for thinking that premise (1) is true. Notice there we have the word “posterior”. Posterior means after experience. Maybe in addition to any *a priori* grounds we have for affirming premise (1), there might be some considerations from experience – *a posteriori* arguments – that would support premise (1) as well. That would put a very different face on the ontological argument. That is what we will look at next time – some of these *a posteriori* considerations in support of the key premise.
Lecture 26: *A Posteriori* Defense of the Ontological Argument

For today’s lesson, we want to attempt to conclude our discussion of the ontological argument for God’s existence. We saw that the crucial premise in this argument is the first one – that it is possible that God (or a maximally great being) exists. If it is possible that a maximally great being exists then it follows that a maximally great being (or God) actually does exist. So the key premise is that first one – what warrant or justification is there for thinking that it is possible that God exists.

We had looked at *a priori* arguments, or evidence or warrant, for that first premise. As I said, the word *a priori* (if it is not part of your vocabulary, you can remember what it means by the word “prior” in it) means prior to experience. This is not based upon empirical studies of the world. It is not based upon your experience through the senses. This is prior to experience. We saw that when we reflect upon the idea of a being which has omnipotence, omniscience, and moral perfection in every possible world that this seems to be a coherent idea. It seems to be perfectly coherent, and that gives good reason for thinking that it is possible that such a being exists. Then we looked at objections to those *a priori* considerations and found them to be inconclusive.

But that is not the end of the story, for although the ontological argument is usually presented as the paradigm example of an *a priori* argument, Plantinga suggests that there might actually be some *a posteriori* considerations that would support that key premise. You can remember what this means by seeing the word “posterior” in this Latin phrase. These are Latin expressions. In it you see the word “posterior.” That connotes posterior to experience or based on experience. There are certain experiential knowledge that we have that might lead us to think that that key premise is true. So, for example, Plantinga says that if we “carefully ponder” the key premise and the alleged objections to it, and if we “consider its connections with other propositions we accept or reject and still find it compelling, we are within our rights in accepting” this premise.\(^{207}\) So there may be some *a posteriori* considerations that would reinforce these *a priori* intuitions we have of the premise’s truth.

What might these be? It seems to me that the other arguments of natural theology for the existence of God can go some distance toward making us think that it is possible that such a being exists. For example, Leibniz’ argument from contingency, certain versions of the moral argument for God’s existence, and a so-called conceptualist argument for

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God’s existence could lead us to think that it is plausible that maximal greatness is possibly exemplified.

For example, remember the Leibnizian argument from contingency that we’ve already talked about. It goes like this:

1. Everything that exists has an explanation of its existence. This explanation might either be a necessity of its own nature (in which case it is a metaphysically necessary being) or in some external cause.

2. If the universe has an explanation of its existence, that explanation is God.

3. The universe is an existing thing.

From these three premises it follows logically that:

4. Therefore the explanation of the existence of the universe is God who is a being that exists by a necessity of his own nature.

Any being that exists by a necessity of his own nature is going to be a metaphysically necessary being. So Leibniz’s argument gives us good grounds for thinking that there is a metaphysically necessary being upon which everything else depends for its existence.208 So there are no limits to the power of this being. There are no non-logical limits to the power of this metaphysically necessary being because everything that exists depends upon it for its existence.

Or consider the moral argument for God’s existence. Again, we’ve already talked about the moral argument. It could be summarized like this:

1. If God does not exist then objective moral values and duties do not exist. If there is no God then there is no absolute standard of right and wrong, good and evil. Everything becomes relative.

2. Objective moral values and duties do exist. Certain things are really right or really wrong. Certain things are really good or really evil.

3. Therefore God exists.

Now, I’m not interested in redefending the moral argument now. We’ve already done that. But what I want to point out is that if moral values and duties depend in this way upon the existence of God then, since certain moral principles are necessarily true, it follows that the God who grounds them must be a metaphysically necessary being. That is, a being that exists in all possible worlds. For example, one naturalist philosopher of science, Michael Ruse, has written, “The man who says that it is morally acceptable to
rape little children is just as mistaken as the man who says $2+2=5$.”209 Think of that statement. Here Ruse equates the truth of these moral principles with the elementary truths of arithmetic like $2+2=4$. These are necessary truths. These are logical truths. Therefore these moral principles, to be grounded in God, require that God be a metaphysically necessary being who exemplifies these moral values necessarily. Therefore the moral argument also leads to the existence of a metaphysically necessary being who is not merely perfectly good but who is the actual standard of goodness, who is the paradigm of goodness from which all moral value derives.

Thirdly, in addition to this, some people might be persuaded by a sort of conceptualist argument for God’s existence as the best grounding for abstract objects like mathematical objects such as numbers and sets and functions and geometrical shapes. An argument might go along these lines:

1. Abstract objects like numbers and other mathematical objects are either independently existing realities (that is Platonism that says they just exist on their own) or else they are concepts in some mind. This premise would involve a denial of anti-realism with respect to these objects, and therefore I myself am not persuaded by this argument as it stands because I think it is defensible to say there just aren’t any mathematical objects – they just don’t exist at all. But if you are a realist about them then it would seem that you would think they are either independently existing objects (abstract entities of some sort) or else they are concepts in a mind.

2. Abstract objects are not independently existing realities.

This would involve rejecting Platonism about these abstract objects. You would probably do so on the grounds of their causal isolation. If these objects exist, they don’t exist in space and time, they have absolutely no causal influence upon the world, and therefore they are irrelevant. How could we know anything about them anymore than I have knowledge of some distant village in Nepal in the Himalayas, and why would they be applicable to the physical world? Why would they be so useful in science if they are causally isolated from the world?210 So it would be plausible to think that abstract objects are not independently existing realities.

3. If abstract objects are concepts in some mind then an omniscient, metaphysically necessary being exists.

If mathematical entities are concepts in a mind, they can’t be concepts in some human mind because there are too many of them to be thought about by any finite mind. They would be necessary in their existence. If 2 and 4 exist, they don’t happen to just exist in

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the actual world. 2+2=4 is a necessary truth, so 2 and 4 would exist in every possible world. Therefore if these mathematical entities exist in some mind as the concepts of that mind, it must be an infinite, metaphysically necessary person who grounds these abstract objects. Thus you are brought to the conclusion of the existence of an omniscient, metaphysically necessary mind as the foundation of abstract objects.

Look at what these three arguments give us. Each one of them gives us a metaphysically necessary being – a being that exists in every possible world. The Leibnizian argument, the moral argument, the conceptualist argument all yield a metaphysically necessary being. The Leibnizian argument gives you a being which is the source of all reality outside itself and therefore plausibly all-powerful. It has no non-logical limits on its power. The moral argument gives you a being which is morally perfect. The conceptualist argument gives you an omniscient being which grounds these mathematical truths. In other words, you’ve got here the elements that make up maximal greatness, don’t you? You’ve got metaphysical necessity, omnipotence, moral perfection, and omniscience.

So these other arguments of natural theology can provide support for the idea that it is possible that a maximally great being exists. I think here as well considerations of simplicity also come into play. For example, it is simpler – isn’t it? - to postulate one metaphysically necessary, infinite, omniscient, morally perfect being than to think that there are three separate beings that have these properties, that there are three metaphysically necessary beings – one of which is omniscient, one is morally perfect, one is omnipotent, and the source of all reality. It is simpler to say that all of these arguments are leading to the one metaphysically necessary being who is omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect.

Moreover, as Richard Swinburne has pointed out, it seems plausible that it is simpler or less ad hoc (less contrived) to say that a property that comes in degrees has either zero or infinity as its value rather than some arbitrarily selected finite value in between. It would be simpler to just say it is infinite or it is zero rather than having an inexplicable finite value somewhere on the measurement. So it would be more plausible to think that maximal greatness is possibly instantiated than quasi-maximal greatness – a being which has infinite power, intelligence, and perfection morally.

So on the basis of these sorts of considerations which are a posteriori I think that we could well consider ourselves to be warranted in believing that it is possible that a maximally great being exists.

START DISCUSSION

Student: The only hesitation I have with using the other arguments for the existence of God with the ontological argument is because I feel it makes the ontological argument
I always like it to stand by itself. Even when you bring this up to some atheist friends they point out the same thing. Then they will just say, “What do you even need the ontological argument for at that point?”

Dr. Craig: That is the next point that I am going to make. So let me hang on to that question. I will get to it. But don’t forget that we still have the a priori warrant for the key premise. These a posteriori arguments confirm that or are a second line of defense, but it is not as though the ontological argument depends wholly on these a posteriori considerations.

Student: I was curious regarding the moral aspect of your talking about . . . you used the example of numbers to say that they exist independently of any one person essentially. Their existence is dependent on a maximally great being. What about moral virtues such as things like courage or honesty or integrity? You could also say that those exist independently of any one given individual person. Could that, in a sense, add fuel to the argument as well? To what degree does it relate?

Dr. Craig: Yes, that is what I was trying to say. I think that you’ve captured correctly what I was trying to say. Imagine a world in which no human beings exist. The moral principle “It is wrong to torture a child for fun” would still be true in such a world. That principle doesn’t depend for its truth upon any actual children that exist. Or imagine a world in which there are actual children but none are actually tortured. That moral principle would still be true in that world that it is wrong to torture a child for fun. Plausibly, as you say, these moral principles are true independent of whether any people exist or these actions actually occur. Therefore they need a grounding that will be metaphysically necessary – that will exist in every possible world.

Student: When you said a metaphysically necessary being is simpler than any other explanation . . . or less ad hoc I think you said . . . what about people who posit physical explanations for the universe like multiverse hypotheses? And they would sometimes consider those more simpler than going to the metaphysical – staying in the physical.

Dr. Craig: What you are doing there is recurring to those arguments again and I’d rather not go back and rehearse those arguments once again. Look at our discussion there where I interact with multiverse hypotheses as a possible explanation of the origin of the universe. What I simply want to do here is say let’s suppose that you are convinced that these arguments are good. We’ve already defended them. Suppose you agree with me that these three (or at least two of the three) are good arguments. Would these lend a posteriori support to the ontological argument? That is all I am saying here now. Again, it would take us too far afield to go back and rehearse the arguments once more. Look at...
the discussion of those. What I want to draw out here is the remarkable coalescence, I think, of the conclusions of these arguments with the key premise in the ontological argument.

**END DISCUSSION**

Now the question which arises at this point is the one that was just broached. Doesn’t the ontological argument now become question begging? What does it mean for an argument to be question begging? What it means is that your only reason for accepting a premise in the argument is that you already believe in the conclusion. You accept the premise because you already believe the conclusion is true. So you are begging the question or you are arguing in a circle. Let me give an example.

Consider this as an argument for God’s existence.

1. Either God exists or the moon is made of green cheese.
2. The moon is not made of green cheese.
3. Therefore God exists.

That is a sound argument for God’s existence. Both of its premises are true. Since God does exist it is true that either God exists or the moon is made of green cheese. In order for that disjunction to be true, one of the disjuncts needs to be true. Since God does exist that is true that either God exists or the moon is made of green cheese. The second premise is true – the moon is not made of green cheese. Therefore God exists. So this is a logically valid argument with true premises which implies the existence of God. Yet no one would think this is a successful piece of natural theology. Why not? Because the only reason you would have for thinking that the first premise is true (that either God exists or the moon is made of green cheese) is because you already believe the argument’s conclusion that God exists. So you are reasoning in a circle. You are begging the question.

The question now is: if the reason that you think it is possible that a maximally great being exists is because you believe that a maximally great being does exist then aren’t you similarly begging the question? If on the basis of the Leibnizian, moral, and conceptualist arguments for God’s existence you come to believe that a maximally great being exists then of course it is possible that he exists. You’ve proven that he already does! So doesn’t the ontological argument then become question-begging or redundant?

I think that this misgiving may result from thinking of the project of natural theology in too linear a fashion. We should not think of the arguments of natural theology as being like links in a chain where the chain is only as strong as the weakest link. If the weak link
is broken then the whole chain is broken and becomes unable to bear the weight that you would want. We shouldn't think of the arguments of natural theology in that linear fashion, as like a chain of links which is only as strong as the weakest link. Rather the arguments of natural theology are more aptly compared to a coat of chain mail like a knight used to wear where the links all reinforce each other so that the coat of mail is not as weak as the weakest link. In a case like that the ontological argument can play, I think, an important role in a cumulative case for the existence of God in which a whole host of independent factors lead us to the overall conclusion “therefore God exists.”

If that is right then Anselm was wrong in thinking that he had discovered a single argument which standing alone would prove God’s existence in all of his greatness. I don’t think the ontological argument would succeed in that way. But it does seem to me that the ontological argument does have a role to play as one of the links in the coat of mail – one of the arguments in a cumulative case for God’s existence. So the arguments taken together show that God, a maximally great being, does in fact exist.

START DISCUSSION

**Student:** Just an observation with this. It seems like these natural theology arguments would be interrogatory in nature. You get out of this begging of the question or circularity. Why do I think I have a concept of a God that’s omnipotent? Why do I have an experience of salvation, why would we have such experiences?

**Dr. Craig:** It seems to me what you are saying there – correct me if I’m wrong – another link in the chain mail could be religious experience. Religious experience might be one of the links in this coat of chain mail leading to the conclusion that God exists. I think that would be certainly justifiable. There are many other arguments for God’s existence that we haven’t surveyed in this class. I am participating in a book dedicated to Alvin Plantinga that is based upon an essay Plantinga wrote back in 1982 called “Two Dozen or So Arguments For God’s Existence.” The folks over at Baylor University have decided to do a volume honoring Alvin Plantinga by assigning each one of these two dozen or so arguments to a contemporary philosopher and writing a chapter on where that argument stands today. I was assigned the *kalam* cosmological argument, as you might anticipate. Big surprise! But just think of that – two dozen or so arguments in Plantinga’s coat of chain mail supporting theism. We’ve just looked at a few. Certainly that could be a part of it.

**Student:** I was just thinking we could frame these types of arguments like ontology, personal experience, properly basic things, as questions as to why do we have the dimension to ask such a question rhetorically rather than say “I am using this as a given.”
Dr. Craig: Right. Don’t forget about what we said right at the beginning that I think it is perfectly defensible to say you don’t need arguments in order to know that God exists, that this can be a properly basic belief in the same way that my belief in the reality of the world around me is properly basic or in my belief that there are other minds besides my own as a properly basic belief not grounded in argument.

Student: I’ve actually seen that kind of linking in many different kinds of interactions like where if you talk about the ontological argument it goes to the contingency argument or something else. I’ve seen it also with the moral argument jumps into the argument from desire. There always seems to be some kind of something, and they kind of back each other with people having questions that lead into something else. Or the cosmological argument going into the design argument. My question about the ontological argument – because you were saying last week that the way that Plantinga presents it that it represents God as a necessary being – I was curious if it is kind of a blend into the contingency argument. Doesn’t that basically just say that God is necessary without needing . . .?

Dr. Craig: All three of the arguments that I mentioned today (contingency, moral, conceptualist) lead to a metaphysically necessary being. So this is not just a feature of the ontological argument or even of Leibniz’s argument. Several of the arguments for the existence of God lead to not just God’s existence in the actual world but God’s necessary existence. In fact, I think it is arguable that even the kalam cosmological argument could lead to the existence of a metaphysically necessary being since it would be metaphysically impossible for the world to be past-infinite, past-eternal, and metaphysically impossible for something to come out of nothing. So in every possible world there would need to be a cause of the origin of the universe. I haven’t pressed that point, but I think that is defensible.

Student: My question was more of: providing that God is necessary a priori.

Dr. Craig: The Leibnizian argument doesn’t assume that a priori. I think it gives an argument based on an explanation – the nature of explanation. The only adequate explanation for the existence of contingent beings is a metaphysically necessary being. So this is still an argument. It is an inference. It is not just an assumption.

Student: I think the ancients used to think if anything exists then it is either contingent or it has to be necessary. Ultimately if anything exists there has to be a necessary existence that has always been. If you say there could be more than one then they would have no contact with each other. For this existence there always is a maximal supreme being.

Dr. Craig: Let me just say a couple of things. You are certainly right that ancient Greek philosophers did think there was a necessary being, but the way they understood necessity was different than the way it is discussed today. For Aristotle, to say something
exists necessarily basically meant it exists eternally and wasn’t subject to being generated or corrupted.\textsuperscript{214} It would just always exist. But it wasn’t the sort of logically necessary existence that we are talking about today. That concept of God evolved among medieval Islamic theologians such as al-Faradi and Ibn Sina and then was inherited in the West by our medieval Latin-speaking theologians like Anselm and Thomas Aquinas and others. That was a deeper more robust understanding of necessity than the ancients had. So while your point is correct, they understood the word differently than it came to be understood.

\textit{Student:} I just want to say I recently read a blog post that was talking about the ontological argument and the title was very provocative. It was about Richard Dawkins going around in his bus that said “God probably doesn’t exist so relax and enjoy your life.” This is going back to the \textit{a priori} saying “If God probably doesn’t exist then God exists.” He is saying that if it is even possible that God exists then therefore God exists. If Richard Dawkins is right that God even probably doesn’t exist then that means that God exists.

\textit{Dr. Craig:} I get the point. If there is any possibility that he exists then the ontological argument goes through. I think that you are making a good point. The atheist has to maintain not simply that God does not exist. He has to maintain that it is impossible that God exists because once you grant the possibility then the argument goes through. The atheist is taking a pretty radical line here – not simply that there is no God, but that it is impossible that God exists. That is a helpful perspective to keep in mind.

\textbf{END DISCUSSION}

With the ontological argument we draw to a close our discussion of the arguments of natural theology. Let me ask if there is any final comment that anyone has on this section of the course which is so, I think, critical toward establishing the coherence of a Christian worldview in a secular society, namely that God exists. We’ve looked at the proper basicity of belief in God’s existence. We’ve looked at the contingency argument, the cosmological argument, the fine-tuning argument, the moral argument, and the ontological argument for God’s existence. These give us not simply the existence of a vaguely characterized being that could be the Flying Spaghetti Monster. These give us a being replete with certain specific attributes like moral perfection, omnipotence, omniscience, metaphysical necessity, and so forth.

\textbf{START DISCUSSION}

\textit{Student:} Do you know of any prominent non-theist philosophers of religion who accept that if God even possibly exists he must exist?
Dr. Craig: Yeah, I actually do. One of the most famous proponents of the ontological argument is the great (even legendary) mathematician Kurt Gödel who developed Gödel’s Theorem that you may have heard of. Gödel wrote an essay defending the ontological argument. There was a gentleman at the University of Birmingham in England when I was doing my doctoral thesis on the cosmological argument for God’s existence. One of my fellow grad students was doing his thesis on the ontological argument. He told me that there was a man in the department of philosophy at the University of Birmingham who believed the ontological argument proved God’s existence. I said, “Is he a theist then?” He said, “Well, not really. He just thinks that as an argument this is a sound argument. Whether it has any religious significance is immaterial to him.”

Student: So there might have been a psychological element in that case?

Dr. Craig: I couldn’t judge. But what I am saying is there have been philosophers who think that the argument is sound, but may not find religious significance in it. In fact, some people have said probably no one has ever come to believe in God through the ontological argument because it is so abstract. In fact, that is false because we get emails at ReasonableFaith.org – I’ve seen them – from people who say the ontological argument is what convinced them that God exists and has led them to become a theist. Even this argument as abstract and a priori as it may seem has been used by the Lord to being people to belief in him.

Student: You said at the beginning of this section of your class – I think you repeated it earlier today – that argumentation is not necessary. I think you are talking that you can rely on the internal witness of the Holy Spirit. You can have this private, inaccessible-to-other-people experience and believe God exists on that basis – God is properly basic. What do you do with the response that says every time in Scripture where you have skeptical people who are asked to believe in God or accept the resurrection of Christ they are given some evidence or argumentation? One case is in the Old Testament, 1 Kings where Elijah demonstrated the power of God and the people were skeptical. It says at the beginning of his test the people were hesitating between two opinions. After he called down fire then they believed.

Dr. Craig: This is the contest with the prophets of Baal.

Student: That’s right. One other example is in Acts 17 at Mars Hill where Paul confronts people who are skeptics. At one point he says I give you proof that this unknown God you are searching for exists because he raised Jesus from the dead. So he gave them evidence. What is your response to that?
Dr. Craig: I draw a fundamental distinction between knowing Christianity to be true and showing Christianity to be true. We can know that Christianity is true in a properly basic way through the inner witness of the Holy Spirit. But when it comes to showing skeptics that our faith is true then we need to give apologetic arguments and evidence. So Elijah didn’t need the fire to come down from heaven to convince him that Yahweh is the true God. He was already convinced. He knew that God exists. But to show the people and demonstrate the imposture of the prophets of Baal he set up a contest where there would be argument and evidence. So it seems to me that this fundamental distinction is very helpful in showing the proper role for both of these. Both proper basicality but then also showing – the use of apologetics. That is the way I would understand it.

END DISCUSSION

The arguments of natural theology for God’s existence are only in one sense one side of the coin because we also would need to consider what are the arguments on the other side against the existence of God. Maybe there are such powerful arguments for atheism that they simply outweigh these arguments for God’s existence and tip the weight of the scale in the other direction. What we want to now take up beginning next week will be arguments for atheism, and especially the problem of suffering and evil in the world. If there is an omnipotent, all-loving God then isn’t that incompatible or improbable with the truly horrendous and innocent suffering in the world? How are we going to deal with that problem? That will be the question that we will take up next time. 216
Lecture 27: The Problem of Evil and Suffering

During our excursus of natural theology we’ve looked at various arguments for God’s existence. On the other hand, there needs to be considered arguments against God’s existence as well. It is not enough simply that there be good arguments to believe that God exists. We want to know where the balance of the evidence lies. Are there equally good arguments for atheism on the other side of the scale that counterbalance these arguments or perhaps tip the balance in the other direction? During this section we want to look at arguments against God’s existence.

As a matter of fact, there really aren’t very many arguments against God’s existence, quite frankly. I find that the atheist’s main complaint is just that there isn’t any evidence for God’s existence. He complains that there is no reason to believe that God exists, and so he is content to simply remain in unbelief. But, you see, if you’ve got these arguments that we’ve just surveyed over the last several months memorized and ready to share then that objection won’t apply to you. Frankly, unbelievers, I find, are not very used to running into Christians who are able to offer good arguments for the hope that is in them. When the unbeliever says to you “There is no evidence that God exists” you can stop him dead in the tracks by looking at him with a surprised expression on your face and saying, “Is that what you think? I can think of at least five arguments for God’s existence.” At that point he’s got to say, “Yeah, like what?” Then you are off and running, and you can be able to share your arguments with him. So rather than a conversation stopper, his challenge actually becomes a conversation starter to begin to share reasons to believe in God.

I think you’ll find that unbelievers are generally speaking so ill-equipped to deal with these issues that in response to the arguments for God’s existence that you share they tend to just repeat themselves. “That is no evidence that God exists.” One blogger characterized my debate with the British atheist Lewis Wolpert in Central Hall, London in the following way:

Wolpert: There’s no evidence for God’s existence.
Craig: There is evidence for God’s existence. And here it is . . . one, two, three, four.
Wolpert: There’s no evidence for God’s existence.
Craig: There is evidence for God’s existence. And here it is . . . one, two, three, four.
Wolpert: There’s no evidence for God’s existence.

Sadly, this characterization was not too far off the mark. Sometimes it seems like non-believers are just deaf. They’ve simply been taught to repeat the slogan “There’s no evidence for God’s existence.” Apparently thinking that by saying it over and over again
that somehow makes it true. I think that for many people it is just an excuse for intellectual laziness and a lack of engagement. It is just a way of saying, “I am not convinced by your arguments.”

But if the unbeliever is not convinced then I think the appropriate response to him is to say politely, “Well, you apparently don’t find my arguments convincing. So you must think that some of my premises are false. So which premise of the argument do you reject and why?” Force them to engage with the argument. One atheist that I was talking to said at that point, “I reject all of them!” I said, “Surely you don’t reject all of them. Do you reject the premise that the universe exists” (which is one of the premises of the Leibnizian argument), “…or that the fine-tuning of the universe is due to physical necessity, chance, or design?” (which just lists the alternatives). He recognized at that point his remark had been careless, and then we began to have a good conversation. Try to get the unbeliever to engage with your specific premises.217

I think all of this underscores the importance of having these arguments memorized. Doing so will help you to stay on track in a conversation with an unbeliever.

In response to your question, “Which premise do you reject and why?” the unbeliever is apt to say something like, “I think that religion is just all in your head” or “Religion has done more harm than good to society than anything else.” Don’t allow him to get you distracted to get you off track. Say, “I understand that is how you feel. But you said there is no evidence for God’s existence. Now I’ve shared an argument. So what I want to know is which premise do you reject and why?” Stay focused on the arguments and the premises and don’t be distracted. Try to get him to engage. Eventually you may get to the point where you can say to him, “I don’t think that you really are rejecting God because of lack of evidence. I sense a deeper emotional rejection of God that is going on. What is the real reason that you reject God?” At that point you’ve moved beyond mere apologetics into real counseling and personal engagement with the unbeliever.

My point is that having a few arguments memorized is a tremendous tool in dealing with unbelievers, and it will completely pull the rug out from under the unbeliever’s main reason for his unbelief, namely the claim that there is no evidence for God’s existence. In fact I have found in personal witnessing experiences that just having a list of the arguments to share with the unbeliever may often be enough. If he says there is no evidence for God’s existence, you can say, “I can think of five reasons to think God exists. God is the best explanation why anything at all exists rather than nothing. God is the best explanation of the beginning of the universe. God is the best explanation of the fine-tuning of the universe for intelligent life. God is the best explanation for the existence of objective moral values and duties in the world. And the very possibility of

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God’s existence implies that God exists.” Very often just sharing that list with the unbeliever will be so overwhelming that it will be enough to answer his objection that there is no evidence for God’s existence. Of course, if he wants to hear more then you can go into the arguments individually. But the point is that if you are prepared you will be able to easily meet the main objection that unbelievers offer to the existence of God, namely this slogan “There is no evidence for God’s existence.”

START DISCUSSION

**Student:** In my experiences of dealing with argumentation with atheists, do you oftentimes, when they bring up no evidence, feel like they are equivocating with the term “proof?” I’ve always given out a lot of these evidences that you speak of with physical things like fine-tuning in the universe, and then it is like they always dismiss it and the next words out of their mouth they say is “it doesn’t prove God.”

**Dr. Craig:** That is a very good point. The way I put the objection is there is no evidence for God’s existence. I didn’t use the word “proof.” I do think you are quite right that when people use the word “proof” they are thinking of 100% certainty. As you indicated, there is no reason that we should set the bar that high for success in natural theology. You are saying there is good evidence for God. That on balance it is more probable than not that God exists, and there is a powerful cumulative case. Whether that amounts to a proof is not really germane. I think that here that sort of intellectual modesty is very attractive. You are not trying to prove too much. I think what you try to do is set the bar low and then exceed it as high as you can rather than set the bar high and then struggle to get over it. But you are quite right in saying that you may need to explain to the unbeliever that you are not offering proofs that compel assent.

**Student:** Just in response to that, if a person says “You haven’t proven that God does exist” wouldn’t you turn that around and say “But you haven’t proven that God doesn’t exist.” If this is an atheist, you have 100% certainty that God doesn’t exist? So show me what this absolute proof is, and then I will believe it. If that is your criteria.

**Dr. Craig:** We will talk some more about that. Is there a differential burden of proof here between the theist and the non-theist? We will see that the atheist will very often claim that he doesn’t have a burden of proof to bear. He need prove nothing; the burden of proof lies all on the shoulders of the theist. I think you are quite right in saying that that is a mistake. There is no differential burden of proof. Both are making truth claims that would need to be justified if we are to believe in them.

**Student:** If the atheist says that by atheism they mean a form of agnosticism . . .
Dr. Craig: I will say something about that in just a few minutes, about the attempt on the contemporary scene to redefine atheism so as to shirk any burden of proof. It becomes equivalent to agnosticism. So hang on to that point.

END DISCUSSION

I’d like to turn first to epistemological objections to the existence of God. I will just go through these fairly quickly because I don’t think that these are very substantive objections on the contemporary scene.

The first epistemological objection is verificationism. Verificationism was a philosophy that was very dominant in the United States and Britain during the 1930s and 40s. Basically what the verificationist said is that any statement in order to be meaningful must be capable of being empirically verified. If a statement cannot be verified through the five senses in some way then it is a meaningless statement.

Notice that this is a criterion of meaning. It is not a truth test. The verificationists weren’t saying in order to be a good scientific theory or in order to be a good explanation you need to have some evidence that would verify your explanation or your theory. I think few scientists would disagree that a good theory would be one that enjoys empirical verification. But the verificationists were much more radical than that. They are offering a criterion of meaning. They are saying that if a statement cannot be empirically verified then it is literally meaningless.

In saying that these statements are meaningless, they didn’t mean that the statement is just like gargling, just gibberish. Rather what they meant was that statements which are not verifiable don’t make any factual assertion. They don’t make any factual claim. They may be meaningful in a grammatical sense. You can understand the claim. It is not just gibberish. But these claims don’t make any factual assertion. To give an analogy, questions and commands are meaningful in the sense that we understand them grammatically. If someone asks you, “Is Publix open today?” you understand the meaning of that question. Or if someone says to you, “Shut the door” you understand the meaning of that command. But those questions and commands don’t make any factual assertions. Questions are not true or false. Commands are not true or false because they are not factual assertions. So they are meaningful in a grammatical sense, but questions and commands are not the sort of things that are true or false. They are not factual assertions. In the same way the verificationist said that statements about God don’t make any factual assertion, and therefore it is neither true nor false. Don’t misunderstand me. They are not claiming that statements about God are disguised questions or disguised commands. I am just using questions and commands as illustrations of statements that are grammatically meaningful but make no factual assertion. In the same way they would say
that statements about God, though grammatically meaningful, express no fact. They make no factual claim, and therefore they are neither true nor false.\textsuperscript{219}

Even atheism, on this view, is meaningless because atheism would say “God does not exist” and that is a meaningless statement. It makes no factual claim just as the statement “God does exist” makes no factual claim. On verificationism, statements about God don’t even have the dignity of being false! They are neither true nor false. They just don’t make any sort of factual claim.

Verificationism succumbed to criticism during the second half of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century. In fact, it has been said (I think rightly so) that the most important philosophical development of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century was the collapse of verificationism which had so dominated the first half of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century. There were basically two criticisms that led to the demise of verificationism.

First, the principle was too restrictive to be plausible. If the verification principle were true that only empirically verifiable statements are meaningful, this would force you to trash not only theological statements but vast, vast ranges of human discourse so that much of what we say and act on would turn out to be meaningless. Metaphysical truths about the existence of the external world, aesthetic truths about beauty and ugliness, mathematical and logical truths cannot be verified by empirical matters. As it turned out, even scientific truths are often not verifiable so that the verification principle would undermine science itself which was, as I say, for the verificationist the sacred cow of the verificationist.

If you want an example of this, consider the principle in the Special Theory of Relativity that light has a constant one-way velocity. It is a postulate of Einstein’s Special Theory of Relativity that the one-way velocity of light is constant. But that is non-verifiable. All we can measure is the round-trip velocity of light. As light goes out, is reflected back, and then returns to the source. We can measure that round-trip velocity of light. It is always constant. But Einstein’s theory presupposes that the one-way velocity of light from A to B is constant, and that is non-verifiable. Theoretically light could go out at one speed and come back at another speed and at varying speeds, just so long as the round-trip velocity is constant. So the theory is based upon a postulate which is non-verifiable. This is common in science. So verificationism would actually destroy science which was, as I say, for the verificationist the sacred cow that they wanted to support.

Secondly, though, not only was the criterion too restrictive but it turned out to be self-refuting. It is self-refuting. Just ask yourself: is the statement “Only statements that are empirically verifiable are meaningful” empirically verifiable? No! It is just an arbitrary definition, and therefore one that we are at liberty to reject. By its own light, the
verification principle, being non-verifiable, is meaningless! It makes no factual claim whatsoever and therefore it has no claim upon us. Therefore, during the second half of the 20th century verificationism simply collapsed. This resulted in a renaissance of metaphysics and ethics and all of the traditional questions of philosophy, including the renaissance in Christian philosophy that is ongoing in the Anglo-American world.

Sadly, however, I find that this kind of verificationism still has a long lingering shadow especially over older scientists who were educated during the verificationist era. That is often sadly passed on to their students. So you will often find this kind of verificationist mentality on the Internet and among people, especially in the sciences, who think that theology or claims about God are just meaningless because they are not empirically verifiable. I can’t emphasize too strongly that this kind of verificationism is universally rejected today by philosophers, both epistemologists and philosophers of science, because of the reasons that I mentioned.

If you run into this, you need to simply share with your unbelieving friend the reasons why verificationism is untenable and that he is adopting a position that is obsolete and universally rejected among philosophers of knowledge and of science.

START DISCUSSION

Student: I thought it was amusing how in your debate with Hector Avalos on the resurrection of Jesus there was a part where he brings up something very similar to this. Well, if you can’t see it, touch it, or taste it, you know in this case, miracles or God – it’s meaningless. You pointed out that it was self-refuting. He replied, well actually no, it’s self-affirming. Whatever that means.

Dr. Craig: It is amazing how often you encounter this. I am sure many of you have in your own witnessing situations.

Student: On my blog I was talking about how people tend to rule out the supernatural because they claim there’s no evidence. One of the things I was talking about was….I said thunder would exist and still accompany lightning even if everyone were born deaf. The idea of empiricism is that if you can’t experience it then therefore it’s not valid or doesn’t exist. But I was showing that there are things in the natural world that even if we couldn’t experience it directly….So to me it seems very arbitrary and presumptuous to assume that there cannot be a supernatural realm just because we can’t experience it with our five senses.

Dr. Craig: That is a good point. In theoretical physics, there are all kinds of entities postulated because of their explanatory value even though we don’t have any direct access to them empirically. But these are theoretical entities that, if they exist, they help
explain the things that we do experience. Many of the arguments for God’s existence are of that nature. God is like a theoretical entity in physics – the existence of which will explain plausibly empirical data that we do experience like the fine-tuning of the universe, for example, or the beginning of the universe. That is a nice analogy, I think, between these high level theoretical entities and God.

Student: Can you repeat the analogy?

Dr. Craig: The questioner brings out a nice analogy between these non-empirically detectable theoretical entities in physics like, for example, certain subatomic particles which, if they exist, will explain very plausibly empirical evidence that we do experience. These theoretical entities may not be directly empirically accessible but they are indirectly posited because of their explanatory value in explaining the things that we can access empirically. That is rather analogous to God, I think.

Student: Even beyond on the cosmological side that you are referring to, there are a number of theorists that have admitted they have theories about strings and concepts that allow certain mathematical formulas to come out but they admit we don’t know if this corresponds to anything that is happening in the real world. A lot of these cosmological theories are just theories that allow certain mathematical formulas to work but not necessarily correspond to anything that is really happening.

Dr. Craig: Fair enough. That would be an instrumentalist interpretation of these theories. Especially when you have empirically equivalent theories that have different theoretical entities, then you may not know which one is actually true. But here, again, I want to emphasize very strongly that the verificationist was not talking about a test for the truth of the theories. He was talking about whether or not they are meaningful. I think we would agree that whether you are a string theorist or a particle theorist and you don’t know which one is correct, say, nevertheless they are making meaningful claims. Those are meaningful accounts even if we don’t know which one is true, if either. Again, be sure not to make the confusion between verification as a test for truth and verification as a criterion for meaning. What we are talking about here is a criterion for meaning.

Student: Would the opposite of verificationism be strict constructivism where nothing exists until you’ve thought it up?

Dr. Craig: That is not clear to me. Why wouldn’t a sort of objectivism be right? That there is objective meaning and it is not tied to empirical verification. I am not sure there is a sort of opposite to verificationism. If verificationism is false, there could be probably a variety of alternatives to it.
**Student:** I’ve noticed that when you get into the empirical evidence that atheists are requiring, it is funny that it usually breaks down to they want to see something huge out of God like him parting the clouds and saying *Here I am!* Or that Jesus would have walked off the cross and said *You can’t crucify me.* They demand from their own worldly theology that God make a big spectacle out of something. The hiddenness or humility of the way God does things is untenable, it seems to be, to atheists. Regardless of how many arguments we come up with, if we can’t show them some kind of huge spectacle they reject it, and they say they are rejecting it because it is not empirical but what they really mean is they want a spectacle.

**Dr. Craig:** That is kind of related to the hiddenness of God that we will talk about later. Why doesn’t God appear to each person as a three hundred foot Jesus or something, or write his name in the heavens? Why doesn’t he do these sort of spectacular miracles rather than this kind of indirect evidence that requires you to seek and to search and to look for God. We will talk about that a little bit later. I think God can have good reasons for not making his existence just as plain as the nose on your face. But you are quite right that many skeptics are demanding that God give them the kind of evidence they want to see rather than asking themselves “Has God given evidence sufficient for his existence, to make belief in God rational or justified?” That is the real question, not whether it meets my desires.

**Student:** All human endeavor is to discover. We are to discover the empirical data, and the creator and discovers are there and also human history are very . . . there is some design in place for us to discover. Doesn’t that establish the verify effect of the design?

**Dr. Craig:** If I understand the question right, again, you are dealing with verification and truth – in order to believe a theory is true you need to have some sort of verification of it, some evidence for it. That is not the issue here. The verificationists weren’t claiming there is inadequate evidence for God’s existence. What they are saying is that it is meaningless to claim that God exists because there is no empirical evidence for or against his existence. So atheism, as I say, is as meaningless as theism is on this view. It is a criterion of meaning, not a criterion of truth or of rationality. It is this criterion of meaning that has collapsed. Claims can be meaningful even if they are not verifiable.

**Student:** What I am trying to say is they twist that verification into their . . .

**Dr. Craig:** Oh, I see. Yes, I think that would be fair to say. Certainly verification is very important in truth-seeking. You want to find a theory or a view of the world that fits the facts of experience, whatever they might be. They have twisted that claim into a claim about the meaning of statements, which is, as I say, far too restrictive to be plausible and in the end self-refuting.

**END DISCUSSION**
Let me say by way of conclusion today that verificationism has been universally rejected by philosophers of science and philosophers who are epistemologists. Therefore we need not be worried about it.\textsuperscript{222}

In light of this many atheists have argued for the presumption of atheism instead. That is to say that atheism is a kind of default position; that until and unless you have evidence for God’s existence then you should believe that God does not exist. Atheism is a sort of default position, and it is that argument that we will take up next time.\textsuperscript{223}
Lecture 28: The Presumption of Atheism

We’ve been looking at epistemological objections to belief in God. The word “epistemology” comes from the Greek word *epistime* which means “knowledge.” So these are objections based upon the fact that God cannot be known to exist for some reason or other.

Last time we looked at the first objection – the objection of verificationism – which held that the question of God’s existence is meaningless. It is neither true nor false to say that God exists because the question of God’s existence is simply a meaningless question. We saw that that verificationist viewpoint was based upon a principle of meaning that was in the first place completely implausible, and then to make matters worse self-refuting. Therefore verificationism has been virtually universally rejected among philosophers of science and epistemologists today.

We now want to turn to a second type of objection – what I call the presumption of atheism – that atheism is in some way a sort of default position that doesn’t require any evidence in favor of that position.

First would be the attempt of many contemporary atheists to redefine the meaning of atheism. Atheism traditionally is the view that God does not exist. Atheism is a position that there is no God. But very often atheists today (at least on a popular level) will put a different spin on atheism. They will say something like this: no one can prove a universal negative like “there is no God.” They think that because atheism is a universal negative that somehow excuses them from needing any evidence for God’s non-existence. Since it is a universal negative that there is no God and universal negatives cannot be proved, it is impossible to prove that God does not exist. Therefore, as atheists, they don’t need to prove such a thing.

Not only is it obviously false that you can’t prove a universal negative – all you have to do is show a self-contradiction in some idea to prove that it has no instances. For example, the idea that there is a married bachelor. It is easy to prove that there are no married bachelors because that is a self-contradictory concept. Therefore a married bachelor cannot exist. So, in fact, you can prove universal negatives.

But the more important point here is that this claim by the atheist is really an admission on his part that it is impossible to prove atheism! Atheism involves a universal negative. He says you can’t prove a universal negative. Therefore, atheism is unprovable. So it turns out to be the atheist who is holding a belief for which there is and can be no evidence on his own view. This argument, far from being some sort of defense for atheism, ought to be a part of the Christian’s apologetic arsenal. It would show that if the atheist is right that you can’t prove a universal negative then atheism is simply unjustifiable and therefore cannot be reasonably held.
What many atheists try to do at this point is to revise the definition of atheism so that it is no longer the view that God does not exist. Instead they say atheism is just the absence of belief in God. Anyone who lacks belief in God counts as an atheist. This is, again, not only contrary to the traditional meaning of the word, but when you think about it it is really quite hopeless as a definition. For on this new definition, atheism is no longer a viewpoint or a position as it is traditionally. Traditionally atheism is the position “There is no God.” But on this new redefinition atheism is no longer a position or a truth claim. It is just a description of somebody’s psychological state. It is the psychological state of lacking a belief in God. As such, atheism is therefore neither true nor false. It is just a psychological state. Even babies, on this definition, turn out to be atheists because they don’t have the psychological state of believing in God. But that is surely absurd. Can you imagine the following conversation between two young mothers:

Mother 1: Julie, I just heard that you had twins! Congratulations!
Mother 2: Yes, thank you. But, you know, it is so sad.
Mother 1: What is sad?
Mother 2: Well, they are both atheists.

On this definition, even our cat, Angel, turns out to be an atheist because I am sure Angel has never thought about the question of whether or not God exists.

All of this would still leave us wondering whether or not there is a God – whether or not God exists. You can call this view atheism or schmatheism. It doesn’t matter what you call it. The question is: does God exist? Is there a God? Anyone who says that God does not exist, even if you call that schmatheism rather than atheism, still we can call upon him to give us some arguments or some evidence for his position.

This attempt to get off the hook of giving arguments for atheism merely by redefining it, I think, is utterly unavailing.

START DISCUSSION

Student: I was also really struggling with this idea of atheism being the default position. I thought a great conversation that you had with another atheist – I think his name was Dr. Shook I think.

Dr. Craig: That was a debate at the University of British Columbia.

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224 5:06 Dr. Craig discusses this debate in his Reasonable Faith podcast “A Lively Debate” found here: http://www.reasonablefaith.org/a-lively-debate – you can find a link to the debate itself in the transcript of that podcast. (accessed May 29, 2016).
**Student:** He said something like, “I believe that nature exists.” He had no reason to think that there is anything more than that. That was kind of like a presumption of atheism like “I don’t have to prove that there is something more than nature. It is clear that nature exists. Why go any further?” So he called himself an atheist. You challenged him by saying, “Doesn’t that make you an agnostic? You don’t know that there is anything more. You are just saying . . .” And he gave an example of the stock market and whether to invest in the stock market or not. You gave all these arguments for investing, and he doesn’t really think they are good. Then you came back with, “That just means you don’t know whether the stock market is going to go up or go down. It doesn’t mean it isn’t going to go up or it isn’t going to go down. You just have to be an agnostic about it.” I thought it was a really good conversation to bring out what it going on.

**Dr. Craig:** Good. I’m glad that that was helpful. There are several types of non-theism traditionally. Non-theism could be atheism, which is the belief that God does not exist. Or you could be agnostic, which is the position, “I don’t believe that God exists but I don’t believe that God does not exist.” In the same way, “I don’t believe the stock market is going to rally, but I don’t believe it is going to fall either. I don’t know what the stock market is going to do.” That is agnosticism. The other position that would be possible would be a kind of non-cognitivism which is the old verificationism which says it is a meaningless question whether God exists or not. All of these would be varieties of non-theism. When the unbeliever says that he doesn’t believe in God or he lacks this psychological state of believing in God, we still want to know, well, are you an atheist who says there is no God, are you an agnostic who is just undecided about the matter, or are you a verificationist who believes that there is no cognitive content to this question? I think you can see that all of these persons will have the same psychological state of lacking belief in God, but that doesn’t answer the question of how we should assess the fact of God’s existence.

**Student:** One thing I like to do in these conversations – because I find the people that I talk to get very hung up on these words “atheism” or “agnosticism” - I just write down all these words, I’ll give the definitions for them, and then I’ll erase the words and leave the definitions and say, OK, which one do you fall under? It is amazing how much they start to struggle to give me an answer at that point. Because you find out what is going on is they get attached to the word atheism, but once you give the definitions but take out the words and say call it whatever you want.

**Dr. Craig:** You are right. People are offended or they get defensive when you say you are misusing this label. They say, “I have a right to call myself what I want!” But what you are doing is, for atheism, you would say “God does not exist.” For agnosticism, “I don’t
know whether God exists.” Non-cognitivism, “It is meaningless to affirm or deny God’s existence.” Then just erase the labels and say, OK, which of these propositions do you affirm? That is a wonderful way to just get past the question of labels. Very good, thank you.

Student: Just for a pragmatic view on trying to define atheists, is it pragmatic to actually try to debate the definition at all? Just concentrate on the subject matter instead. Or do you think for the purposes of evangelism we should be talking about . . .

Dr. Craig: I do think it is very important to try to understand what your conversation partner believes because there is a huge difference between an atheist and an agnostic. The agnostic makes no knowledge claim at all. But the atheist is making a knowledge claim. He is saying God does not exist. That is a knowledge claim that requires an argument or justification in the same way that the claim God does exist. I think it is very important to identify exactly what your conversation partner really does believe, however it is labeled. I think some of these folks may not really know what they believe. They may have just used words. This may actually promote some self-examination on their part to say, “Do I really believe this or not?”

Student: It was more of a question about should we get caught up on the definitions of words rather than subject matters.

Dr. Craig: No.

Student: My experience is that there are many people who don’t want God to exist. So they prefer a life void of what they understand God to be. Therefore they say they are atheist but they don’t want to get into the quagmire of sorting through all of that. They say, “Look, my life is fine the way it is. I don’t think there is a God, I don’t want there to be a God, so move on.” That is what I think many of them feel.

Dr. Craig: Yes, and I don’t have a label for that position. The philosopher Thomas Nagel says that. He says, It is not just that I don’t believe that God exists. I don’t want there to be a God. I don’t want to live in a universe like that. I am troubled by the fact that many of my most brilliant and gifted colleagues in philosophy believe that there is a God. He finds that disturbing because he doesn’t want there to be someone like that. So you are quite right. In dealing with a person like that, I think we need to maybe take a step back and talk about the existential implications of atheism – the absurdity of life without God. Here you can appeal to French existentialist atheists and others who have recognized how the implications of this worldview are really dreadful.

Student: I think the alternatives of their non-belief in God is very severe. So it is worth the exercise of exploring that. I just wanted to comment on one thing. As you know my
brother was an atheist. As he was close to death, he said, “I don’t understand why this is happening to me.” Which to me is saying . . . I mean, if he is truly an atheist, why not?

Dr. Craig: Isn’t that odd? As though he expected there to be a purpose or plan or reason.227

Student: Yeah, it was very puzzling and depressing. Why? Why? I thought that opened up . . . at least the thought for further . . . or how you can deal with that with another person. I guess that is the God-hold.

Dr. Craig: That’s a very poignant example of how deep that sort of God-consciousness is that he would say, “Why is this happening to me?” That is very interesting.

Student: I think that when you are talking about any subject matter you really have to be honest with yourself. I think that is especially true with philosophy. I think we have to realize that truth (whether it is in mathematics, physics, or things like that) exists independently of our desires. For example, I can walk out my door and I could drive a car around or something like that and I can bemoan being stuck in traffic and I say “I wish gravity doesn’t exist.” But my mere desire to temporarily suspend the law of gravity so I am not stuck in a traffic jam will not make my car start to levitate. My point is that the same is true with regarding the question “Does God exist?” I can wish that God does not exist, but if he does, he does so independently of my desire for him not to exist. It is interesting because the people who espouse this belief “I don’t want God to exist” it is like, don’t you want your life to have some kind of meaning? It is kind of interesting because they want to have their cake and eat it, too. They want their life to have meaning, but if there is no ultimate justice, if there is an absence of ultimate justice, then there is really an absence of ultimate meaning as well. Those two things – ultimate justice and ultimate meaning – can only exist if there is a God who is all-powerful. Only an all-powerful being can ensure those things so an all-powerful being would by definition be God if nothing is greater.

Dr. Craig: I agree. I think the example that someone earlier gave, as well as Thomas Nagel, indicate that it is not only theists who can be accused of wishful thinking, but atheists, too, can fall into this trap, as you say, of thinking that the world has to conform to their desires.

Student: In regards to the earlier comment, I just in my mind coined the term displacement – people who are atheists want to make themselves God until they come to a point in life when they realize they are not, like at the point of death and sickness and that they are not in control. Then the questions come up – why?
Dr. Craig: I hope so.

Student: One of the things I’ve noticed – and some of you all have probably noticed – I think atheists or agnostics are so desperate to avoid being labeled, they will mix-and-match these definitions to the point of saying “I’m an agnostic-atheist.” They matrix it out and say I’m over here a little bit. It is pretty interesting.

Dr. Craig: I’ve heard that same blend, too. I think that is just a lack of clarity in their thinking. Again, as someone earlier so nicely emphasized, don’t argue about labels. Just say “What is that? Tell me what that belief is. What is the position here?”

Student: First of all, I don’t think cats are atheists. They are demons!

Dr. Craig: [laughter] Oh, no, no, no! Our cat is named Angel, with good reason!

Student: I was just wondering, in your view and your experience, do you see that if someone takes a position that says there is no God, is it easier to discuss things with them than if they go, “I don’t know and I don’t care.”

Dr. Craig: Certainly if they don’t care, that is very true. As I said the other day, sometimes that is called apatheism – there is a label for that. That is very difficult to deal with. My professor, Norman Geisler, differentiated between two kinds of agnosticism – ordinary agnosticism (which is just a confession of ignorance, “I don't know whether God exists”) and what he called ornery agnosticism (which is, “No one can know that God exists. It cannot be known that God exists”). The ordinary agnostic is open-minded and I think easy to deal with. The ornery agnostic is actually making, again, a claim. He is claiming it cannot be known that God exists. Therefore that requires some evidence or argument. We need to hear his justification for that claim that it cannot be known that God exists. It depends on what kind of agnostic you are dealing with.

END DISCUSSION

Let’s move on to the next epistemological objection for the presumption of atheism. This is the view that atheism (that is to say the belief that God does not exist – atheism on the traditional definition) is the default position. You should assume that something does not exist unless and until you have evidence that it does exist. In the absence of evidence you should believe that God does not exist. You hold that something doesn’t exist unless and until you have evidence for it. This is an attempt to place a differential burden of proof. The atheist on this view has no burden of proof. His is the default position. It is the theist who carries the whole burden of proof because he asserts that God does exist.

I think there are two very significant problems with this position.

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The first problem is the one that was pointed out to me by an Australian criminologist. He says there is a saying that is beloved among criminologists which is “absence of evidence does not equal evidence of absence.” As a criminologist he knew that just because you didn’t have any positive evidence, say, that the butler was the murderer, that doesn’t mean he wasn’t the murderer. The absence of evidence isn’t necessarily evidence of absence. I think that that is very evident. Take, for example, the claim that there is a flea in this room. We don’t have any evidence that there is a flea in this room. Does that therefore imply that there is no flea in the room? I think obviously not. There could very well be a flea in this room even though we don’t have any evidence of it. So the absence of evidence is not necessarily evidence of absence. On the other hand, suppose somebody were to say there is an elephant in this room. In that case the absence of evidence would be, I think, evidence of absence. If we have no evidence that there is an elephant in this room, that is pretty good evidence that there is no elephant in the room. So what is the difference between the case of the flea and the case of the elephant? Why, in the one case, is the absence of evidence not evidence of absence, but in the other case the absence of evidence is evidence for absence?

I think there are two conditions under which absence of evidence is evidence of absence. First of all would be that we have fully canvassed the area where the evidence should be found. If you haven’t even looked into the room there might be an elephant in there because you’ve never looked at the evidence. You’ve never sought for it. Or if you examined the evidence very superficially you might not simply have discovered the evidence for the thing in question. So the first condition under which the absence of evidence will count as evidence of absence is that you have fully canvassed the area where the evidence should be found. Now translate that to the case of God. That will mean that you have done a thorough and in-depth investigation of the arguments of natural theology for God’s existence. That will be necessary in order for the absence of evidence to count as evidence of absence of God. You have fully canvassed all of the arguments for natural theology in-depth before you can judge that there is no evidence for God’s existence.\textsuperscript{229}

The second condition would be: if the entity did exist then we should expect to have more evidence of its existence than that which we have. If there were a flea in this room, should we expect to have more evidence of its existence than that which we have? Obviously not. We don’t have any sort of flea detector that would let us know that he is here. On the other hand, if there were an elephant in this room then we would expect to have more evidence – visually and olfactory evidence (the smell of the elephant and so forth) that he exists. So the absence of evidence in that case is good evidence that there is

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no elephant. Again, translate this into the question of God’s existence. What this would mean is that if God did exist then we should have more evidence of his existence than that which we do have. Is that true? If there were a God, should we have more evidence of his existence than the existence of a contingent universe, the beginning of the universe at some point in the finite past before which it did not exist, the fine-tuning of the universe to an incomprehensible precision for the existence of intelligent life, the existence of a realm of objective moral values and duties, the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth from the dead? If God exists should we expect to have more evidence than that? Well, that is far from obvious. It seems to me that what the atheist is saying then is that he is able to predict the sort of evidence that God would give if God existed. Once again we are thrown back onto the arguments of natural theology. I would say that we have very good evidence for God’s existence and that there is no reason to think that if God existed that we should have more evidence of his existence than that which we do have. So it will be a question once again of how good are these arguments.

Under what conditions, then, does the absence of evidence count as evidence for the non-existence of something? Two conditions. First you fully canvass the area where the evidence should be found, and then secondly if the entity did exist then you should expect to have more evidence of its existence than what you do, in fact, have. I don’t think that those conditions are met in the case of theism. Therefore I am unpersuaded by this argument. I don’t think that the theist and the atheist have differential burdens of proof at all. Both are making knowledge claims and both have to support them.

START DISCUSSION

Student: When an atheist asks you about Bertrand Russell’s orbiting teapot, how do you respond?

Dr. Craig: Sometimes atheists will say, “What about the hypothesis that there is a teapot in orbit around the Earth? We don’t have any evidence of such a teapot orbiting the Earth. So isn’t that good evidence that it doesn’t exist?” In this case the absence of evidence, they would say, is evidence of absence. I think it is a bad illustration. I think we have boatloads of evidence that there is no such teapot orbiting the Earth. We know that no Soviet or American cosmonauts have carried teapots into space and discharged them out of their space capsules. Moreover, no extraterrestrial would bring teapots to the Earth in space because you can’t pour tea in space out of a tea pot. You might need to suck it out of a tube but in a non-gravity situation it is pointless to have a teapot. So I think we have every reason to think that there is not a teapot orbiting the Earth, and it is not just the absence of evidence for it. We have good reasons to think that there is no teapot orbiting the Earth.
Student: I find sometimes what happens in these conversations is sometimes the atheist, I think, misuses the term “proof.” A lot of times they will use examples like the teapot or even things like Bigfoot. They’ll say, “Now prove they don’t exist.” I think when they say “prove” what they mean is they mean “prove beyond all possible doubt” which is, as we all know, is a ridiculous standard.\textsuperscript{230} By that logic, of course, I couldn’t even be a theist, which I point out to them. I would say even I wouldn’t claim to know that God exists with absolute certainty where I couldn’t possibly be wrong. But if I can say that it is beyond a reasonable doubt, then couldn’t atheism be like that?

Dr. Craig: Exactly. There you just have to go back to square-one with them and point out that you are offering arguments for God’s existence. You are not claiming you can offer a sort of mathematical proof. I think we have very good reasons, very good evidence, to think that Bigfoot doesn’t exist, that the Loch Ness Monster doesn’t exist, or the Abominable Snowman. There is good evidence that those things don’t exist. So we want to hear from the atheist – what is his arguments and evidence that God does not exist? We are quite willing to give our arguments for God’s existence so I think we have every right to ask the atheist, “Give us your arguments as to why you think God does not exist.”

Student: In a way, theology is kind of like, I would say, astronomy or cosmology as you would put it. The reason I say that is because the less we know about a given subject matter, if we don’t even know the scope or the size of something exactly (like we don’t know the size of the universe) the more we have to rely on things like indirect observation. It is kind of the same with the Earth’s core. Nobody has seen it in person, just because obviously the conditions are not suitable for human life but we have to rely on indirect observation to see what it is like. I think the same is true with the supernatural realm to some extent as with astronomy and things like that.

Dr. Craig: I think that is absolutely right. That is by the very nature of the case. God is not a physical idol that you could observe with the five senses. We are talking here about a transcendent, personal mind beyond the universe. What you will see will be, as you say, the fingerprints as it were of the Creator in his creation. It will be indirect evidence of his existence such as plays a key role in astronomy – say, the evidence for a black hole or in high-level physics for certain theoretical particles and things of that sort. They are posited because of their explanatory value for that we which do observe and see.

END DISCUSSION\textsuperscript{231}
Lecture 29: The Hiddenness of God

We’ve been looking at epistemological objections to belief in God. Last time we examined the atheist objection that in the case of God there is no evidence for God's existence and therefore belief in God is unjustified. We should believe that God does not exist. There is a sort of presumption of atheism. Atheism is the default position unless and until there is adequate evidence to prove God's existence.

I argued that this mistakenly equates the absence of evidence with evidence of absence, and that you can't always do that. Indeed there are certain conditions that need to be fulfilled in order for the absence of evidence to count as evidence of the absence of something. Namely, the first condition we saw is that we have fully canvassed the area where the evidence ought to be found. Secondly, if the entity did exist then we should expect to find more evidence of its existence than the evidence that we do have. In order for the atheist to justify his belief that God does not exist, he would need to prove to us that both of these conditions are fulfilled. That puts a whole new face on the so-called presumption of atheism. We see now it is not a default position at all. Indeed, it would involve the atheist in some pretty heavy burden of proof. He would have to show that both of these conditions are fulfilled which I, at least, would argue he can not.

So the debate over the lack of evidence for God has morphed in recent years among contemporary philosophers into a discussion of the so-called hiddenness of God. This is in effect a discussion of the probability or the expectation that God, if he existed, would have given us more evidence of his existence than that which we have. It is an attempt to show that second condition is fulfilled.

Certainly God could have made his existence much more evident than he has. But the question here, I think, is going to depend largely on your perspective on natural theology. If you are convinced that God has left adequate evidence of his existence – evidence which is pretty convincing to an open-minded and informed person – then I think you are apt to be skeptical that we should expect to see much more evidence of his existence than the evidence that we do have. Indeed, when you read the people who push this objection based on the hiddenness of God, you will find inevitably that they just assume that there are no good arguments for God's existence. So it is no wonder that they think that God is hidden. They don't believe that any of the arguments of natural theology are any good. But if, as I've argued, we have good arguments for the existence of God then God isn't so hidden after all, and it is not so evident that if God did exist he would give more evidence of his existence than that which he has given.

Some atheists unsatisfied with the amount of evidence that we have have argued that if God existed then he would have prevented the unbelief of the world by making his existence just starkly obvious. For example, he could have inscribed on every atom in the
universe “Made by God.” Or he could have placed a neon cross in the heavens saying “Jesus Saves.” In that case God's existence would be starkly apparent to everyone and thereby he would have prevented the unbelief in the world.

But I think we need to ask ourselves in response to this objection why God should want to do such a thing as that? Paul Moser is a contemporary Christian philosopher who has rightly emphasized that on the Christian perspective God really isn't all that interested in simply getting people to believe that he exists. Rather, as Moser says, what God is interested in is building a love relationship with us, not simply getting people to add one more item to their inventory of what exists. The Bible says in James 2:9 that even the demons believe that God exists and tremble because they don't have a saving relationship with God. It is that saving, personal relationship with him that God is interested in building – not simply getting people to believe that he exists as the demons do.

Of course, in order to believe in God (that is, to trust in him, to know him) you've got to first believe that God exists. But if you reflect on it, there is really no reason at all to think that if God were to make his existence starkly obvious that more people would freely come to know him and his salvation than actually do. Mere showmanship will not bring about a change of heart. That is the lesson of Jesus' parable in Luke 16:30-31 where you will remember Abraham tells the Rich Man in Hades who asks him to send someone from the dead to his family members so that they will believe and not come to this place, and Abraham says, Even if someone will rise from the dead, if they won't listen to Moses and the Scriptures neither would they believe in that case. Just seeing a miraculous event isn't going to bring about heart change if these people are closed to God and his Word.

It is interesting as you read the Bible that it describes the history of God's interaction with humanity in terms of a sort of progressive interiorization (if I can coin a word) of God's interaction with people with an increasing emphasis upon the work of the Holy Spirit in our inner-person. For example, in Romans 8:16-17, Paul says, “When we cry 'Abba, Father!’ it is the Spirit himself who bears witness with our spirit that we are the children of God.” So there is this progressive interiorization of God's interaction with humanity. In the Old Testament, God is described as revealing himself to his people in manifest wonders – the plagues upon Egypt, the pillar of fire and smoke that followed Israel, the parting of the Red Sea. But did these wonders produce lasting heart-change in the people? No! Israel fell into apostasy again and again with tiresome repetitiveness.

So if God were to inscribe his name on every atom in the universe, or place a neon cross in the sky, people might well believe that he exists, but how can we be confident that this would lead to a greater love of God and knowledge of God? Perhaps over time people would begin to chaff under these brazen advertisements of God's existence and even
come to resent him for such in-your-face effrontery. In fact, we just don't really have any way of knowing that in a world of free creatures in which God's existence is as plain as the nose on your face that the number or the percentage of people who come to love him and to know and experience his salvation is any greater than that in the actual world where, remember, the actual world includes not simply the past and the present but also the future. But then it seems to me the claim that if God existed he would make his existence more evident or starkly obvious just has little or no warrant. That undermines the claim, I think, that in the absence of such evidence that is itself positive evidence that God does not exist.233

START DISCUSSION

_Student:_ Throughout Scripture we understand that God is concerned with free will so I think that when we talk about this we have to assume that God in some way makes a careful balance. Because he wants there to be enough evidence that people can accept him with their own free will, but also he doesn't want to make it necessarily as plain as day so that people can reject him. I think the only reason why it is not more evident than it is is because the only way that God could make it more evident than it already is is that he would in some way have to interfere with free will.

_Dr. Craig:_ This is a reply that is often made to the hiddenness of God. I think there is truth in it. Obviously any revelation of God's existence would have to be freedom permitting if he is not to turn us into puppets or robots. That is why I said that it is not clear that in a world of free creatures that even if God's existence were as manifest as the nose on your face that more would come to know him and love him. I do think that it would be consistent with human freedom for God to make his existence more obvious than he has. In the Old Testament the revelations in parting the Red Sea and the pillar of fire and smoke and the other miracles that Israel witnessed didn't remove Israel's free will. That is evident from the fact that they continually apostatize. But neither were they effective in winning the love and the heart commitment of the people. So while God needs to be hidden enough that he doesn't overwhelm our free will – I think that is quite right. . . . that may happen in heaven when we have the vision of Christ and we no longer see through a glass darkly. But in this world, God's existence needs to be hidden in such a way as to be consistent with human freedom. But I would also say he could still make his existence a lot more obvious than he has if he wanted to that would be consistent with freedom. But what the atheist doesn't know (and cannot provide any reason to think) is that in such a world there would be a greater degree of people who love and come to know God than in the actual world.
Student: I am very loathe to disagree with you, Dr. Craig.

Dr. Craig: Oh! I hear a “but” coming!

Student: The Scriptures plainly say that from Nebuchadnezzar to Paul human freedom does not enter into when God wants to make known himself to people. He overrules whatever it is that they thought they knew or believed to the point where maybe God's hiddenness is his purpose to reveal himself to certain people in his own timing rather than if I revealed myself to you, you might reject me. Because in no instance in the Scriptures . . .

Dr. Craig: Wait. You said, If I revealed myself to you, you might reject me. So you are saying then it is consistent with human freedom.

Student: No, no. That is what I am objecting to. I am saying that instead he is revealing himself to people in the time that he purposes because, in my reading of the Scripture, at no time has he revealed himself directly to someone and they've rejected him.

Dr. Craig: Well, what about Israel? The examples that I gave of the Red Sea, the plagues on Egypt.

Student: When I say “reject” I don't mean as the atheist rejects him and says he doesn't exist. They just strayed like we do right now. We believe him. We believe that he exists. We love him. But we still stray. But I'm saying at no time in the Scripture does he reveal himself and, I guess, respect human freedom like in the case with Nebuchadnezzar or with Paul and say, I don't want to reveal myself to them because they might even reject the fact that I, God, exist.

Dr. Craig: OK. That wasn't my point. In fact, that was what I was disagreeing with in response to the earlier question. I think that, as you say, God sometimes does reveal himself so powerfully that there can be no doubt that he exists. But that doesn't remove the human freedom to reject a relationship with him. Paul saw the vision of Jesus on the Damascus Road, but what does he say in response to that? He says, “Therefore I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision.” He went ahead and went to Ananias and so forth. Paul, even though he had this vision of Christ – I don't think it was freedom-removing. It may have made it very clear that Christ had appeared to him. But the decision to trust in Christ, to follow him, to be his disciple – Paul still had that freedom to be disobedient.234 That is what I am arguing. God's concern, as Moser said, isn't just in getting us to believe that he is out there. Even the demons believe that. What God wants to do is get us saved. He wants to get us to trust and to love him. There is no reason to get people simply to

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believe that he exists if it is not going to produce this kind of relationship in the end. God is perfectly justified not to give such a stark revelation of himself.

Student: But then are you saying that human freedom can overrule God's intention to get us to love him? That at some point he can reject?

Dr. Craig: Yes. OK, now this gets into . . . I think I now understand where you are coming from. When we get to the doctrine of justification, you'll see that I am not a Calvinist. I am not a Reformed theologian in that sense. I disagree with people like Luther and Calvin that God unilaterally saves us and we have no choice in the matter. I would be more of an Arminian or Molinist or Wesleyian who thinks that we have the ability to repudiate God's grace and to reject him should we so choose. That will be discussed later on, but you are right. From the Calvinist perspective, what the Calvinist would just say is that God doesn't want to save everybody. He doesn't want to save some. So he passes over them. They are called the reprobate. The elect – God will manifest himself to them in such a way that they will certainly be inevitably saved. But the rest he just passes over them and lets them go to hell. He doesn't really want to save them. That would be the Calvinist solution to the hiddenness of God. But I personally find that solution abhorrent and inconsistent with the nature of an all-loving God who wants as many as possible to be saved. But that's opening a Pandora's box, obviously, so let's move on to the next question.

Student: My comment is, on atheism, when the atheists claim lack of evidence I think they are claiming a willful ignorance because the evidence is present. There are arguments. Natural law. And even in the case of the multiverse, it cannot withstand the contingency argument. You can make an argument out of the multiverse. For instance, if the multiverse exists then everything that is possible exists. God is possible. Therefore God exists.

Dr. Craig: I think that what you are saying is the point that I also wanted to affirm, and that is that there is ample evidence for God's existence if we are simply willing to look at it with an open mind and an open heart. I do think that. In reading the literature on the hiddenness of God, you find these folks just assume that none of these arguments is any good. Whether that is willful ignorance or they've actually looked at them but are unconvinced, I couldn't say. But they don't interact with them. They don't show that they are no good. They don't refute them. So it does make you wonder what is the justification for this assumption that seems to underlie this argument about the hiddenness of God.

Student: I deal with atheists a lot. Even in the presentation of the evidence, they will just outright ignore it. I can't help you if you are going to be willfully ignorant on the matter.

Dr. Craig: Then you have to trust the Holy Spirit to open their hearts.
Student: Well, I fight them.

Dr. Craig: [laughter] OK.

Student: I think I know your answer to this question, but just for our benefit. It does seem like in Scripture – Old and New Testaments – that the major characters often had God personally speak to them or provide a message to them – audibly, through visions, appearances of angels, and so forth. We don't see – at least I haven't – that today. Does that make God more hidden for us than it was for them, and is that a problem?

Dr. Craig: I agree with you that we don't have prophets today in the same way that they did in the Old Testament. John the Baptist seems to have been the last of those prophets before Christ came. So we don't have people speaking revelation from God today – speaking the word of the Lord. Those who do claim that I think are spurious. I haven't had visions or God speaking to me in the way that you described either, such as we have in the Old Testament, say to Ezekiel or to Isaiah. Yes, I think that is problematic in the sense that we would say if God really wants people to come to know him then why doesn't he do that more? I think what I've just said would be my answer to that. This kind of thing isn't just effective if it's mere showmanship, but God, through the ministry and witness of the Holy Spirit, does have this kind of interior assurance and ministry in our lives that is adequate for those who are not willfully ignorant of this, who reject him. So there is adequate grounds in the work of the Spirit for us today.

Student: I thought you would also say we have written Scripture inspired by God which they did not.

Dr. Craig: Good point. Fair enough.

Student: I'll borrow a quick note from Joyce Meyer – she was, I think, one of the best practical theologians around. She said that it is a trust issue, and trust and faith always involve unanswered questions. We are always going to have a certain amount of that in order to have a trust and faith in God.

Dr. Craig: I understand. My only reservation is that I think that even if you are absolutely certain that God exists (as I say, if it is manifest or plain as the nose on your face) I think that the trust issue still arises – it is still there. You don't need uncertainty in order for the faith or the trust issue to be an issue. So once you come to believe that God exists, the question still remains: am I going to be his disciple? Am I going to love him and bow the knee and obey him? As I say, Israel in the Old Testament had no doubt about the first question – that God exists, that Yahweh had delivered them from Egypt. But the trust question still remained.
Student: I agree. We have a couple of dimensions on that. Also, an example of overt rejection in light of supernatural evidence is the raising of Lazarus. Not only did they want to kill Jesus after they saw, but they wanted to kill Lazarus, too!

Dr. Craig: It bears out – doesn't it? - what Jesus said in that parable in Luke 16 – if they won't hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they believe even if someone rose from the dead. And here comes Lazarus! As you say, they try to kill him.

Student: The Scripture says God is the same yesterday, today, and forever. I think so is human nature. Therefore, if you go back to the beginning, Adam and Eve seemed to have a revelation of God. There was still a decision that had to be made that they did make.

Dr. Craig: Wonderful example! Who could have been more certain that God existed than Adam and Eve? And yet!

Student: They chose not to believe even though they had a direct revelation. The deception to me conveys maybe she wanted to do something to be more like God. But the deception – there is still a choice of trust and she chose not to.

Dr. Craig: Good example, thank you.

Student: I agree with you that the evidence for God is so strong it is like the nose on your face that he exists. There are no issues on that. And quite honestly, for the Israelites it was the same thing. It was so obvious that God existed that wasn't the question. The problem becomes that in people's daily lives they see difficulties, they experience hunger, they experience pain, etc. That is what causes people to even ignore the fact that there is evidence for God. What is your thinking on the premise that we are actually here to experience pain and difficulty as part of God's plan?

Dr. Craig: That forms the perfect segue to the next section which is on the problem of suffering and evil! But, so as not to preempt further questions on this topic, I won't make that transition yet. But we will.236

Student: One of the main points you are defending is the idea that it may not be necessarily true that just because God were to reveal himself and make himself more obvious and more people came to believe that he existed that therefore more people would come into a loving, saving relationship. A lot of atheists I talk to really resist that. They basically are like, You think of all the people that don't believe, if God revealed himself plainly to everyone that surely more people would come to a saving relationship. Doesn't it just seem obvious?

Dr. Craig: It is not obvious, though, is it?
**Student:** They use that to put the burden of proof back on us. They are saying, “You show me how that is true.”

**Dr. Craig:** Oh, no. Remember here – this is important. Don’t let them shift the burden of proof. We are looking at arguments for atheism. We bore our share of the burden of proof when we gave arguments for God. Now it is the atheist’s turn. He needs to show that if God really did exist then he ought to be making his existence much, much more manifest than he is. That objection is defeated by saying you don’t have any reason at all to think that in a world in which God’s existence was perfectly obvious that this would lead to greater salvation and love of God. In fact, as I said, I wouldn’t have any reason to doubt that in such a world people might actually come to resent God more because it would be so in-your-face that they would be more unbelieving in the sense of trusting in him. The atheist has got the burden of proof here. I don’t think he can give any argument.

**Student:** One attempt I have heard someone say was that you take someone like a Muslim. They are already a theist of sorts. They believe in God. Surely if God just plainly revealed himself to them, a Muslim could easily switch over and just believe in the Christian God instead.

**Dr. Craig:** Well, you know how hard it is for Muslims to become Christians. It is enormously difficult to make that transition. Some do, and some do through visions and dreams of Jesus. But we don’t have any knowledge to say if God gave more dreams and visions that more would come to know him. We just don’t have any way of knowing that. It may be that this world that God has chosen is the one in which he is most effective in bringing people to himself through the ways in which he has revealed himself. Even if he could get more people to believe that he exists, that doesn’t show that it would result in greater salvation.

**Student:** If providing more evidence for God’s existence or having more reasons to believe in God doesn’t help people come to a loving relationship with God then what is the purpose of natural theology?

**Dr. Craig:** I think that God can use this in the lives of those who are open to it and receptive. I take very seriously that God wants as many people as possible to be saved. So he knows the right degree of revelation of himself to give so as to maximize the number of persons in the world who will come to love and know him. These arguments would be part of the way in which he does that. But we are not in a position to say that if he were there he would give more.

**Student:** I actually have a huge problem with the people saying that atheism is the set position that everybody is born with. I haven’t seen a study that shows that way or the opposite. In my own experience, and what I’ve seen in other people around me, is I started out believing that there was something. When I became an atheist it was when I
thought that I was so smart that I didn’t have to believe in that. It was foolish to believe in that. I think, from what I've seen, most people kind of start with they believe in something. Children believe in something. Then somebody either snuffs it out of them or they snuff it out of themselves. They get some kind of chronological snobbery where they look back on everybody who has ever believed in God, whether it be our founding fathers, the country, or the people in the Bible, and they say they lived in a non-technological, non-philosophical genius world where they have to believe in God because they are ignorant. Going back to what he said, I think that you kind of build up walls towards believing in God. I think that is why natural theology is useful. Because it kind of tears down those walls and then lets the Holy Spirit in and lets Jesus in. Then you can do the rest of the work through the Bible. Just in my personal experience, I don't think that people are born atheists. I think people are born to know that God exists, and then they trick themselves out of it somehow or somebody else does it.

*Dr. Craig:* There is actually scientific data to support that. I remember seeing a sociological study of Japanese children who are not raised in a theistic culture and yet tended to have a belief in God – in these very young children – until it got, as you say, rubbed out. Many people who are working on child psychology think that belief in some sort of God or agency is hardwired into the human brain. I think you are quite right in saying that atheism is not something that you are born with. It is something that is arrived at later. But that is not really the issue here. I am not suggesting, nor is the atheist suggesting, that it is a default position in that sense. The issue here is that if there were a God would he have made his existence a lot more obvious than it is. I don't see any reason to think that when we remember that his desire is not simply to get people to believe that he exists but to bring people into a personal, saving relationship with him.

*Student:* I really think that was a great comment because I remember my own life. I believed very, very truly as a young person. I remember meeting the first person that ever said, “No, I don't think there is a God.” I was shocked! As I went through life I got smarter and smarter to the point where I overcame the need to believe in God. I thought back. I am going to follow up on my comment on cats.

*Dr. Craig:* You are very bold!

*Student:* I looked back, and my parents told me there was a Santa Claus. And I remember when I found out there wasn't I went, “They lied to me!” So I want to follow up with cats and say Santa Claus is a bad thing to teach children about because it turns out to be a lie.
**Dr. Craig:** I actually did a question of the week on that on our website. I agree with you. I think that it is terribly prejudicial to theism when your children find out you've been lying to them about this mythological figure. I think there are ways to celebrate Christmas that take advantage of Santa Claus by talking about the real Saint Nicholas – the church father – and what he did and how people now pretend that he comes on Christmas Eve to visit the children. We can play this game. We can make believe and fantasize about this, but it is not literally true. Children love to make believe so you can still have fun with Santa. You don't have to be a Grinch. But my goodness, we shouldn't, I think, as you say, lie to our children lest they think, “Have they been lying to me about Jesus and God?”

**Student:** According to the famous passage in Romans 1, apparently in God's mind he has given us sufficient arguments because here in verse 20 he says, “For since the creation of the world, God's invisible qualities, his eternal power, and divine nature, have been clearly seen being understood from what has been made so that men are without excuse.” In his mind, he has given enough. So while little man can get together and say maybe he should have given more, but they are not God. The next thing, too – the reason most people don't come to God is not because they don't believe in him. It is because they hate him. They are unregenerate. They don't want anybody telling them what to do. That, in essence, is what Armageddon is – it started out at the Tower of Babel and has progressed to Armageddon where God has finally had enough with unregenerate mankind which has grown more and more. As J. Vernon McGee used to say (he was a famous pastor; he died years ago but he is around the world with Thru the Bible, by J. Vernon McGee) people that say they have an intellectual problem with God is most of the time a lot of baloney. What they've got is a sin problem. They don't want to give up what it would take to follow God.

**Dr. Craig:** I think you are right. That is what Romans 1:20 clearly says. It says that God has made his existence so evident in the created world that people are without excuse. It couldn't be much plainer than that. The atheist would have to show that if God existed he would make his existence more obvious than what he has. That is just sheer speculation on his part. It is conjecture. There is no reason to think that.

**Student:** When we are talking about why wouldn't God make his existence more obvious, I think he has made it pretty obvious but so many people don't see it. My analogy is, I have a husband and three boys. I spend a lot of time finding lost things. Helping look for backpacks.

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Dr. Craig: The husband is included in that, huh? [laughter]

Student: Keys, shoes, wallets. The keys are on the counter, or the backpack is on the counter. “Oh, Mommy, I can't find it.” It is right there! It is not that my vision is better. In fact, I probably have the worst eyes in the house. So why do I see it that is right there, and no one else can find it?

Dr. Craig: What's the answer? [laughter]

Student: My question is: it didn't suddenly pop out of the sofa when I saw it. It was in the same place, and we all had the opportunity to see it but only I saw it. That implies that the obviousness could be the same to everyone, but some people don't see it whether they choose not to see it or they are blinded to it.

Dr. Craig: To try to draw a spiritual analogy then, you could say that in some way you were more attuned to seeing these things whereas these other folks, even though they were right there, didn't see them. Similarly, one could be more attuned to seeing God in the way he has revealed himself whereas people who are hardened or, as Romans 1 says, darkened in the intellect would suppress this truth and not want to see it.

Student: I definitely agree that at the point where the Gospel has been presented the reason it is rejected is more moral than it is intellectual. I think that is affirmed pretty clearly in John 3 where it says, “This is the condemnation that the light has come into the world and men love the darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil.” It gives a causal connection between evil deeds and the rejecting of the light. I think you are definitely right that atheism is a moral issue – I guess anti-theism is more of a moral issue if you draw that distinction between non-belief and disbelief. That is my main comment. I wanted to affirm that that is true. I approach that truth – I come from the Reformed perspective. I am not going to ask this in a way that brings it into the Calvinistic versus Arminian view of regeneration, if I can avoid it. If I can't you are free to not answer. [laughter] When I am doing apologetics to a non-believer especially (and I think apologetics is more for the believer than it is for the non-believer at a certain point), I have to approach it in those terms. That is where I have to trust the Spirit of God to regenerate the person on his own account rather than my ability to persuade. My objective then becomes present the Gospel correctly rather than present it persuasively.

Dr. Craig: Whoa! But wait a minute. That doesn't need to be mutually exclusive. You can do both.

Student: I wouldn't say it is mutually exclusive. I don't mean that at all. I think it is a different point of emphasis.

Dr. Craig: We are on the same page.

Student: I agree with you.
**Dr. Craig:** Apart from the Spirit of God, these arguments would fall like water on the stone because the natural man doesn't receive the things of the Spirit of God. Of course, you are absolutely right that the Spirit of God needs to move in the hearts of unregenerate people to get them to look at the evidence and to use the evidence as a means of persuading them. God can use arguments and evidence as a means of drawing people to himself in the same way he can use preaching to draw people.

**Student:** Absolutely. I just kind of wanted to bring it up.

**Dr. Craig:** You are making a good point.

**Student:** I don't disagree. They are definitely not mutually exclusive. I just know from my experience sometimes . . . and that is the source of any frustration that I get. They are not being persuaded. I just have to always remind myself that it is not up to me to necessarily persuade. It is up to me to present them clearly and truthfully. I think that has always been an encouraging thing for me.

**Dr. Craig:** I think you are right. Bill Bright, the founder of Campus Crusade for Christ, had a slogan. He said, “Success in witnessing is simply sharing Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit and leaving the results to God.” I think that something similar can be said of apologetics. Success in apologetics is simply sharing sound and persuasive arguments in the power of the Holy Spirit and then leaving the results to God. It is not up to you to bring about the result.

**END DISCUSSION**

We will return to this question of the problem of suffering and evil which is the most important argument against the existence of God that is out there.
Lecture 30: The Problem of Evil

We have now come to the most important argument in support of atheism that needs to be examined, and this is the argument from the suffering and the evil in the world. This goes by different names. Sometimes it is called “the problem of pain” or “the problem of innocent suffering.” Among philosophers, however, the problem usually goes under the name “the problem of evil.” So I will often refer to it under that title. But it needs to be understood that it is not technically just about moral evil but natural evil as well; that is to say, the suffering that results from disease, accident, natural disasters, and so forth.

Undoubtedly, the problem of evil (or suffering) is the most important argument in support of atheism. When you consider the extent and the depth of human suffering in the world, whether it is due to natural disasters or to man's own inhumanity to man, then I think we have to admit that it is hard to believe in God. The horrible suffering in the world certainly seems to be evidence of God's absence.

To illustrate, in 1985 when Jan and I were living just outside of Paris, the problem of evil came home to me in a new and powerful way through two incidents that were shown on French television. In the first of these, a terrible earthquake occurred in Mexico City which devastated blocks of high-rise apartment buildings. As the rescue teams in the aftermath of the quake searched through the rubble for survivors, they came across a ten-year old boy who was trapped alive somewhere in the recesses of a collapsed building. During the next several days the whole world watched as the rescuers attempted to clear away the rubble to try to get to the boy. They could communicate with him. They could hear him, but they couldn't reach him. His grandfather, who had been trapped with him in the building, had already died. The little boy cried, “I'm scared!” The rescuers were desperate to try to get to him. But after several days had passed, there was silence. He was heard no more. Alone in the darkness, without food or water, afraid, this little boy died before the rescue teams could get to him and free him.

That same year, a mud slide swept over a village in Colombia. As the rescuers came to help survivors, they came across a little girl who was pinned up to her chin in muddy flood waters. For some reason or another that I can't understand, they were unable to free her from the water or stop the water that was flowing around her. Every night on the evening news we would watch this little girl's decline. It was the most pathetic sight that I've ever seen. She stood there unable to move with this muddy water constantly flowing into her mouth, spitting this water out. As the days went by she became more and more exhausted, and deep dark circles formed under her eyes. She was dying before our very eyes as we watched on television. Finally, the evening newscaster reported that she was gone.
These two incidents rent my heart. “Oh, God,” I thought, “why did you permit these children to suffer so terribly?” If they had to die, so be it. Let the little boy be killed instantaneously in the collapse of the apartment building. Let the little girl drown suddenly. But why these lingering, pointless, agonizing deaths? I think we've got to be honest – when you see things like this going on, it is hard to believe in God.

But as one colleague rightly remarked to me, as a philosopher I am called upon to say what I think about an issue, not how I feel about it. As difficult as the problem of evil may be emotionally, that is no reason in and of itself to think that God does not exist. So in dealing with the problem of evil, I think it is absolutely vital that we make a distinction between what is called the intellectual problem of evil and the emotional problem of evil.

The intellectual problem of evil concerns whether it is plausible that God and the suffering in the world can co-exist. By contrast, the emotional problem of evil deals with people's dislike of a God who would permit suffering. I think it is vital that we keep these problems distinct because the answer to the intellectual problem is apt to appear very dry and uncaring to the person who is suffering emotionally from some terrible evil in his life. For example, I remember that when Joni Eareckson suffered her paralyzing diving accident, a parade of people came to her hospital room trying to explain how it is that God could have permitted this tragedy in her life. As I read her account of these, I thought some of these were actually pretty good explanations! But to her, who was suffering emotionally, they came across like Job's comforters – uncaring, irrelevant, arid. She needed someone to comfort her and to encourage her. She was suffering emotionally. It wasn't intellectual answers that she needed.

By contrast, someone who is contemplating the problem of evil as a purely abstract philosophical problem but isn't going through emotional suffering is very apt to find the answer to the emotional problem of evil to be superficial and just based on emotions and feelings and not really providing good answers to the philosophical questions that are raised.

So it is important that we keep these problems distinct. The intellectual problem of evil lies in the province of the philosopher. The emotional problem of evil lies in the province of the pastoral counselor.

I am convinced on the basis of my experience that for the majority of people the problem of evil is not really an intellectual problem. It is an emotional problem. Most of them have not thought deeply about this issue at all, much less read the literature on it. Rather, their unbelief is born out of rejection of God, not refutation of God. It is not that they have a refutation of God's existence, it is just that they reject him. They want nothing to
do with a God who would allow them or others to suffer terribly. Nevertheless I think it is important to talk about the intellectual problem of evil because many people think that their objection is intellectual even though it is, in fact, emotional. By defusing the intellectual problem of evil, we can help to get to the real problem and to help them emotionally.

In discussing the intellectual problem of evil, it is again important that we draw some distinctions here. We need to distinguish between the logical version of the intellectual problem of evil and what can be called the evidential or probabilistic version of the problem of evil.

The logical version of the problem of evil says that there is a logical inconsistency between God and the evil or suffering in the world. If God exists then evil cannot exist. It is impossible. By contrast, if evil and suffering do exist, it is impossible that God exist. Since evil obviously exists, it follows that God does not exist.243 God and evil are like the irresistible force and the immovable object – if one exists, the other one cannot exist. And since obviously suffering and evil do exist it follows that God does not exist.

By contrast, the evidential or probabilistic version doesn't claim that God and the suffering in the world are logically incompatible. It is logically possible that God and the suffering in the world might co-exist, but nevertheless, the objector says, it is highly improbable. Given the evil and the suffering that we see in the world, it is improbable that God exists.

Before we discuss these two versions of the problem, I think it is important to keep in mind just who has the burden of proof in this discussion. We are considering arguments for atheism. In the previous section of this course we were looking at arguments for God, and so it was the believer who had to bear the burden of proof. But now it is the atheist's turn. We want to hear from him some good arguments against God. So it is the atheist who has to bear the burden of proof here. It is up to him to give us an argument exhibiting premises leading to the conclusion, “Therefore God does not exist.”

All too often I find believers allow unbelievers to shift the burden of proof onto the believer's shoulders. The unbeliever says, “Give me some good explanation for why God permits suffering.” Then he just sits back and plays the skeptic at whatever explanation the believer might offer. The atheist winds up having to prove nothing. This might be a clever debating strategy on the atheist's part, but it is philosophically illegitimate and intellectually dishonest. So in conversation, don't allow the unbeliever to shirk his intellectual responsibilities. He is the one who is claiming that the co-existence of God and evil are either logically impossible or improbable. So it is up to him to give us an

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argument and to support the premises of his argument. Now it is the Christian's turn to play the skeptic and to question whether the atheist has really proven that God cannot or does not have morally sufficient reasons for permitting the suffering in the world. Insist that the atheist bear his share of the burden of proof when it is his turn to present his case against God.

Because the problem of evil intellectually comes in different versions, when you are talking to the unbeliever it is also important to find out which version it is that he is supporting. Just ask him straightforwardly, “Are you saying that it is impossible that God and the suffering in the world co-exist? Or are you saying merely that it is improbable that God and the suffering in the world co-exist?” If he is like most atheists, he has probably never thought about the question, and so he doesn't have a clue which version he is supporting. Here you may need to help him to clarify what he, himself, believes by explaining the two versions to him. Ask him questions to help him to understand what exactly is it that he believes, and then how he responds will determine your reply – whether you need to reply to the evidential version or to the logical version. But in either case, keep in mind that it is the unbeliever who has the burden of proof here, not you.

START DISCUSSION

Student: I’d back it up one more step and ask the meaning of the problem. If God doesn't exist then evil and suffering don't exist. This is just what happens.

Dr. Craig: OK, you are making a good point, and that is why I said that this philosophical name here can be misleading because it is not just about moral evil. What you are saying – and I think you are making a good point – is that on atheism there are no objective moral values and duties. What happens is just what happens and there is no moral dimension to it. But you see, the problem of evil doesn't really concern evil. What it really concerns is suffering. Even if there is nothing morally evil about getting killed in an earthquake or drowning in a flood or getting childhood leukemia, nevertheless the idea is that this kind of suffering is incompatible with the existence of a loving and all-powerful God. I will come back to your point. I think you are making a very good point about moral evil. But with regard to so-called natural evil, that could exist in an atheistic world, and indeed one would think it very likely to exist given the laws of nature that govern our universe. There would be, you would expect, a lot of natural suffering of a non-moral nature.

Student: How are you defining evil?

Dr. Craig: I think for purposes of this problem, what we would just use is the word “suffering.” People feel pain and are harmed. They go through terrible suffering.
Student: So you are removing the moral aspect when you say “evil?”

Dr. Craig: Yes I am. Perhaps I should have done more to make that clear at the beginning when I said this is called the problem of evil by philosophers. But it is really what C. S. Lewis called it – the problem of pain, or the problem of suffering. Some of the suffering is going to be due to sin and moral evil – murder, theft, selfishness, greed, and so forth. A lot of the suffering in the world is due to human wrongdoing, isn't it? But we are talking about just suffering, whatever its sources might be.

Student: So isn't it good that when we are having these discussions that you at least come to an agreement on a definition of terms, because they may have in their head something far different from yours.

Dr. Craig: Yes, that may well be the case. Yes, I think that is a good point.

Student: I just wanted to say that I appreciate you directing it this way because my trouble with this discussion, when you are having this discussion with other people, is how clouded it gets. So I really appreciate you breaking it down like that and saying, “Let's go to this step.” I even appreciate the point of defining terms. I think in this discussion you really do have to differentiate what is intellectual and what is emotional. I never even thought of evidential and logical. Even that helps because when you are talking intellectual you can't really understand what side they are on unless, like you said, you kind of walk them through what they think they believe.

Dr. Craig: Very good. Thank you.

Student: It seems if suffering was a problem, then you also have a problem with some people being happy and other people being very happy. There would be no difference. It would have to be nothing. Everything would have to be the same.

Dr. Craig: I think that the atheist would plausibly claim that, given the laws of nature and human intelligence, we can often do things that will bring pleasure into our lives – eating, sex, meaningful work. There are lots of things that we can do to make our lives pleasurable and happy. But then there is so much that results in suffering and pain. It is the claim that this suffering is incompatible or improbable with the existence of a loving and all-powerful God.

Student: To me that is just a matter of degree, plus you are also assuming there is not compensating in the other realms, other areas.

Dr. Craig: Yeah, I don't think that the atheist is not saying that people live lives that are on balance unhappy. On balance, I would say people generally live happy lives. When we are going through hard times we generally look to the future and hope that things will improve. If people's lives were, on balance, worse than good everyone would commit
suicide. It is worth keeping this in perspective. On balance, most people live happy lives despite the suffering that punctuates our lives.\textsuperscript{245}

\textit{Student:} Maybe suffering is necessary in a world – if you don't play sports, you can't get injured.

\textit{Dr. Craig:} Now you are getting into solutions to the question. That is good, but let's hold off on those. We just want to understand first the different distinctions to be made, and especially this issue of the burden of proof. Because I can almost guarantee you, when you are talking to an unbeliever, what he will say is, “Why does God permit the suffering and evil in the world?” He'll look to you to give an answer to that question. Anything you say then he doesn't have to prove anything. He just has to be a skeptic. He just has to fold his arms and take pot shots at whatever you say, and he thinks that therefore he has justified his unbelief or his atheism when in fact he hasn't. He needs to give an argument as to why God and the suffering in the world are either inconsistent or improbable with respect to each other.

\textit{Student:} I don't know how to pronounce his name, but the gentleman that was in the Nazi prison that wrote the book \textit{Night}. He became an atheist through his experience in the concentration camp when he felt God abandoned him.

\textit{Dr. Craig:} Was that Elie Wiesel?

\textit{Student:} Yeah, I don't know how to say his name. Where would he fall on this? Have you read any of his stuff? I would be curious as to where you think he lies. Did he do it from an emotional standpoint?

\textit{Dr. Craig:} I haven't read Wiesel's book myself, so I can't answer that question. I don't know where you would put him on this continuum. Sorry.

\textit{Student:} Since you mentioned that, Wiesel said the question was not “Where was God?” but “Where was man?” That is how he famously responded to the problem.

\textit{Dr. Craig:} What did he mean by that?

\textit{Student:} He blamed evil on humanity.

\textit{Dr. Craig:} Oh, really?

\textit{Student:} Or the lack thereof among the Nazis.

\textit{Dr. Craig:} OK.

\textbf{END DISCUSSION}

Let's turn now to a discussion of the logical version of the problem of evil.
As I say, according to the logical version of the problem, the co-existence of God and the suffering in the world are logically impossible. The atheist is claiming that the following two statements are logically inconsistent with each other:

1. An all-loving, all-powerful God exists.
2. Suffering in the world exists.

The atheist who propounds the logical version of the problem of evil is saying that these two propositions are logically inconsistent with each other.

The first question that needs to be asked is: why think that these two statements are logically inconsistent? After all, there is no explicit contradiction between them. One is not the negation of the other. So if the atheist thinks that these two statements are logically inconsistent with each other he must be assuming some hidden premises or hidden assumptions that would bring out the contradiction and make it explicit. And the question is: what are those hidden assumptions? They seem to be two in number.

3. Necessarily, an all-powerful God can create any world that he wants. (That is thought to follow from God's omnipotence.)

The second hidden assumption seems to be:

4. Necessarily, an all-loving God prefers a world without suffering.

An all-loving and all-powerful God exists, therefore he both can and would create a world without suffering, which contradicts (2) – suffering exists. These do seem to be the two hidden assumptions made by the atheist.

In order for this argument to be a good one, both of these hidden premises (3) and (4) need to be necessarily true. But is that the case? Are these statements necessarily true? Let's think about them.246

First let's think about (3) – if God is all-powerful he can create any world that he wants. Is that necessarily true? Well, no, not if it is possible that people have freedom of the will. It is logically impossible to make someone do something freely. That is as logically impossible as making a square circle or a married bachelor. God's being all-powerful doesn't mean that he can do the logically impossible. In fact, there isn't any such “thing” as the logically impossible. It is just an inconsistent combination of words. So God's being all-powerful doesn't mean that he can do logical impossibilities.

Notice that if the atheist denies this and says, “Yes, a God who is all powerful can do logical impossibilities” then the problem of evil just evaporates immediately! Because then God can bring it about that both he and evil exist even though that is logically
impossible! So if you say that God's being all-powerful means that he can do the logically impossible then there just is no logical problem of evil because God can bring it about that this inconsistency is true or obtains.

If it is possible that people have free will then it means that (3) is not necessarily true because if people have free will they may refuse to do what God desires. So there will be any number of possible worlds which God cannot create because the people in them wouldn't freely cooperate with God's desires. In fact, for all we know, it is possible that in any world of free persons with as much good as the actual world, there would also be just as much suffering. That conjecture doesn't need to be true. It doesn't even need to be probable, because remember we are talking about the logical version of the problem of evil. As long as it is even logically possible then it shows that it is not necessarily true that God can create just any world that he wants. So assumption (3) is just not necessarily true. On this basis alone the atheist's argument fails.

START DISCUSSION

Student: What if they insist that free will doesn't exist if God exists, and use the same arguments as the Reformed?

Dr. Craig: What I think one would say then is that this refutation of the argument only requires that it is possible that free will exists. So as long as it is even possible that there be creatures that have freedom of the will then it shows it is not necessarily true that an all-powerful God can bring about any world that he wants.

Student: How does free will interact with natural disaster?

Dr. Craig: It wouldn't necessarily address that question. But remember we are talking here about a logical version which says that it is impossible that there be God and the suffering in the world. That is based on the assumption that God can just bring about any world that he wants. Yet if there are worlds involving suffering because they have free will in them then that means that it is not true that God can bring about any world that he wants. And that is crucial for the atheist's case that this is logically impossible. This isn't meant to address specifically that question, though you could adapt it to do that. Alvin Plantinga, for example, has said it is logically possible that all of the natural evil in the world is caused by demons and that they have freedom of the will. Now, you might say that is ridiculous; that is absurd! But then you would be confusing the logical version of the problem of evil with the probabilistic version. Granted it would be fantastically improbable to think that all the earthquakes and tsunamis in the world are caused by demons. But that only goes to underline how heavy a burden of proof the atheist has here. He has to show it is logically impossible for God and suffering to exist.

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Student: Like you say, your position depends upon libertarian free will. But I know there are people out there who think libertarian free will is incoherent. So what if the atheist does try to argue that? Libertarian free will is incoherent. Because if it is incoherent then it can't be a possible answer to this.

Dr. Craig: That is right. This assumes that it is possible that there be libertarian freedom. If you disagree on that then you are going to have to defend the coherence of that idea if you are going to use this free will defense against the problem of evil.

Student: I am not sure I entirely agree with where you are going with (3) because God actually did create a perfect world as far as we know. If you look at the account in Genesis, sin ruined it.

Dr. Craig: Remember when we talk about a world here, we mean past, present, and future. So even if God created a universe that is innocent and free of suffering at the first, but then it goes bad, the possible world includes everything – the past, present, and the future. This world obviously is a fallen world that isn't free of suffering and evil.

Student: I do have some issues with (3) because the term of omniscience, omnipresence – all the omni-predicates – indicate that contradictions are possible for God in his realm. Can he make a round square? Yes. Can he lift a rock too heavy for him to lift? Yes. Because, just like in physics physics breaks down in the presence of a black hole, logic seems to break down in the presence of God. We know that paradoxes exist. We live right through them – Zenith paradox, we are able to travel though we have an infinite amount of points between point A and point B. Looking at a logical argument, once you flip it and put the conclusion first, on the other side of that “therefore” (just like a math question) everything extends from that versus his input into it. I don't know if I said that in a coherent way.

Dr. Craig: I understand where you are coming from, and I would disagree with you that we have examples of paradoxes like the ones you mentioned. I don't think that anybody has been able to demonstrate that there is some incoherence in the ideas of omnipotence or omniscience or these other things. But if you do think, as I say, that God has the ability to bring about logical contradictions then the problem of evil just dissolves because he can bring about that (1) and (2) are true even if they are logically contradictory. That seems to me to just completely short circuit the whole discussion.

Student: It does in that sense, and I agree with the conclusion of what that type of thinking does. I am very loathe to put limits on God, even logical ones. I don't think that God is necessarily contained by logic.

Dr. Craig: Let me make one more attempt and then we will close. If you are going to be giving a good apologetic to the atheist, it probably wouldn't be a good idea to appeal to
something that he would think is logically incoherent. For him, that would just prove that
Christianity and theism is logically incoherent, and that really gives him a good argument
to reject it. So I think this would be an unwise way to respond to the problem.

_Student_: You are right in terms of tactic. It is just thinking in terms of God himself.

_Dr. Craig_: OK. If we do think in just purely philosophical terms and not tactics, I would
just dispute the idea that theism involves a kind of incoherence that you suggest.

_Student_: I am not suggesting it does. I am only suggesting the person of God and his
omni-predicates allow for things that boggle the mind.

_Dr. Craig_: Boggle the mind – that is fine. But that is very different.248

_Student_: Contradiction is a part of something . . . there are things that we can't
understand.

_Dr. Craig_: Again, that's different to say there are things we can't understand and say that
these things are logically contradictory. That is what I would dispute.

**END DISCUSSION**

We can continue this discussion next week. Then we will look at the evidential version of
the problem of evil.249
Lecture 31: The Logical Version of the Problem of Evil

Last time we began to look at the logical version of the problem of evil. You will recall this version of the problem claims that the co-existence of God and the suffering in the world is logically impossible. Given the suffering and evil in the world, it is logically impossible that God exists.

The statements

1. An all-powerful, all-loving God exists.

and

2. Evil and suffering exist

are not explicitly contradictory to each other. So the atheist must be assuming some hidden premises if he thinks this is an implicit contradiction – premises which would bring out the contradiction and make it explicit.

We identified two such premises. The first one was:

3. If God is all-powerful (as Christians claim) then he can create any world that he wants, including a world with no evil and no suffering.

4. If God is all-good then he would prefer a world without suffering over a world with suffering.

Since God is all-powerful and all-good, it would follow therefore that suffering does not exist. Since suffering does exist, one can conclude that therefore God does not exist.

We began to look at those hidden assumptions and ask ourselves: are they necessarily true? We saw first of all that the assumption that “if God is all-powerful he can create any world that he wants” is not necessarily true because if it is even possible that human beings have freedom of the will then there may be worlds that in and of themselves are logically possible but they are not feasible for God to create because people would not freely do what God wants them to do. It is logically impossible to make someone freely do something. If there is a freedom of the will (or if that possibility exists) it follows that it is not necessarily true that God can just create any old world that he wants to create. On that basis alone the atheist’s argument collapses and is fallacious.

Let’s go on to the second assumption: “If God is all-loving and all-good then he would prefer a world without suffering.” Is that necessarily true? Well, I don’t think so. It doesn’t seem like it. Because God could have other overriding reasons for allowing the suffering in the world. We all know of cases in which we permit or even inflict suffering because of some greater good that might be achieved. I am reminded of a comment made by C. S. Lewis to the effect of “What do people mean when they say ‘I am not afraid of
God because I know that he is good.’ Have they never even been to the dentist?” Remember, that was written when dentists worked without Novocaine! Those of us who remember those days know that even though the dentist is good, nevertheless, that can inflict considerable suffering. So it is simply not true that a world without suffering is automatically better than a world with suffering.

The atheist might say an all-powerful God isn’t limited in the way that, say, your dentist is. The all-powerful God could bring about this greater good directly without the suffering. But, again, clearly given the freedom of the will, that may not be possible. Some goods, for example moral virtues, can only be achieved given freedom of the will. It is only through the free cooperation of people that moral growth and moral virtue is possible. So it could well be the case that a world with suffering is, on balance, a better overall world than a world that would involve no suffering. This is, I think, at least possible, and that is all that needs to be the case in order to defeat the atheist’s claim that this is assumption is necessarily true.250

START DISCUSSION

Student: You’ve been really clear about just the mere possibility of a rejoinder – this is enough to defeat the argument. What if somebody says, I've got a mere possibility against your teleological argument. The mere possibility of there being a multiverse is enough for me to ignore all the design implications I see around me. When somebody attempts to use that . . .

Dr. Craig: That wouldn't be relevant to the teleological argument because one isn't making claims of necessity – that of logical necessity this is the case. It would be relevant to the ontological argument. There, if he could show that it is possible that God does not exist, then you are quite right that it would have these ramifications. But it is so important to keep in mind here that the atheist is making a very, very strong claim in the logical version – that it is logically impossible for God and the suffering in the world to co-exist. That is why, as I say, if it is even possible that people have free will it would show that the key assumptions are not necessarily true.

Student: I follow your argument entirely except for one thing I need clarity on. I understand that if God created a world with human beings that have free will that on their own accord can choose him or not choose him – there would have to be evil. Correct?

Dr. Craig: Not that there would have to be.

Student: But the possibility that evil could exist.
Dr. Craig: Right. The possibility of evil, and it might be the case that in any world of free creatures that has as much good as this world does there would also be this much suffering and evil. We just don't know. The atheist is just conjecturing here.

Student: Then you factor in Satan and the impact of sin and that we are fallen, it only magnifies it – the possibility of sin and evil being present.

Dr. Craig: That's right. I don't mention Satan because it doesn't really add anything. The idea here is there is creaturely freedom, and this could be human creatures, or Klingons, or it could be demons and Satan.

Student: What I am not quite following is the material suffering. That's not the proper word. Suffering through natural causes – not through evil acts – whether it be, as you mentioned last week, with the child who was buried in the rubble. There was no cause of a human will that created that situation. I think to me that is where we will have the most difficulty in trying to explain or rationalize . . .

Dr. Craig: I think you are right, and that is just the point. One isn't trying here to offer an explanation. You are not trying to give an explanation of why there is evil and suffering in the world. What you are merely doing is undercutting the atheist's claims that an omnipotent God could create a world without evil and suffering and that an all-loving God would create a world (or prefer a world) without evil and suffering. And we are simply saying those two assumptions aren't necessarily true. But you are not offering any explanation here of natural evil or other sorts of evils in the world.

Student: But we in your class are very curious people so . . . [laughter]

Dr. Craig: I think the answer will become more relevant when we get to the evidential or probabilistic version of the problem of evil. There we will need to address these issues, I think, more directly.

Student: Is there anything you think in the fact that the world is suffering through domination by Satan, and that it is crying out in pain as well as the human race and therefore even the world is captured, if you will, by . . .

Dr. Craig: I mentioned that last week. Alvin Plantinga says it is logically possible that the natural evil in the world is the result of Satan and his minions – that we live in this fallen universe where they cause all sorts of disasters and things. That might seem enormously improbable, but as long as it is logically possible it shows that the atheist has failed to prove these crucial assumptions that would show God's existence with evil's existence to be impossible. 251

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Student: What if someone claims that an all-good God should have refrained from creating rather than creating creatures who have free will who he knew would suffer?

Dr. Craig: I think that that is not essentially different because a world in which there is no physical universe – that only God exists – is still a possible world. That is a possible world. So the claim here, on the atheist's part, is that if God is all-loving he would prefer a world without suffering over a world with suffering. And a world in which God alone exists would be such a possible world – a world without suffering. I think the response remains the same. We can have morally sufficient reasons for allowing suffering to occur, and therefore a world with fallen creatures who come to know God through Christ's salvation may be a better world than a world without suffering – that is a world in which God creates nothing and just exists by himself. So it is really the same point again. The atheist has to show that it is logically impossible that there could be goods in mind that God has which prompts him to create a world of creatures that lapse into suffering and evil.

Student: I think we give up too much ground because I am not sure that they can prove that this world is not perfect as it is now. Because we don't have total knowledge. We don't know that God is not perfectly fair and makes up for the child and the suffering in the rubble in a different area. So the world could be perfect and have always been perfect because a greater plan that we cannot see now.

Dr. Craig: The logical version of the problem of evil is trying to expose an inconsistency within the Christian worldview. It is trying to say, You, Christians, are committed to the truth of God's being all-powerful and all-loving and to the reality of evil. You yourselves recognize that this is not a perfect world; that this is a world which is fallen, in which there is evil. And so the atheist will claim that the Christian worldview is internally contradictory. I don't think that it would be a theologically acceptable response to say this world is perfect. That would be to say sin is illusory. That is really a Hindu view of the world that says the distinction between good and evil is part of Maya or the world of illusion. I think that as Christians we are committed to the truth of that premise that evil and suffering really do exist.

Student: Evil exists. It is not that. Suffering is an unfairness. What I am saying is God may have orchestrated things that we cannot see yet – for each individual it balances out.

Dr. Craig: I think that is the same point that I am making. Like the dentist, there can be overriding goods that God has in mind that would outbalance the suffering. I think that is right. But I would stay away from the word “perfect.”

Student: I have reasons to lead that way but. The reason I am trying to say is because of lack of complete knowledge that it only appears...
Dr. Craig: We'll talk some more about that when we get to the evidential version.

Student: I am going to use a simple parable to illustrate what we view as evil. That is, if a baby sleeps in a crib and as he grows if we continue to let him stay in the crib it is going to be more and more difficult and incur suffering. That kind of suffering is almost like God built in this growth mechanism and if we don't grow with it (the sin of omission) we will fall into suffering. In that sense suffering is necessary to promote this growth.

Dr. Craig: I think that is the point I was trying to make with respect to moral virtues. If God just left us as infantile persons protected from every suffering and from every discipline, we would never be able to grow into mature moral agents who can make wise decisions and do acts of goodness and sacrifice and become the kind of moral persons we are supposed to be.252 We would be like, as you say, these infantile spoiled children still in the crib. In one sense, I think you are right. That is worse. That is more suffering than the person who, through hard knocks and discipline and the vicissitudes of life, learns to be a mature, giving, courageous, patient person that has these moral virtues that he develops. I think that is a good point.

Student: Going back to the first hidden premise, it seems to me that the atheist could say that, as Christians, we absolutely do believe in a God that can create a world without pain and suffering because we believe he is going to do exactly that in eternity.

Dr. Craig: Remember, this is so crucial – by a “world” here we don't mean a universe, we mean a possible world. And a possible world is a maximal description of reality that includes past, present, and future. So the actual world in which we live is one in which there is real evil and real suffering, even if the initial segment of it began very well, it hasn't continued like that. Even if the final segment of it will be restored (as we believe), nevertheless in between there is this segment of genuine, horrible evil and suffering. We must not try to minimize that. When we talk about a world (a possible world) we mean everything – past, present, and future.

Student: It seems almost as though the atheist's logical argument on this is almost too simplistic. They are not taking into account all the nature laws of physics. Even the mortality of man – free radicals that break down the body and all that different type of stuff that can happen to a person that can cause him to suffer that might not have anything to do with any other person doing it. Gravity – if you decide to jump off a building – you are probably going to get hurt. Tidal waves, and things like that.

Dr. Craig: I think, if I can speak for the atheist, he would say but that is assuming that the law of gravity is logically necessary. Maybe God could have created a world operating according to different laws of nature in which these unfortunate incidents would not
occur. But then I think your response to that ought to be quite properly, “How do you know? That is just conjecture.” The atheist really has no way of proving that in a world operating according to different laws of nature there would be less evil and suffering than in this world.

**Student:** I think when you combine the two – the different laws that people have to obey (you can hardly get around them, whatever it is, even a moral conscience or nature laws), and then you have the freedom of the will which you brought up. You only have freedom of the will to a certain extent. I can't just fly out of this room. If you have freedom of the will along with boundaries, you hit the boundaries and there is suffering, whatever it is.

**Dr. Craig:** Think of this scenario. God could have created a world of pure spirits in which there is no physical bodies or physical universe at all. So you would never be injured. You'd never feel pain. There would just be pure spirits. Would that be a world without evil and suffering? Not at all. That kind of world might be horrible. It might be terrible. That could be like an angelic world that falls into sin and produces demonic beings. So it is not at all clear that in a world, say, of pure spirits that this would be a world that would be without evil and suffering so long as there is freedom of the will.

**Student:** That was a segue to what I was thinking. Anytime you have freedom you are going to have evil. God created free beings.

**Dr. Craig:** Be careful. You didn't say this, but you don't want to say that freedom entails evil. There could be logically possible worlds where people always freely do the right thing. I think freedom of the will entails the possibility of evil, but it doesn't entail evil itself.

**Student:** No, it doesn't, but if God created people with free will, ultimately evil is going to be expressed because Satan was created without sin but yet sin began in heaven.253

**Dr. Craig:** Yeah, but you don't want to say that Satan's fall was logically necessary.

**Student:** Not necessary but some evil will come is inevitable.

**Dr. Craig:** Well, I don't think that is true, at least not in a logical sense. I think what one can say is that possible worlds in which no evil occurs (and there are free beings, free creatures) are logically possible but they may not be feasible for God to create because if there were free creatures they would go wrong and do things that God didn't want them to do. Remember our discussion of middle knowledge. That is what this relates to. By his middle knowledge, God knows all of the worlds that are feasible for him to create. So we don't need to deny that there are logically possible worlds in which people always freely do the right thing. Otherwise sin would be necessary. But what one can say is that these

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worlds may not be feasible for God. That was the point that I was trying to make where I said just because God is all-powerful doesn't mean that he can actualize any old possible world that he wants. There are worlds which may be infeasible for God in view of human freedom.

Student: The corollary then would be, in our world, is if God wants to destroy evil then he should destroy me, and nobody wants that for themselves unless you are going to take the Kool Aid like Jim Jones. That is the logical extension to that – we just all off each other.

Dr. Craig: Yes, we can be grateful, each of us, that God is willing to allow evil or we wouldn't be allowed to exist.

END DISCUSSION

The point here is that in making these two assumptions – that if God is all-powerful he can create any world that he wants, and that if God is all-good he would prefer a world without suffering over a world with suffering – the atheist is assuming a burden of proof that is simply unsustainable. He would have to show that freedom of the will is impossible and that it is impossible that a world with suffering is better than a world with no suffering. No atheist has been able to carry that heavy burden of proof.

Having said that, we can actually push the argument a notch further. I think that we can make it plausible that God and the suffering and evil in the world are logically consistent with each other. All we have to do is come up with a third statement that is consistent with God's existence and entails that suffering exists. Here is such a statement:

5. God could not have created a world with as much good as the actual world but with less suffering, and moreover God has good reasons for permitting the suffering in the world.

Is that statement (5) true? I don't know. God knows! But as long as it is even possible it shows that there is no inconsistency between God and the evil and suffering in the world. Because if God exists and God could not have created a world with as much good as the actual world but less suffering and he has good reasons for permitting the suffering that does exist then it follows that suffering does exist. Thus there is no inconsistency. So not merely has the atheist failed to prove any inconsistency between God and the suffering in the world, but I think we can make it very plausible that God and the suffering in the world are logically consistent, namely, the possibility of (5) shows that they are logically consistent.

START DISCUSSION

Student: When we are talking to someone, we can just leave it as it is that he just has good reasons but we don't necessarily know what they are. However, we can take it a step
further and suggest those reasons. If they say, *OK, what reasons could he possibly have?* Even though his mind is higher than ours, isn't a primary reason that we could give is saying God didn't put us on the Earth as his pets that are just here for our pleasure. Happiness is not God's objective for us – it is actually a knowledge of God and salvation?^{254}

*Dr. Craig:* You are anticipating the evidential problem of evil that we are going to talk about next where those kind of points will become relevant. But with regard to this logical version, I would reiterate what I said earlier. We are not trying to offer any explanation of why God permits the suffering and evil in the world. That is not our burden of proof. This is the atheist's argument. He is the one making this very strong claim that it is logically impossible that God and the suffering in the world exist. It is simply enough to say isn't (5) possible? As long as it is, it shows there is no inconsistency. And you haven't provided any explanation at all for why there is evil and suffering in the world.

*Student:* For this, it is not even necessary, but the other can be an extension of it.

*Dr. Craig:* Yeah, right. Sure. Obviously, I think as someone said, we are curious and we'd like to know – what might those reasons be? God has good reasons for permitting the suffering in the world. What might they be? That is a legitimate inquiry, and we'll talk about that in a minute.

*Student:* Do we need good and free will in that statement? Because I can see God creating a world where we have free will and no suffering if we are all isolated. But as soon as we have to have community and interaction, then he has got to establish a law that brings suffering.

*Dr. Craig:* The idea behind (5) is that we can imagine worlds that, say, have less suffering than the actual world. Right? He could have created a world where there is a lot less suffering. But then the good of the world might also be diminished at the same time. Or we can imagine worlds in which God will create much better goods – there is more goods – but the attendant suffering would also be much greater. What we want to say is it’s possible that God couldn't have created a world that attains this much goodness in it but doesn't also have this much evil and suffering in it.

*Student:* I see what you are saying. I am trying to say the measure of good – how do you measure good. Without free will, you could just have everyone doing God's will (we're all robots) and there is no suffering. But if you have free will, everybody goes there way but God is so sovereign and so powerful he could keep us from interacting with each
other. But we would never have community and fellowship. So when he has to give the law, you must obey a common ground – his will. He puts a moral . . .

*Dr. Craig:* Yeah, I think it would be plausible to say that a world in which, say, there is only one person on each planet would be a world that doesn't achieve the kind of goods that this world does because of the things you mentioned.

*Student:* So good would be a measure in that case of something more like social interaction.

*Dr. Craig:* That would be part of the goods that this world has achieved, hasn't it? Love between persons and things of that sort. There are lots of things.

*Student:* On a more basic level, multi-cellular life.

*Dr. Craig:* Yeah.

We tried to show that the atheist has failed to bear his burden of proof to show that they are inconsistent, and now we've pushed the argument a step further and say that we can prove that they are consistent as long as (5) is possible.

*Student:* My understanding or conception of what heaven will be like is a world in which all the inhabitants of heaven will have free will and yet will not fall into sin. Also, somehow the laws of physics will be such that we won't be suffering by natural evil either. The question is if God can bring that about then and will bring it about then, then why can he not bring it about now?

*Dr. Craig:* What you need to remember is that heaven is not itself a possible world. It is just a segment of a possible world. There is also all of the people in hell at the same time. There is also that precursor to heaven that is this veil of tears through which we go. So heaven is the outcome or the result of all that has gone before. It may well be the case that God could not create a world like heaven just *de novo* because people wouldn't have had the opportunity to choose for and against Christ and so forth. I don't think that that is a counter example to what we are saying here.

*Student:* We are not there yet, and I know we are getting there, but when you debate you notice people jump right past logical. Is that largely because it has been abandoned philosophically? I am thinking of the late J. L. Mackie and his disciples. It seems as if they jump right to it. Neil deGrasse Tyson all the way to the late Chris Hitchens go right for natural evil, non-volitional, non-free will evil and simply bypass this to the evidential. Do you find that to be the case?
Dr. Craig: Yes, I do find the slide from the logical version into the evidential or probabilistic version, but I don't think it is because the logical version has been answered and they are aware of it. I think it is through the failure to draw clear distinctions between these versions. So very often people will make this very strong claim of the logical version that it is impossible for God and the suffering in the world to exist, but then they argue evidentially. It is just, I think, a failure to draw the clear distinctions. It will really help us to deal with the respective problems if we can keep these distinctions clear.

END DISCUSSION

Let me wrap up this version of the problem of evil – the logical version – by saying that after centuries of discussion, the books are pretty much closed now on the logical version of the problem of evil. Scarcely any atheist today will defend this argument. It is widely admitted by both theist and non-theistic philosophers alike that the logical version of the problem of evil is bankrupt. The reason is because the burden of proof that it lays on the atheist's shoulders is so heavy that it cannot be sustained. He would have to prove that it is logically impossible that God and the suffering and evil in the world co-exist, and no one has been able to do that.

START DISCUSSION

Student: What we can conclude here is what you were saying – you didn't bring up what he said but – Chris Hitchens is famous for saying that God can't be all good because of dot-dot-dot and God can't be all-powerful because of dot-dot-dot. You are saying that it is a logical claim because he is saying it is one way or the other, there is no middle ground. But then it is argued on an evidential level. So they kind of switch the whole play of the argument. So our job in that circumstance is to keep it logical and say, OK, prove logically that what you just said that God can't be all-good and allow evil and God can't be all-powerful and allow evil.

Dr. Craig: Yeah, and I think if we do that it might be a sort of startling realization to the unbeliever that, Gee, I guess I can't really prove this. I really can't prove these are impossible or inconsistent as I thought. That might help to open him up a little more. So, right, I think it is really important in discussing with an unbeliever who is pushing this problem of evil is to ask him, Are you saying that it is logically impossible that God and the suffering in the world co-exist? Or are you merely saying that the suffering in the world makes it improbable that God exists? Which one of those do you believe? If he says “impossible” then hold his feet to the fire and say, OK, you are making a strong radical claim. One that is rejected by most atheist and theist philosophers alike. Let's see you support that claim.
Student: Are there any other versions of the logical problem of evil? Sometimes I talk to atheists I hear them reference things like, *The way J. L. Mackie defended it isn't the only version of the logical argument*. Or are they all pretty much the same thing?

Dr. Craig: I think they basically come down to the same considerations. There is an argument from gratuitous evil in the world. That is to say, *All right, God and suffering and evil are consistent. That is logically possible. But it is not logically possible that God would co-exist with the unnecessary, pointless evil in the world. Given the unnecessary pointless evil in the world, it is impossible that God exists*. But you see, then, the Christian isn't committed to the truth that there is pointless and unnecessary evil. As I said earlier, the Christian is committed to God's being all-powerful and all-good and to the reality of evil. He is committed to those. So if the atheist can show an inconsistency between those there is an internal contradiction in our worldview. But we are not committed as Christians to the view that there is gratuitous evil in the world, that there is pointless and unnecessary evil. Therefore the atheist would have to give some good argument for that, and that then launches you right into the evidential version of the problem.\(^{256}\)

Student: I thought God and evil have to co-exist because God's purpose is to draw us to him. Just like light and darkness, if a plant needs a light he will be drawn to the light. We are drawn to God only when we experience darkness.

Dr. Craig: Be careful. You wouldn't want to say that our existence is logically necessary, right? That you and I have to exist. You wouldn't want to say that – that God had to create you and me.

Student: Well, but God did.

Dr. Craig: Right! [laughter] He did, but he didn't have to. So if our existence – if the existence of human beings – isn't logically necessary then it is not logically necessary that human suffering and evil exist. Because there needn't have been any human beings. What you are talking about is at most a kind of conditional necessity that if God created human beings then there would need to be evil and suffering. But that is not an absolute necessity. There is no necessity that he had to create human beings to begin with. I would even dispute that conditional necessity. As I said earlier, I don't think that as Christians we want to say that the existence of free will entails that evil exists. I think that is, in fact, the case that because there is free will there is evil, but there is nothing logically impossible about a world in which God gives creatures free will and they always do the right thing. They wouldn't be puppets or robots, they would just always freely make the right choice. That is what led someone like a J. L. Mackie to think then an all-powerful
God ought to have created that world. It is a logically possible world, he could have created that world. What he didn't see is the distinction between a possible world and a feasible world. Such a world may be logically possible in and of itself but it may not be feasible for God because if he tried to create those people they would in fact go wrong and result in evil in the world.

Student: When Jesus died he offered salvation. It is possible that we all – like the new heavens and new Earth – it is possible but not necessary. But he laid that seed so that possibility can be realized. God created evil so that good (eventually) will be agreed upon and realized.

Dr. Craig: I certainly do want to agree with you that God uses evil and suffering as a means of bringing people into his Kingdom, to know him. But the way you stated it initially, I don't think we want to say that evil is in any way necessary. This is a contingent result of creaturely freedom, of creatures misusing their free will to bring about evil. But it is not something that is logically necessary, I would say.

END DISCUSSION

The bankruptcy of the logical version of the problem of evil doesn't mean we are out of the woods. Because we still have the evidential or probabilistic version of the problem of evil. This is still very much a live issue that is debated today. You will remember the atheistic claim here is that given the suffering and the evil in the world, it is improbable that God exists. It is highly improbable that God could have good reasons for permitting the suffering in the world. So even though this is possible, nevertheless it is highly improbable. Much of the suffering in the world looks to be pointless and unnecessary, surely God could have created a world with this much good but with a little less suffering in it. So the suffering in the world provides evidence that God does not exist.

This is a much more powerful version of the problem of evil. Because the conclusion is more modest, the burden of proof it lays on the atheist is much lighter. Here the atheist doesn't need to prove that it is impossible that God and evil co-exist, but just that it is improbable given the evil and suffering in the world that God exists. And because this conclusion sets the bar lower, the burden of proof that the atheist bears is much lighter. We will need to examine next time how we can respond to this evidential or probabilistic version of the problem of evil.
Lecture 32: The Probabilistic Version of the Problem of Evil

We’ve been talking about the logical version of the problem of evil. I explained last time that the burden of proof that it lays upon the atheist’s shoulders is simply too heavy to be sustained, and that this fact is now widely recognized by both atheist and theist philosophers alike. Therefore, this is not really an issue of hot debate anymore. Those people who say that philosophy never makes any progress can be refuted by simply pointing to this problem. For hundreds of years – from the time of Epicurus, hundreds of years before Christ, until the 1970s – the logical version of the problem of evil was the standard statement of this problem and objection. Now it has been widely recognized that this problem, in fact, is bankrupt. It has been resolved, and in fact no one is able to show that the co-existence of God and the suffering and evil in the world are logically incompatible with each other.

But that then throws us onto the probabilistic, or the evidential, problem of evil which does remain very much a matter of debate among philosophers today. This is a much more powerful version of the problem. Since its conclusion is more modest – namely, it is improbable that God exists – the burden of proof that it lays on the atheist is much lighter, and therefore can be said to be an easier argument to sustain. How might we respond to the atheist’s claim that the evil and the suffering in the world makes it improbable that God exists? I want to make three points by way of response to this argument.

1. **We are not in a good position to say that it is improbable that God has good reasons for permitting the suffering in the world.**

The key to the evidential problem is the atheist’s claim that God probably doesn’t have good reasons for permitting the evil and suffering in the world.

We all recognize that much of the suffering in the world looks unjustified. We see neither its point nor its necessity. So the success of the atheist’s argument is going to depend on whether or not we are warranted in inferring that because the suffering looks unjustified, it really is unjustified. The atheist’s argument depends upon that critical inference from appearance to reality. Because the suffering appears to be unjustified or pointless, it really is. The first point that I want to make in response is that we are just not in a good position to make that kind of a judgment with any sort of confidence.

As finite persons, we are limited in time and space, as well as intelligence and insight. But the sovereign God sees the end of history from its beginning and providentially orders history so that his ends are achieved through people’s free decisions and actions. And in order to achieve his ultimate ends, God may well have to allow a good deal of
suffering along the way. Suffering which appears to be pointless to us within our limited frame of reference may be seen to be justly permitted within God’s wider frame of reference.

Let me give two illustrations of this point. One from contemporary science and one from popular culture.\(^{259}\)

The first illustration – in so-called chaos theory (a field of modern science), it has been shown that certain large-scale systems like the weather or insect populations are extraordinarily sensitive to the smallest disturbances. A butterfly flapping its wings on a twig in the jungles of West Africa can set in motion forces that will eventually cause a hurricane over the Atlantic Ocean. Yet no one watching that little butterfly flapping on that branch could possibly – even in principle – predict such an outcome. We have no way of knowing how seemingly insignificant and trivial alterations can radically affect the course of world history.

The second illustration from popular culture – in the movie *Sliding Doors* (starring Gwyneth Paltrow), the movie tells the story of a young woman who is rushing down the stairs of a train station to catch a subway. As she nears the train, the movie splits into two paths that her life might take. In the one life, the doors to the train slide shut just before she can board. So she is prevented from catching her train. In the other pathway, she makes it through the sliding doors just before they close. Based upon this seemingly trivial event, the two paths of her life increasingly diverge as time goes on. In the one pathway of life, she is enormously successful, prosperous, and happy. In the other life, she encounters failure, misery, and unhappiness. It is all because of that split-second difference in getting through those sliding subway doors.

Moreover, that difference is due to whether or not a little girl playing with her dolly on the stair railing is snatched away by her father or momentarily blocks the young woman’s path as she is rushing down the stairs to catch the train. When you see this you just can’t help but wonder about what other seemingly enumerable trivialities led up to that event. For example, whether the father and the daughter were delayed in leaving the house that morning because the little girl didn’t like the cereal that her mother gave her for breakfast. Or whether the father was inattentive to his daughter because of something that he had read in that day’s newspaper that disturbed him, and so his thoughts were not on his daughter. And so on and so forth.

The most interesting part of this film, however, is the ending. In the happy, successful life, the young woman is suddenly killed in an accident, while in the other miserable life, her life turns around and the life of hardship and suffering turns out in the end to be the
truly good life after all. My point is obviously not that everything will turn out for the best in this life! No, I am making a much more modest point. Simply that given the dizzying complexity of life, we are simply in no position to judge with any sort of confidence that God has no good reason for permitting some instance of suffering to afflict our lives. Every event that occurs sends a ripple effect through history such that God’s reason for permitting it might not emerge until centuries from now, maybe in another country. Only an all-knowing God could grasp the complexities of directing a world of free people toward his previsioned ends. Just think of the innumerable, incalculable events that would be involved in arriving at a single historical event.260 For example, the Allied victory on D-Day. Think of the infinite complexity that would lie behind arriving at that single event. We have no idea of what suffering might be involved in order for God to achieve some intended purpose through the freely chosen actions of human persons, nor should we expect to discern God’s reasons for permitting suffering. It is hardly surprising that much of the suffering and evil in the world should appear pointless and unnecessary to us because we are simply overwhelmed by this kind of complexity.

I want to emphasize that this is not to appeal to mystery or to divine psychology, but rather it is to point to our inherent limitations which make it impossible for us to say when confronted with some example of suffering that God probably doesn't have a good reason for permitting that event to occur. Unbelievers themselves recognize these kinds of limitations in other contexts. For example, one of the decisive objections to utilitarianism (which is the ethical theory that says that we should do that action which is likely to bring about the greatest good for the greatest number of people) is that we have no idea of the ultimate outcome of our actions. Some short-term good might lead in the long run to untold misery while some action that looks disastrous in the short-term may turn out to bring about the greatest good for humanity. We don't have a clue given our cognitive limitations. This defective utilitarianism as you can see has absolutely nothing to do with divine mystery or divine psychology or something of that sort. It has to do with the inherent cognitive limitations that we as finite observers undergo.

Once we contemplate God's providence over the whole of human history, I hope you can see how hopeless it is for finite limited observers to speculate about the probability of whether God has a good reason for the suffering that we observe. We are simply not in a position to assess those kind of probabilities with any sort of confidence.

That is the first response to the probabilistic version of the problem of evil.

START DISCUSSION
Student: What would you say to the argument that Hugh Ross puts forth that a lot of what is seen as natural evil in the world is the result of physical processes that are necessary to support life, like earthquakes being caused by plate tectonics which are required for life. A lot of times it is our own human choices, like the decision to build a home on a fault line, that puts us in trouble and not some unavoidable problem from decree from above.

Dr. Craig: I think those are helpful explanations. It is very true that the degree to which human moral choices are intertwined with natural evil and suffering is just inextricable. They are very much bound up. As you say, very often the reason people could suffer from natural disasters is because of free choices that folks make. What I want to say, however, is that these natural disasters that are due from things like a universe operating according to natural law which makes rational decision-making possible form the arena or the context in which the drama of God's plan of salvation is being played out. God's ultimate purposes for human beings are going to be achieved by placing them in an arena like this. So these natural evils that occur ultimately serve as the context in which these free moral choices are made. So you cannot say that they are irrelevant to free choices or could just be removed because we are not in a position to know what would happen, for example, if a tsunami had not occurred or that an earthquake had not occurred. My point is the more general point that I think would encompass the insight that you mention.

Student: One of the ways that has helped me think about the issue of probability and the amount of evil and suffering in the world comes down to almost using a popular idea like Sliding Doors. But in many popular stories and ethics you have the character of the wise old sage who is teaching a mentor. What will happen often is he will do something that the one who is being trained is like, “What is this person doing?” And it seems pointless. Of course a cheesy example is The Karate Kid where he is telling him to wax on and wax off the car. He's like, I want you to teach me karate, but you are teaching me how to wax your car. But secretly he was doing that. Even though it looks pointless it actually turned out to turn around for something that he didn't realize it was happening. That is the way I kind of look at it.

Dr. Craig: That is helpful. That is another good popular illustration. I think you will find a lot of these in literature or movies if you begin to look for them. Again, it is all calling into question this inference from appearance to reality. That is a key inference in the evidential version of the problem of evil. Because it looks pointless, it is pointless. That is, I think, something that we're simply not in a position to say.

Student: You've covered a situation where chance happened and that caused certain evils. You gave an example of the sliding doors. But there seems to be areas where it is almost evil by design. An example being a wasp laying an egg inside a spider. That is not by
chance. It seems to be a design behind the evil. What is your take on Satan influencing . . .?

_Dr. Craig:_ Oh my goodness! Here there is so much more that could be said in terms of satanic or demonic influence, or this gets into evolutionary theory as well. An evolutionary biologist like Francisco Ayala appeals to these sorts of horrible designs in nature to appeal to evolution. He says evolution is the best explanation. These weren't designed. These evolved by chance among these insects. Therefore God can't be blamed. God had reasons for setting up this sort of evolutionary process, but he disagrees with the Creationist that every single instance like this is designed.

The other thing that could be raised is to what degree animals suffer. I think that the evidence would be that insects and these lower forms of life where most of these horrors are to be found are like little machines. They are not even sentient. When you get to the level of, say, mammals like cats and dogs, they are clearly sentient beings who experience pain and other sensations. But when you are talking about spiders and ants and wasps, I don't think there is any evidence whatsoever that these are sentient beings that have states of pain awareness. What they have are nervous systems that are complicated enough to react to noxious stimuli. For example if you poke an amoeba with a needle it will recoil as though it were in pain, but in fact it is not a sentient being. That would greatly diminish, I think, these difficulties because there really isn't any suffering with respect to such creatures. Even when you get to the sentient animals, as Michael Murray has emphasized in his book, *Nature Red in Tooth and Claw* (an excellent book if you are troubled by animal suffering), even though many animals are sentient and they have states of pain awareness they don't have a sort of third-level awareness of a first-person perspective on their pain awareness so as to say “I am myself in pain.” Because animals are not persons, they can be in pain without being aware that they are in pain. They would be like a strange phenomenon that is exhibited among human beings called “blind sight” where people are to all intents and purposes blind – they have no visual experience, they can't see anything. But in fact they really can see. If you toss a ball to one of these persons he'll catch the ball. If you say, “Come here,” he won't run into the table; he'll walk around it. They actually can see. But they are not aware that they can see. They don't have that third-level awareness of their second-level ability. Animals that don't have this third-level awareness would be like that. They can be in pain, but not be aware that they are in pain. That is a tremendous comfort, I think, to pet owners and animal lovers who are troubled by animal suffering and pain. I was talking to a biologist, Jeff Schloss, about this months ago, and he said for the most part animals lead very
pleasant lives that end rather quickly through predation and really don't experience a great deal of suffering because they are not even aware that they are in pain.

Student: I think that would reduce the amount of suffering, and there is some arguments that perhaps more advanced apes (an example being CoCo) grieving over a kitten on YouTube.

Dr. Craig: Right, when you get to the higher primates.

Student: There does seem to be almost – the best I can describe it – is evil by design. You look at viruses and the complexity and elegance of viruses and the . . .

Dr. Craig: Why would you call that evil? That was the point of my first response. If these are really like little machines – viruses and things – there is nothing evil about that any more than a machine rusting in the rain.

Student: Except that they cause people distinct difficulties.

Dr. Craig: All right. There you are talking about human suffering, and this will then be my first point that I just made – we are not in a position to say that the suffering in the world is not justly permitted by God. God has placed us in an arena in which there are viruses and bacteria and people die of leukemia and other sorts of diseases. When that happens we are not in a position to say with any kind of confidence that God doesn't have a good reason for allowing this to happen. So I would subsume this under this general first point, though one could say a lot more about it as I just did.

Student: I regards to this issue that was just raised, I think we a lot of times underestimate the effect of the fall on creation and on living things and on the planet. Changes in living things are non-random. The environment unlocks a genetic package so you can have, because of the fall, different packages that effect themselves in different living things that were not intended to operate that way before the fall.

Dr. Craig: My difficulty with that response – which is one option, and Michael Murray in his book has a chapter devoted to that response – is that it seems to presuppose Young Earth Creationism. That hardly seems a persuasive response to the problem of natural evil because you are taking on the view there that there was no suffering and pain in the world prior to the fall of Adam – there was no animal suffering. In fact the world was created only a few thousand years ago in six literal 24-hour days. That hardly seems to be a very persuasive answer to this problem. You could still, though, perhaps appropriate what you want to say. William Dembski, who is not a Young Earth Creationist, has said that perhaps the garden of Eden (in which the original human pair was created) was a sort of oasis – a sort of pristine shelter – in a wider world of animal predation and suffering and earthquakes and things of that sort. But God had created it – had put them in such a world – knowing that they would fall. And it is within such a fallen world that the human drama
of salvation is best played out, which fits right in to what I am talking about. That is a very interesting solution that presupposes middle knowledge, namely God in creating humanity knew that they would fall and so had them created in a world that bears the fallenness – a kind of fallen creation – knowing that in such a world of pain and suffering the human plan of salvation would best be worked out. So I think you can appropriate that kind of insight without committing to Young Earth Creationism.

*Student:* I tend to be relatively Young Earth, but I don’t see where it is tied to it – the timeline.

*Dr. Craig:* OK. Good. I think that is what Dembski wants to try to do – to appropriate the insight but without the timeline.

*Student:* I like this point a lot. I think it also goes along with the movie series *Back to the Future*. Taking the question another way, I am not the only person in this class . . .

*Dr. Craig:* Before you go on, could you explain to everyone what you were referring to in the *Back to the Future* film.

*Student:* Sure. Let's go back to 1980. It has already been as long as that movie was done as the time of the picture, which was 1950. But the idea was that they built a time machine out of a Delorean. They went back in time. Remember the amount of power was 1.21 gigawatts to be able to leap through time. It went through a series – I would call it a science fiction but also call it a comedy. A lot of funny things happened along the way. People made choices. When they went through time, different situations represent themselves. When they come back things were slightly different than when they left based on what they did in the past.

*Dr. Craig:* Those things were very trivial at the time, right? Like socking Biff in the nose when he comes to the car, or managing to plug in the wire.

*Student:* I've been a Michael J. Fox fan, so I love the movies.

*Dr. Craig:* Yeah, these time travel scenarios really illustrate this point well, I think. OK, go ahead.

*Student:* I was going to say that I am not the only person in this class who has had periods of suffering as maybe other people have had some other things happen. Taking the opposite position, what should we say generally? Some Christians are very sure they can explain their suffering. They are very sure they could, for example, explain the ins-and-outs of the Orlando tragedy. What kind of cautions do you think we should have when going on the other side?
Dr. Craig: What I like about this point is that it doesn’t offer any explanation for why these things occur. In fact, what it says is you are not in a good position to know why they occur. Someone who presumes to say, “This is why the Orlando shooting occurred” is being extremely presumptuous. My point is that we are not in a good position to make those kind of judgments. That is the wisdom of the book of Job. God never tells Job why he is suffering. He just says to Job, *Who are you to answer back to me – the Almighty and Provident God? I am working things out. Your duty is not to figure out why this is happening, but to trust me as you go through it.* I didn’t used to like the book of Job as a young Christian because he never gets any answers. But I think I’ve come to see the wisdom of it that as we go through these things we should not try to figure out why they happen. We are not in a position to know that. Rather, what we do is pray for strength and stamina to get through them and for our faith not to fail as we do.

Student: On that point, I wanted to point out something in Luke 13 which is the only place in the Gospels where this appears. It is where Jesus is asked about a question about evil.

Now on the same occasion there were some present who reported to Him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. And Jesus said to them, “Do you suppose that these Galileans were greater sinners than all other Galileans because they suffered this fate? I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. Or do you suppose that those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them were worse culprits than all the men who live in Jerusalem? I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish” (Luke 13:1-5)

Doesn’t that almost seem callous and almost even rude? He doesn’t give an answer. You got both evils here. You got moral evil and you got natural evil.

Dr. Craig: You do! OK, do you see his point? You’ve got the moral evil – Pilate had killed these Jews by the sword, right? - but then you also have this accident where the Tower of Siloam fell on these people and killed them. Here Jesus is being asked about moral evil and natural evil. OK, go ahead.

Student: That is the whole thing. One point is – first off, if you want to read this chapter in context he is also talking about need to repent also. He says, *No, the people that were killed by Pilate weren’t greater sinners than anybody else.* He says the same thing also about those where the tower fell. The bottom line is we are all subjects of God and he can do what he wants. It is not that he is picking on somebody necessarily. It is just . . .
Dr. Craig: Right. I love this response of Jesus. This is where he is actually posed the philosophical question about evil. What is he refuting there? He is refuting the view that people suffer because they deserved to – that they committed some sin; that they are somehow outside of the will of God – and that is why these bad things are happening to them. That is a corrective that needs to be issued again and again because Christians will very often think that when somebody is suffering for some pointless reason that they think, well, there is some secret sin in his life or he is under God's judgment. Jesus repudiates that. He says they are no worse than you are, and you need to also repent so as not to be judged by God. This is a really good admonition, I think, not to be judgmental when innocent suffering takes place.

Student: I also like to bring a scripture verse from Matthew 13:33 saying, “the Kingdom of heaven is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three pecks of flour until it was all leavened.” It is almost like God created the world and set in motion to arrive at the Kingdom of heaven. But a lot of times we are “dysfunctional yeast” – we can't realize this wonderful purpose so we trump that with our self-will or our own agenda or we just kind of indifference about harrowing in this purpose. It is almost like if the yeast doesn't work the dough doesn't rise, the Kingdom of heaven doesn't arrive. It is more like all the breakthroughs in science are God's inspiration and God wanted to give us that kind of communication as long as we are connected with him. Due to lack of interest of connecting with God and wanting to realize his purpose and all that and that makes this dough doesn't rise to the Kingdom of heaven. It is more like sin of omission.

Dr. Craig: I think that you are making some good points. To draw that in contact with what I just said, the leaven here is described as very insignificant and tiny. She just introduces a little leaven, but then in time it leavens the whole lump. So the Kingdom of God is going to work itself out in human history. We will see next time how, in fact, that really has happened and emphasizes or underscores the point that what in our limited perspective and lifetime may appear trivial or inconsequential may, in the long run, turn out to be hugely significant. That underlines the point here that we are not cognitively situated in such a way as to make the kind of probability judgments that the atheist wants to make.

END DISCUSSION

Let's go on to point 2.

2. Relative to the full scope of the evidence, God's existence is probable.

The key to understanding this second point is that probabilities are always relative to some background information. Probabilities are not absolute. It is always probable
with respect to some background information. So, for example, suppose we are given the information that Joe is a college student and that 90% of college students drink beer. Relative to that information, it makes it highly probable that Joe is a beer drinker. But suppose now we are given the additional information that Joe is a Wheaton College student and that 90% of Wheaton College students do not drink beer. Relative to this new set of information, it now becomes highly improbable that Joe is a beer drinker. So probabilities – to repeat – are relative to background information.

So when the atheist says God's existence is improbable, your antenna should immediately go up, and you should say “Improbable relative to what?” What is the background information? Is it the suffering in the world? Well if that is all you take as your background information, it is no wonder that God's existence would look improbable relative to that alone, though as I've argued in point 1 appearances can be deceiving. But the probability of God's existence relative to the suffering in the world alone taken in isolation isn't really an interesting question, is it? The really interesting question is: how probable is God's existence relative to the full scope of the evidence. I'm persuaded that when you consider the full scope of the evidence then God's existence is quite probable even given any improbability that evil might be thought to throw upon God's existence. That is to say, any improbability of God's existence relative to evil alone is simply outbalanced by the evidence for the existence of God – evidence that we've discussed in this class.

Consider, in particular, the moral argument for God's existence. A lot of the suffering in the world is the result of human choices – moral choices. Much of the evil in the world is moral evil. But then you can present a moral argument that goes like this:

1. If God does not exist then objective moral values do not exist.
2. Evil exists.
3. Therefore, objective moral values exist, namely some things are evil.
4. Therefore, God exists.

Paradoxically, at a superficial level, although evil would seem to call into question God's existence, at a deeper, more fundamental, level evil actually proves God's existence because apart from God the suffering in the world isn't really bad. So if the atheist thinks that suffering is bad or that suffering ought not to exist then he is making moral judgments that are possible only if God exists.

What you need to understand with respect to the evidential version of the problem of evil is that most of the people who write on the evidential version of the problem of evil are simply assuming tacitly that there is no evidence on the other side of the scale. For them, the only question is whether or not God's existence is improbable relative to the evil
suffering in the world, because they just assume there is nothing on the other side of the scale to outbalance it. But I think that there are very weighty arguments on the other side of the scale for God's existence, including the argument from evil itself. I could actually concede that God's existence is improbable relative to the evil in the world alone taken in isolation but maintain that this is just outweighed by the arguments for God's existence.  

START DISCUSSION

Student: Your friend, Richard Dawkins, says that he does not know that God is absent, but he thinks it is very improbable that God exists. He bases his life on that conclusion. Here's my question. Even if one thought that the probabilistic argument reached the conclusion that proponents urge, let's say the chances are less than 40% that God exists even taking into account all the background evidence, would one still be justified in believing in an all-knowing, all-powerful, all-good God based on Pascal's Wager?

Dr. Craig: OK. That is a big question to open up in the last minute! [laughter] What you are asking is about sort of gambling on God's existence. Given that the rewards of believing in God if God does exist are so great, and the disadvantages of believing in God if he does not exist are so minimal, the idea is that you ought to go ahead and believe in God's existence anyway because there is so much at stake. I think if you can whittle the alternatives down to just, say, Christianity versus atheism, I do think Pascal's argument does provide justification for belief in God. But usually it is thought that the alternatives are equally probable. Whether or not that would still be justified in gambling on God if the odds are against God, I am not sure what to say in that case because I don't think they are against God. I think they are at least even. In that case I think Pascal's argument is a good one.

END DISCUSSION

What we will do next time is look at the third point where I am going to argue that the existence of the Christian God in particular is not really very improbable given the evil and suffering in the world. That is to say, if the Christian God exists, it is not really surprising that there would be a lot of moral and natural evil in the world. Therefore, that evil doesn't really render the existence of the Christian God that improbable.
Lecture 33: Refuting the Probabilistic Version of the Problem of Evil

We’ve been looking at the evidential, or probabilistic, version of the problem of evil and suffering. I suggested last time two responses to this problem. First that we are simply not in a good position to say with any confidence when some instance of evil or suffering enters our lives that God probably doesn’t have a morally sufficient reason for permitting that. Given our finitude in time and space, our cognitive limitations and intelligence and insight, we simply aren’t in a position to make those kinds of probability judgments with any confidence.

But secondly, I also suggested that probabilities are relative to background information, and that even if God’s existence were improbable relative to the evil and suffering in the world alone, that doesn’t mean God’s existence is improbable. Because when you consider the full scope of the evidence, God’s existence may be very probable. To illustrate, relative to the facts of reproductive biology, my existence is enormously improbable. Of all those hundreds of millions of sperm, what are the chances that just that one would unite with my mother’s egg to make me? Relative to the facts of reproductive biology, my existence is incredibly improbable. So should I believe that I do not exist? Obviously not because I have very good reason to think that I exist even given any improbability that my existence might have relative to the facts of reproductive biology taken in isolation. In exactly the same way, when we consider the full scope of the evidence, God’s existence is probable even given any improbability that evil and suffering might be thought to cast upon God’s existence. In particular I argued evil itself is an argument for God’s existence. Because in the absence of God, there is no absolute standard of good and evil, right and wrong. So in the absence of God there really are no objective moral values or duties, and hence if you think evil exists or that suffering ought not to exist, you have thereby committed yourself to the objectivity of moral values and duties. And that entails that God exists. So even on a superficial level, evil might seem to call into question God’s existence, on a more fundamental level evil actually is evidence for God’s existence.

Those two points alone, I think, are sufficient to turn back the force of the atheist’s evidential argument from evil. But I now want to make a third point, and that is that Christianity entails doctrines that increase the probability of the co-existence of God and suffering in the world. That is to say, if the Christian God exists then it is not really so improbable that evil and suffering should also exist. It actually turns out that the problem of evil is much more difficult for a sort of bare-boned theism – a mere monotheism – than it is for Christianity. For Christianity entails certain doctrines that increase the probability that suffering and evil should exist.
What are these doctrines? Let me mention four of them this morning.

1. The chief purpose of life is not happiness, but the knowledge of God. This is absolutely fundamental. The reason that the problem of suffering seems so difficult, I think, to most people is because they just naturally assume that if God exists then his goal for human life is happiness in this life. God’s role is to make a comfortable environment for his human pets. But on the Christian view this is false. We are not God’s pets. The goal of human life is not happiness as such, but rather the knowledge of God which in the end will produce true and everlasting human fulfillment.268 But much of the suffering in life may be utterly pointless with respect to the goal of producing human happiness. But it may not be pointless with respect to the goal of producing a deeper knowledge of God. Innocent human suffering provides an occasion for deeper dependency and trust in God, either on the part of the sufferer himself or on the part of those around him.

Of course, whether or not God’s purpose is actually achieved through our suffering is going to depend on our response to it. Do we respond with anger and bitterness against God? Or do we respond with deeper faith and trust and dependency in God. Whether or not God’s purposes are achieved through our suffering all depends upon how we respond to it.

Because God’s ultimate goal for human history is the knowledge of himself (which will, in the end, bring eternal happiness to people), history cannot be seen in the proper perspective apart from considerations of the kingdom of God. The purpose of human history is establishing the kingdom of God. God’s desire is to draw as many people freely into his kingdom. It may well be the case, I think, that suffering is part of the means that God uses to draw people freely into his kingdom.

Is this some sort of airy-fairy speculation on my part? Not at all! A reading of a missions handbook like Operation World by Patrick Johnston reveals that it is precisely in countries that have endured severe hardship, both moral and natural evil, that Christianity is growing at its greatest rates while the growth curves in the indulgent West are basically flat. Consider for example the following reports from Operation World.269

China: It is estimated that 20 million Chinese lost their lives in Mao’s Cultural Revolution. Christians stood firm in what was probably the most widespread and harsh persecution the Church has ever experienced. The persecution purified and indigenized the Church. Since 1977, the growth of the Church in China has no parallels in history. Researchers estimate that there were 30 to 75 million Christians by 1990. Today, it is estimated to be somewhere between 90 million

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and 100 million. Mao Zedong unwittingly became the greatest evangelist in history.

El Salvador: The 12-year civil war, earthquakes, and the collapse of the price of coffee, the nation’s main export, impoverished the nation. Over 80% live in dire poverty. An astonishing spiritual harvest has been gathered from all strata of society in the midst of the hate and bitterness of war. In 1960 evangelicals were 2.3% of the population, but today, they are around 20%.

Ethiopia: Ethiopia is in a state of shock. Her population struggles with the trauma of millions of deaths through repression, famine and war. Two great waves of violent persecution refined and purified the Church, but there were many martyrs. There have been millions coming to Christ. Protestants were fewer than 0.8% of the population in 1960, but by 1990 this may have become 13% of the population.

Examples like this could be multiplied. For example, since the recent earthquake in Haiti there have been tremendous revival such has never been seen throughout Haiti and people coming to faith in Christ. The history of mankind has been a history of suffering and war; and yet it has also been a history of the advance of the Kingdom of God.

In 1990, the U. S. Center for World Mission in Pasadena released information charting the ratio over time between Bible-believing Christians in the world and non-Christians in the world. Neither category includes merely nominal Christians. These are Bible-believing or evangelical Christians in the world compared to non-Christians in the world. In the first century when Christianity first began, for every Bible-believing Christian in the world there were thousands of non-believers. By the time of the Middle Ages, that figure had shrunk to about 1,000 non-believers for every Bible-believing Christian in the world. By the year 1900, that ratio had shrunk to 27 non-Christians for every Bible-believing Christian in the world. And by 1990, that figure had shrunk to 7 non-Christians for every Bible-believing Christian in the world. According to Patrick Johnstone, “We are living in the time of the largest in-gathering of people into the Kingdom of God that the world has ever seen.” I think that it is not at all improbable that this astonishing growth in the Kingdom of God is due in part at least to the presence of terrible suffering in the world.

2. Mankind is in a state of rebellion against God and his purpose. Rather than submit to and worship God, people rebel against God and go their own way and so find themselves alienated from God, groping in spiritual darkness, morally guilty before God, and pursuing false gods of their own imagination. The terrible human evils in the world are
simply testimony to the state of man’s depravity in this condition of spiritual alienation from God. So the Christian isn’t really surprised at the terrible moral evils in the world. On the contrary, he expects them. The Scriptures say that God has given mankind up to the evil that it has freely chosen. He doesn’t intervene to stop it. He lets human depravity run its course. In Romans 1, three times (in verses 24, 26, and 28) Paul says, “God gave them up” to the evil and depravity that they had chosen. He lets human evil run its course. This only serves to heighten mankind’s moral responsibility before God as well as our wickedness and our need of his forgiveness and moral cleansing.

3. God’s purpose is not restricted to this life, but it spills over beyond the grave to eternal life. According to the Christian faith, this life is but the cramped and narrow foyer that leads into the Great Hall of God’s eternity. God promises eternal life to all who place their trust in Christ as Savior and Lord. So when God asks his children to endure terrible suffering in this life, it is only with the prospect of a heavenly joy and recompense that is beyond comprehension.

When you think about it, the apostle Paul lived a life of incredible suffering. He suffered from both some sort of debilitating physical infirmity (natural evil) as well as from moral evil perpetrated upon him by his persecutors. His life as an apostle was punctuated by “afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, tumults, labors, watching, hunger” (2 Corinthians 6:4-5). And yet he went on to write, “We do not lose heart for this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison because we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen for the things that are seen are transient but the things that are unseen are eternal” (2 Corinthians 4:16-18).

Paul lived this life in the perspective of eternity. He understood that the length of this life being finite is literally infinitesimal in comparison with the eternal life that we shall enjoy with God. Think about it. The longer we spend in eternity, the more the sufferings of this life shrink by comparison to literally an infinitesimal moment. That is why Paul could call the suffering in this life a “slight momentary affliction.” He wasn't being insensitive to people who suffer terribly. On the contrary, he was one of them. But he understood that these sufferings are simply overwhelmed by the ocean of everlasting joy and glory which God will give to those who trust him.

It could well be the case that there is suffering in the world which serves no earthly good whatsoever. It is pointless from a human point of view, but God permits it simply that he might overwhelmingly reward in the afterlife those who have borne such suffering in faith and confidence in God.

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4. The knowledge of God is an incommensurable good. The passage that I cited from 2 Corinthians also makes this point. Paul imagines as it were a scale on which the sufferings and the miseries of this life are placed on one side and on the other side is placed the glory which God will bestow upon his children in heaven. And Paul says, “the weight of glory” is so great that it is “beyond comparison” with the suffering. Think about it. To know God, the infinite locus of goodness and love, is an incomparable good. It is the fulfillment of human existence. It is what we were made for. Thus the sufferings of this life cannot even be compared to it. So the person who truly knows God, no matter what he suffers, no matter how awful his pain, can still truly say, “God is good to me.” Simply in virtue of the fact that he knows God, an incommensurable good.

These four Christian doctrines greatly increase the probability of the co-existence of God and the suffering and evil in the world. Thus they in turn decrease any improbability that the evil and suffering in the world would seem to cast upon the existence of God.

The atheist might respond at this point that we have no reason to think that these four doctrines are true. Whoa! Wait a minute! He is trying to shift the burden of proof again! Remember, it is the atheist who says that the suffering in the world makes God’s existence improbable. So it is entirely legitimate for you to respond, “Not the Christian God!” The atheist needs to show that the Christian God is improbable relative to the suffering in the world. In order to do that he either needs to show that these four doctrines are probably false or else show that God’s existence is still improbable given the truth of these four doctrines. But in either case he has the burden of proof here. It is not up to you to prove that these doctrines are true. It is up to the atheist to show that they are either probably false or that evil and suffering is still highly improbable given the truth of these doctrines. The atheist is the one who has the burden of proof here. Don't let him foist it upon you.

START DISCUSSION

Student: I actually think that the fact that for humans the main drive is happiness and comfort and so on and so forth. That is a huge kind of a mole hill to get over in a lot of cases.

Dr. Craig: Mountain!

Student: Yeah. Because I think somebody said something on stage one time that she thought that Christianity was, You give your life to God and then you get the American dream. I don't know if those were her exact words, but I think a lot of us when we come to God that is what we expect. We think if we stop living a worldly way everything starts going right. I think when you are battling the problem of evil, you are also battling that
bad theology. You have to kind of put the two together and say, _OK, it is not about your happiness. It is about you knowing God and about more people knowing God._ Obviously when you see more suffering groups of people dig down and seek God.

*Dr. Craig:* I think this is absolutely foundational, and moreover I think pastorally it is incredibly important, as you say, when we go through apparently pointless evil and suffering in our lives as well to realize that God isn't there to make us happy. Therefore we shouldn't be surprised when we suffer as we do.

*Student:* I once heard . . . one of the ways that I like to respond to unbelievers when it comes to the problem of evil and suffering, also what gives me great comfort when I am suffering, is to say not only all the things that you just said but also to reflect on Jesus' suffering on the cross and saying that . . . I once heard Dr. Peter Kreeft say that the problem of evil puts God on the hook but with Jesus God *is* on the hook, or something like that. Just a little play on words. But it is to say . . . I think it was Malcolm Muggeridge who said something like, _I couldn't worship a God who is far away and just kind of stood off, but the fact that God enters into our suffering and I look at the cross and I think, “That is the kind of God that I need in a world with so much suffering.”_  

*Dr. Craig:* It is remarkable that we follow a crucified Savior, isn't it? Jesus is called a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. That gives us strength. I am going to draw on this point when we get to the emotional problem of evil. I think that is where this is most relevant.

*Student:* Could the atheist respond by saying that we are begging the question – that we are assuming that God exists – because when we say that knowledge of God is extremely valuable we must assume that God exists for that proposition to hold.

*Dr. Craig:* No, it is not begging the question because, as I said a moment ago, it is the atheist who is shouldering the burden of proof here. When we wanted to affirm that God exists then we have to bear the burden of proof and give some sort of evidence for that or justification at least for why we think we are warranted in believing that God exists. But now what we are looking at is arguments for atheism. This is the atheist's attempt now to show that it is improbable that God exists. We are not assuming that God exists. We are just saying relative to the evil and suffering in the world, it is not improbable that God exists, especially the Christian God. If the Christian God exists, we would expect to see an awful lot of suffering and evil in the world. So come on, Mr. Atheist, give us your argument here to show that it is improbable in a significant way that the Christian God exists.

Again, it is so easy to allow the atheist to shift the burden of proof in these discussions onto the Christian shoulders, and therefore it is really important that we understand
Student: I am continuously debating a friend of mine who used to be a believer and he walked away. When I shared with him about the miracles of healing and so forth and so on, most people he sees are not healed. Because he is not healed, that is evidence for him not to believe in God. How would you respond?

Dr. Craig: I don't appeal to miraculous healings as arguments for God's existence. If you look at my book *On Guard* or *Reasonable Faith*, I think that there are weightier arguments for the existence of God than pointing to miracles. I think they can be part of a cumulative case. Having given arguments for God as the creator and designer of the universe and the source of moral values and as the best explanation for who Jesus of Nazareth was, his radical claims, his resurrection from the dead, then I think one could say, “And you know God still does miracles today” and point to something like Craig Keener's two-volume work on miracles.

Student: I shared that with him.

Dr. Craig: I think that could be part of a cumulative case. But I wouldn't ever appeal to that as my sole foundation for why we ought to believe in God.

Student: It is not the sole foundation, but he just says basically God has a bad plan because there is so much evil in the world, and lots of people aren't healed. You can't deal logically with him. He is more emotional.

Dr. Craig: Oh! OK, that is why you need to share with him point (1) – the purpose of life is not human happiness, so we shouldn't be surprised at all that God doesn't heal everyone. That will come with the resurrection. But look at 2 Corinthians 4 where Paul talks about how he says “though this outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed every day.” He says, “We have this treasure in earthen vessels.” This is to show that the power belongs to God and not to us. Whether you like that view or not, that is what Christianity teaches. Christianity is not the health-and-wealth Gospel that says everybody ought to be healed or prosperous. It is a Christianity that says God will renew you in the inner spirit as you endure a life that is prone to suffering, corruption, and ultimately death, and is under the power of Satan and his minions and therefore filled with wickedness and evil. It is not a Pollyanna-ish view of the world.

Student: Where is that verse?

Dr. Craig: That is 2 Corinthians 4 that I was quoting before. That whole chapter is wonderful.
Student: It has been a while since I've seen the debates; I don't remember a lot of it. I remember you debated Walter Sinnott-Armstrong on the problem of evil and you were giving the same sort of argument you've been giving the Defenders class. I remember one example when he was giving his speech he was leading with attempting to show that gratuitous evil and suffering exists – it was something about how he gave this example of what about a child who has some really horribly painful debilitating condition where shortly after birth they just die. Examples like that seem to be such a clear example, so he says, of pointless suffering because it didn't benefit the child, it didn't benefit the parents, so it just seems obvious that that is an example of gratuitous evil since there are so many ways a loving God could have prevented that.

Dr. Craig: Certainly he could have. OK, so how would you respond to an example like that?

Student: I guess I would just appeal to what you were saying earlier – you don't know, because what if it does have this ripple effect that causes some other good to come about? Maybe the parents end up learning something from this and maybe they end up turning more to God or something, and therefore they are saved.

Dr. Craig: Yeah. We just don't know. That is absolutely right.

Student: I have encountered people who will ask, “Why didn't I get an answer to a particular prayer?” I forgot who I said this to, but I said, “Remember Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. He prayed, 'May this cup pass from me.' He didn't get that. He got crucified instead.” It was a revelation to them. I said, “Jesus didn't get what he prayed for.” And they were so just flabbergasted by that because they had been steeped in the health-and-wealth prosperity doctrine their entire Christian life.

Dr. Craig: This is so important. Notice one other feature of Jesus' prayer. He ends that prayer by saying, “Nevertheless, not my will but thy will be done.” I think that that ought to be at least tacitly the prayer of all of us when we do pray for things like medical recoveries or healings or things of that sort. It may well be that God's will is that that person not be healed and that something terrible happen. That is his sovereign discretion.

Student: For every one of us, death is inevitable.

Dr. Craig: Yes, eventually.

Student: I've seen people who feel guilty . . . they believe that they would go on living if they just had enough faith. That is really sabotaging yourself because you are not . . . it is bad theology.
**Dr. Craig:** It is, and as you say it can be very self-destructive because of the doubts and the unanswered questions that it engenders.

**Student:** Here is one of Jesus' promises that you don't hear much about. In John 16:33 he said, “In this world you will have trouble but take heart I have overcome the world.” The Greek word there is *thlipsis* (Strong's 2347) meaning “oppression, affliction, or tribulation.” So we are promised that we will have that.

**Dr. Craig:** Yeah, that is right. And also in 1 Peter (I can't cite the verse exactly) where he says all who want to live godly lives in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution. This is our lot. We shouldn't be surprised.

**Student:** Just to connect some dots with an earlier point - when I was 33 I had cancer. I went through the whole surgery, chemo, radiation. I didn't know why or how that fit into God's plan. I think that from the parent of the child that seems to die for no good reason, sometimes not only is it, like you mentioned, an opportunity for the parents to exercise faith and trust God and say, “Though he slay me, I trust him” that is also . . . we don't know what the ripple effect is on other people who see how they handle that tragedy. Even though I never lost faith through my journey through that, I was really surprised. Countless people who said that their faith had been strengthened or they had been inspired because they saw how we handled it as a family. Even in the chemo room where you'd think this would be a field ready for harvest – right? - I found that in trying to share Christ with people in the chemo room, that those people were more worried about losing their hair than losing their lives. I just thought they are so vain. It is just stunning how even in the face in a lot of cases almost certain death that they were so much more concerned with how they look. I was fine with seeing my hair leave. [laughter]

**Dr. Craig:** You look great!

**Student:** Thanks! But so many people . . . even the nurse right before I went in for surgery said, “You are so joyful. I've never seen anyone headed into surgery as joyful as you are. What is the reason for that?” And I thought, “God! How could you tee that up any better to be ready for an answer for the hope that lies within?” You never know what that hardship is going to lead to or what seeds were planted or how other people's faith is impacted.

**Dr. Craig:** Thank you! That is a wonderful testimony. And we are glad you are still here with us as well.

**END DISCUSSION**

Let's wrap up this discussion. In summary then, the evidential version of the problem of suffering just can't be put through successfully. It requires probability judgments which
are beyond our ability. It fails to take into account the full scope of the evidence. And it is diminished in force when it comes to the Christian God.

Since neither the logical nor the evidential version of the problem of evil goes through, I think that the intellectual problem of suffering and evil fails as a disproof of the existence of God.

But when I say “fails” I mean “fails intellectually.” The anguish of the suffering and the gnawing doubt may still remain. That brings us back to the emotional problem of evil. I’ve already said that I think for most people the problem posed by suffering is really an emotional problem. That will be the question we will want to turn to next week.275
Lecture 34: The Emotional Problem of Evil

We are going to wrap up our discussion today of the problem of evil and suffering. I initiated this problem by saying that there are really two versions. There is the intellectual version of the problem of suffering which comes in both a logical and a probabilistic form, and then there is what we could call the emotional problem of evil.

I've argued over the last couple of weeks that the intellectual problem of evil ultimately fails. The atheist is unable to show that the evil and suffering in the world is either inconsistent with or improbable with respect to God's existence. Therefore, the intellectual version of the problem of evil fails.

I indicated that I think for most people the problem of suffering and evil is not really an intellectual problem. It is really an emotional problem. They've never really thought very deeply about this problem, but they just emotionally react to God's permitting the terrible evil and suffering in the world. So we need to address this emotional problem. You might be thinking, Then why go through all of this intellectual material if this is really just an emotional problem? I think there are two reasons why it is important to have dealt with this intellectually.

First, people think that their problem is intellectual. So by working through the intellectual problem of evil we can show respect for their opinion and try to help them to see what the real problem is. We take their objections and arguments at face value and deal with them intellectually.

But secondly, I think also that what we've seen can be of tremendous help to us when we are called upon to go through suffering. The health-and-wealth gospel and the gospel of positive thinking that is preached in so many mega-churches and denominations in the United States are simply false gospels. They set people up for a fall. They cannot make sense of terrible, apparently pointless suffering entering in your life and therefore are setting people up for tremendous doubt and perhaps abandonment of their faith when they encounter that sort of suffering.

It is very obvious that these are false gospels because that sort of health-and-wealth prosperity gospel won't preach in Iraq or in Syria or North Korea or a thousand other places. If it won't preach there then it is not the true Gospel. We need to understand that God's plan for human history may involve terrible suffering for us whose point or reason we may not be able to see; indeed, we cannot expect to see it. Our hope is not in worldly happiness, but rather in that day when we go to be with God and he will wipe away every tear from our eyes.

What can be said to folks who are struggling with the emotional problem of suffering? In one sense, the most important thing may not be what we say at all. For many people, I
think the important thing is that you just be there as a sympathetic listener, as a loving friend who cares about them. You don't need to have all of the answers. They may simply need someone who understands, who sympathizes with them, and gives them a shoulder to cry on. But still there will be people who need counsel. We ourselves may need to deal with the emotional problem of evil when we go through suffering. What does the Christian faith have to say to deal with this problem as well?

It tells us that God is not some sort of distant creator or impersonal ground of being. Rather, it tells us that God is a loving heavenly Father who shares our hurts and who suffers along with us. On the cross Christ endured a suffering of which we can literally form no conception whatsoever because he endured the punishment or penalty for the sin of the whole world. Even though he was perfectly innocent, he voluntarily took upon himself the consequences for the sin of the entire world that we deserve. None of us can comprehend that suffering. Even though he was innocent, he voluntarily took upon himself incomprehensible suffering for our sake. Why did he do this? Simply because he loves us so much. To bring us back to a relationship with God, our heavenly Father. How can we reject him who was willing to give up everything for us?

So when God asks you to go through suffering that seems pointless, unnecessary, or unmerited, I think that meditation upon the wounds of Christ can help to give us the moral strength and the courage that we need to bear the cross that we are asked to carry through life. Don't torture yourself trying to figure out why God is permitting you to go through that suffering. As I said, given our cognitive limitations, we should not be able to expect to perceive the reasons for which God is allowing that suffering to enter your life.

The British theologian, J. I. Packer, calls this “the York signal box mistake.” Packer says that in the city of York in England there is a great train yard filled with tracks that have shuntings off to the side, sidings and so forth. The trains are controlled by a signal box that is in a tower over the entire train yard in York. To someone who is in the signal box, he can see on a lighted electronic map the little glowing worms of the various trains and why one is shunted on to a siding there, why another train is pulled over here. It can all make sense to someone in the signal box. But to someone down on the tracks, it is utterly incomprehensible why these trains are moving all about in the way that they are and why they are being shunted in the ways that they are. It would be incomprehensible to the person down on the tracks. What Packer says is that when it comes to the evil and suffering in our lives, for better or worse we are not in God's signal box. We can't see the big perspective. We are down on the tracks. Therefore, when we try to figure out why God allows us to suffer in a certain way, we are presuming to be in his position in the signal box, and we are not there. Rather than try to figure out why God is allowing you to
suffer in this way, you should simply ask him to give you the strength and the courage to bear the suffering that Christ has called upon you to bear and to see what lessons you might learn out of this.

I mentioned earlier in our study that the knowledge of God is an incommensurable good to which our suffering cannot even be compared. To know God, to come into relationship with him, is a good which is literally incomparable to the suffering that we undergo.

Few of us, I think, really understand this truth. But I had a colleague when I taught at Westmont College who got to know a woman who did understand this. He used to make it a practice of his to visit shut-ins in nursing homes in the community in an attempt to bring some bit of cheer and love into their lives. One Mother’s Day he was visiting a nursing home in which he met a woman whom he would never forget. This is his account of that woman and that friendship. He says:

On this particular day I was walking in a hallway that I had not visited before looking in vain for a few who were alive enough to receive a flower and a few words of encouragement. This hallway seemed to contain some of the worst cases. Strapped onto carts or into wheelchairs and looking completely helpless.

As I neared the end of this hallway I saw an old woman strapped in a wheelchair, her face was an absolute horror. The empty stare and white pupils of her eyes told me that she was blind. The large hearing aid over one ear told me that she was almost deaf. One side of her face was being eaten by cancer. There was a discolored and running sore covering part of one cheek and it had pushed her nose to the side, dropped one eye and distorted her jaw so that what should have been the corner of her mouth was the bottom of her mouth. As a consequence, she drooled constantly. I also learned later that this woman was 89 years old and that she had been bedridden, blind, nearly deaf and alone for 25 years. This was Mabel.

I don’t know why I spoke to her. She looked less likely to respond than most of the people I saw in that hallway. But I put a flower in her hand and said, “Here is a flower for you, Happy Mother’s Day.” She held the flower up to her face and tried to smell it and then she spoke and much to my surprise her words, though somewhat garbled because of her deformity, were obviously produced by a clear mind. She said, “Thank you, it’s lovely, but can I give it to someone else? I can’t see it you know, I’m blind.”
I said, “of course,” and I pushed her in her chair back down the hallway to a place where I thought I could find some alert patients. I found one and stopped the chair. Mabel held out the flower and said, “Here, this is from Jesus.”

It was then that it began to dawn on me that this was not an ordinary human being. . . . Mabel and I became friends over the next few weeks and I went to see her once or twice a week for the next three years. . . . It was not many weeks before I turned from a sense that I was being helpful to a sense of wonder. And I would go to her with a pen and paper to write down the things she would say. . . .

During one hectic week of final exams, I was frustrated because my mind seemed to be pulled in ten directions at once with all of the things that I had to think about. The question occurred to me, what does Mabel have to think about? Hour after hour, day after day, week after week, not even able to know if it is day or night. So I went to her and asked, “Mabel, what do you think about when you lie here?”

And she said, “I think about my Jesus.”

I sat there and thought for a moment about the difficulty for me of thinking about Jesus for even five minutes. And I asked, “What do you think about Jesus?” She replied slowly and deliberately as I wrote, and this is what she said,

I think how good he has been to me. He has been awfully good to me in my life, you know. . . . I’m one of those kind who’s mostly satisfied. . . . Lots of folks would think I’m kind of old-fashioned. But I don’t care. I’d rather have Jesus, he is all the world to me.

And then Mabel began to sing an old hymn:

Jesus is all the world to me,
My life, my joy, my all.
He is my strength from day to day,
Without him, I would fall.
When I am sad, to him I go.
No other one can cheer me so.
When I am sad, he makes me glad.
He’s my friend.

This is not fiction. Incredible as it may seem, a human being really lived like this. I know, I knew her. How could she do it? Seconds ticked and minutes crawled, and so did days and weeks and months and years of pain without human company
and without an explanation of why it was all happening – and she laid there and sang hymns. How could she do it?

The answer, I think, is that Mabel had something that you and I don’t have much of. She had power. Lying there, in that bed, unable to move, unable to see, unable to hear, unable to talk to anyone . . . , she had incredible power.

What an amazing testimony. Paradoxically, even though the problem of suffering is the greatest obstacle to belief in God’s existence, at the end of the day God is the only solution to the problem of evil. If God does not exist then we are locked without hope in a world filled with pointless and gratuitous suffering. God is the final answer to the problem of suffering for he redeems us from evil and he takes us into the everlasting joy of an incommensurable good which is fellowship with himself.

That is what I wanted to share about the emotional problem of suffering and evil.

START DISCUSSION

Student: It sounds like Mabel was highly spiritually mature. I've noticed even in my own personal life that when conflict comes the first thing you do is panic. You wonder what you are doing wrong, how can you fix it. Did I pray long enough? Have I given enough quiet time? Because the pain is hard, whatever it is – physical ailment, you lost a job, you lost a relative, whatever it is – you wonder why God is coming at you. You think did I do something wrong, especially if someone has lost a child they wonder if they were bad parents or they did something where they deserved that. There are Old Testament verses, at least, that seem like your happiness is right in line with whether or not you are good to God. Obviously the New Testament is different with all the . . .

Dr. Craig: Don't forget the book of Job is found in the Old Testament!

Student: I didn't say the whole Old Testament. But Proverbs says if you give your life to God basically that he will direct your steps and you'll be successful and so on and so forth. But I agree that you can focus on God. I think there are adages that talk about instead of looking at how big your problem is look at how big your God is. It takes time to get to Mabel's level, but yes, if we could learn to dig our heels in and just say, “God, OK, whatever you are doing here, help me to get through it.” Or “Whatever you are doing to my friend, help me to just be there for them.” I think if we just focus on him, that is what we need to do. But it is hard. You do panic. You try to run from the pain. You try to figure out any way to get rid of it and move on with your life. But sometimes God is just trying to change your life.

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Dr. Craig: Yeah.

Student: Something that struck me about Mabel's story was when he said she had power. I started thinking about other people that I've known in very unfortunate conditions. They seem – and I can't prove it, this isn't any kind of logical proof of any kind but – they always seem like they've been given a grace that we can't have. They have been given a gift that we could only imagine. Even if we were in their situation, we wouldn't necessarily have it, but those people seem to be almost specifically chosen to be infused with a grace that gives them a joy that we can't understand. When you see the Downs child always happy, full of love. I've never seen a miserable Downs person. They are always happy. Why?

Dr. Craig: Paul suffered from a terrible physical infirmity that he asked God to remove. Three times, he says, he prayed to God to remove it. God's answer to him was, “My power is made perfect in weakness.” You see that illustrated in Mabel's life, I think, so beautifully. Paul says, I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses because when I am weak then I am strong.

Student: It just seems like God infuses the weak with his power. That is where we get that. 280

Dr. Craig: Yeah.

Student: Thank you very much for sharing that story. The story very much reminded me of a great American saint, Fanny Crosby, who was born blind or at least was blind at a very young age and became, I think, one of the greatest hymn writers of all time. Blessed Assurance, All the Way My Savior Leads Me. She has written along these lines – similar things that Mabel shared. I think just in the way the disciples' lives are this powerful testimony and evidence for the Christian faith so to the testimony of the great saints, a powerful evidence for the Christian faith.

Dr. Craig: Amen.

Student: Could you comment on whether you think the book of Job is historical or an extended parable?

Dr. Craig: I don't know. I have never studied it, so as a layperson I never looked into it. I wouldn't have a problem if it were a fictitious story that was meant to illustrate a point. But in the absence of any reason to think that, I think one can take it as historical. I've just never explored that.

Student: The one issue that bothers me if you try to take this as history, it says that Job had ten children that were all killed. Job was tested, and he lost all of his property. At the
end of the book, his fortunes are restored two-fold, and he has another set of children. But
the original children are gone. They don't return. If you take it as history, it seems like
that is not really a restoration of his fortunes in the sense of losing those children. That
causes me pause to take it as history.

Dr. Craig: Well, I don't know . . . maybe what that might cause you to question is not so
much the historicity of it but perhaps the Jewish value system that is expressed there. If a
man loses some of his family and then God gives him twice as large a family, for an
ancient Jew that might be thought to have your fortunes restored. That is exactly what in
a Jewish culture that valued family one would mean by having your fortunes restored.
We've got to recognize that we are dealing with ancient cultures here that may be very
different than our modern cultures in terms of their values. I think that would need to be
considered as well.

Student: Thank you, again. That was an incredible story. I was struck by the word at the
end – she showed incredible “power.” The word I expected was “faith” or “strength.”
Power to me means someone has control over other people or things, and here is this
helpless person. I am still kind of struck by that word.

Dr. Craig: Yes, it is a tremendous paradox, isn't it? I think he is right in choosing it. He
could have said she had great faith, but he didn't. He chose to say that this seemingly
helpless invalid had, in fact, tremendous power — much greater power than we who are
well seem to exhibit. I like the choice of words that he gave.

Student: I think also in the case of Job that we have to have a perspective that is not of
this world — that is of eternity. Yes, indeed, those children are gone. They are better than
Job.

Dr. Craig: Right! They are better off!

Student: They are better off than Job. All of the people of the Old Testament are dead.
All of the people born before 1850 are dead. They are all dead. Part of what we have to
look at, I think, with suffering is not this world but eternity. It is hard to do because that is
God's perspective. I think that is another thing that we have to think about in terms of
suffering.

Dr. Craig: Absolutely.

Student: During this world there is a broader perspective that is very difficult for us to
understand.

Dr. Craig: I think you are making a good point. When we dealt with the probabilistic
version of the problem of evil you will recall I mentioned that one of the Christian
doctrines is that this life isn't all there is. This life spills over into eternal life. When you
view our suffering in the perspective of eternity it is infinitesimal by comparison with the
time we will spend with God in eternity. But I think what you are pointing out is that this also goes some distance for dealing with the emotional problem of evil. If you can live in light of eternity and keep your eyes fixed on that, that will help to give you the strength to endure the suffering that we go through now. So this point is not only intellectually relevant, but it is – I think you are right – emotionally important as well.

Student: I want to go back to the word “power.” One of the things that I run into as a doctoral student at Georgia State is this whole idea that only white men have power in this country. It is an urban university. It is a research university. It is very much a worldly mindset. They would not look at Mabel and say, “Yeah, that's power.” I think part of what we need to do as believers is to retake the word “power” and attribute it back to what the word actually means. Power is not “I get to boss you around” although people in their sin natures have taken it to do that. But power means enabled by God to persevere. I think we've lost sight of that as well.

Dr. Craig: Well said. Thank you.

Student: You said that this was the response to the emotional problem of evil. Are we going to be continuing on with other discussions?

Dr. Craig: No, I think that this is sufficient for dealing with the emotional problem of evil.

Student: OK, then I better ask the question now. A book that was written I think relatively recently by Bart Ehrman on the problem of evil. I was wondering if you could respond to something like that where he is saying that these issues dealt in the Bible are actually saying you are supposed to respond to the problem of evil this way, and then another part of the Bible it says that you should respond to the problem of evil that way.

Dr. Craig: I haven't read Bart Ehrman's book on the problem of evil because I don't think it is likely that a New Testament scholar who has no training in this area would have much insight into the philosophical questions related to the intellectual problem of evil. I think it is very interesting, though, that Ehrman's abandonment of the Christian faith, he said, really had nothing to do with biblical inerrancy or his finding errors in the Gospels or his work as a New Testament scholar where he is trained and where he is expert. He is a textual critic on the Greek manuscripts of the New Testament. There wasn't anything in that that apparently led to an insuperable obstacle to Christian faith. It was these philosophical questions related to the problem of evil that caused him to lose his faith. I, for one, find that tremendously paradoxical because it wasn't something in his area of expertise that challenged him and made him lose his faith. It was in something on which he hasn't studied, he isn't expert. I would simply say that the responses to the intellectual
problem of suffering that I’ve given, I think, are thoroughly biblical and are good responses to the probabilistic version. Did you have something specific in mind?

Student: I think his argument was that each one of these examples – let's say your sin has caused this evil to happen to you – is one response, but then another place it will say it is not that. He'll say that these are two separate accounts that are contradictory – the Bible contradicts itself rather than different scenarios can have different explanations.

Dr. Craig: I think that, again, would be a question for the consistency of biblical theology, not the adequacy of the answer to the problem of suffering and evil. It seems to me that what I’ve said about those four Christian doctrines that greatly increase the probability of evil and suffering if the Christian God exists are all biblical and that they show that it really isn't surprising that the world would be filled with moral and natural suffering if Christianity is true. I take that to be an adequate response to the problem of suffering and evil from a biblical point of view.282

Student: What I am seeing – help me through this – given we are in a secular world and also academia is so liberal, the most of those saying, I can't believe in God because of the evil and the suffering in the world, and no loving God would allow that, I think they stop there because they are not really searching. It is more that they want to prove to themselves that God does not exist, and they are not responsible to a god. It seems to them that you can't have an all-loving God and have suffering. As we studied this – which we had to delve into to create some logic behind that statement – most do not want to go that far, if I'm correct. It does take a little bit . . . I can understand a human being being evil and causing suffering on another human being. I think the real hangup is – let's take your example of the little girl caught in the rubble where there is no apparent good news or greater-good. I think those kinds of sufferings just stop short. It is kind of difficult to walk someone through to get them to a point where they can comprehend that a loving God allows evil and suffering.

Dr. Craig: The question is – is this an intellectual problem that is being raised? If it is then I would just go back through the points that I made about how we are not in a position to say when some natural evil occurs; that God probably doesn't have a morally sufficient reason for allowing that. Give some illustrations like from chaos theory and popular culture to make the point. Then make the other points that I made as well. It is all just going through the same material over again. If this is an emotional problem that they are having, then, again, I think one would point to Christ, to God, and how he was willing to bear suffering for them, of which they can form no comprehension. So why would they reject him when he was willing to go through hell in order to save them? One would just
need to go through these issues again with a person and hopefully that person will be open and not just argumentative.

END DISCUSSION

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