

The Inescapability of God

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Synopsis

Although the Bible teaches that God's existence is evident from nature, it has become commonplace in modern society for people to doubt or deny that God exists. In this article I contend that six aspects of our lives which all of us take for granted—existence, values, morality, reason, mind, and science—can only be adequately explained on a theistic basis. (1) The existence of contingent things—including humans—ultimately depends on a noncontingent, self-existent God who freely created the universe. (2) Objective value judgments about things within the universe presuppose an absolute standard of goodness that transcends the universe, by which those things can be judged good or bad. (3) Objective moral judgments about human actions presuppose transcendent moral laws which in turn require a transcendent moral lawgiver, as even many atheists concede. (4) Our rational faculties must find their ultimate origin in a rational source; reason cannot come from non-reason, and naturalistic evolutionary explanations of our cognitive faculties are self-defeating. (5) Our possession of conscious minds cannot be explained on an atheistic materialistic basis; naturalistic evolutionary accounts of the emergence of complex conscious minds assume the very thing they purport to explain. (6) Science rests on a host of foundational philosophical presuppositions, including two assumptions which cannot be justified apart from a theistic worldview: that the universe is orderly and rational, and that our minds are well-fitted to comprehend that order and rationality. Insofar as atheists take these six things for granted, they have to depend on God even while they deny his existence.

There is no more foundational an issue in Christian apologetics than the existence of God. At the very center of the Christian worldview is the conviction that there is a transcendent, personal Creator of the universe who is absolutely perfect in goodness, power, wisdom, and knowledge. If there is no God, the Bible cannot be the Word of God. If there is no God, Jesus cannot be the Son of God. If there is no God, the Christian gospel is meaningless. No wonder the “Christian atheism” movement never took off!

For many Christians, the reality of God is so obvious and undeniable that we’re amazed anyone could seriously doubt it. With the Psalmist, we acknowledge that the heavens declare the glory of God (Ps. 19:1). With the apostle Paul, we affirm that God’s existence and attributes are clearly displayed in creation (Rom. 1:20). And yet, we all know people who *deny* the existence of God. What can we say to those who reject what seems so apparent to us?

Since a transcendent spiritual being can’t be detected with our five senses, we cannot prove God’s existence by the empirical methods of science. Nevertheless, while God cannot be perceived directly like ordinary things within the universe, it turns out that we cannot make sense of the ordinary things we do perceive—and the universe as a whole—*unless* God exists. Only a worldview centered on a transcendent, perfect, personal Creator can make rational sense of the things we take for granted all the time.

In what follows, I’ll unpack that bold claim by offering six interrelated arguments for the existence of God. In each case, I’ll identify something that we take for granted in our everyday lives and explain why we need God in order to make sense of it.

God and Existence

Here’s a truth so obvious that it seems almost perverse to mention it: *something exists*. Even if you doubt everything else, you cannot reasonably doubt that *you* exist. Indeed, all but the most intransigent solipsist will acknowledge that *many* things exist: stars, mountains, trees, rabbits, buildings, smartphones, and so on.

But *why*? Why does anything exist at all?

In a sense, this most obvious of truths—something exists—is a rather surprising one. After all, none of the things in that short list above *had* to exist. The universe could have been very

different; it could have existed *without* any of those things. So the existence of all these things begs for an explanation. What accounts for their existence?

Philosophers have a special term for things that exist but didn't have to: *contingent*. A contingent thing is one that might *not* have existed, even though it does in fact exist. So, for example, the Eiffel Tower is contingent. It didn't *have* to exist. Likewise for living organisms such as trees, rabbits, and humans. You and I are *contingent* beings. Your parents might never have met, in which case you would never have existed.

Everything in the physical universe is contingent. But it's important to see that what is true of the parts of the universe is also true of the whole. The cosmos as a whole is an inconceivably large physical thing, and therefore it's a contingent thing. The cosmos didn't have to exist.¹

We can now move forward with the argument. Any contingent thing needs an explanation for why it exists, since it might not have existed. But that explanation can't come from the thing itself. It has to come from *outside* that thing. It makes no sense to say that something brought itself into existence. So the existence of every contingent thing has to be explained by some *other* thing—and that other thing must be either contingent or noncontingent.

You can see where this is heading. If the universe as a whole is contingent, there needs to be an explanation of why it exists, and that explanation cannot come from the universe itself or anything within the universe. One of the great shortcomings of atheistic worldviews is that they cannot provide an explanation for the existence of the universe, for according to such worldviews, there's nothing beyond the universe that could explain its existence.

The Christian worldview faces no such difficulty, because it includes three fundamental tenets:

1. God exists.
2. God is *not* a contingent being.
3. God freely chose to use His unlimited power to bring the universe into existence.

¹ There's no fallacy of composition here. The point is that physical things are *by nature* contingent, and the universe is a physical thing.

Precisely because God is a fundamentally different kind of being than the universe, the puzzle of existence finds a coherent answer. The universe is not self-existent. It has to derive its existence from some other source. But God *by His very nature* is absolutely self-existent. If God had to derive His existence from some other source, He wouldn't be the Absolute Being. He wouldn't be God! Existence itself points us to the existence of God, because only God can serve as a final explanation for why anything exists at all.

God and Values

One of the things we do all the time is to make *value* judgments. We'll think or say that something is good or bad. In extreme cases, we'll use concepts such as *perfect* or *evil*. Sometimes these judgments are subjective, in the sense that they depend on our own personal tastes or preference, but not all value judgments are person-relative in that way. Some are *objective* value judgments. When we make those judgments, we're saying that something is good or bad *regardless of anyone's personal tastes or preferences*. The discovery of antibiotics was a *good* thing, while the Holocaust was a *bad* thing—indeed, a supremely *evil* thing. No right-thinking person really believes these value judgments are merely matters of personal taste or cultural preference. People may disagree about which things are objectively good or bad, but the fact is that everyone makes *some* objective value judgments, whether they recognize it or not.

The next step in the argument is to observe that any objective value judgment presupposes some objective *standard* or *criterion* of judgment. That standard has to be independent of us; otherwise it wouldn't be truly objective. It can't be reducible to human desires, feelings, or preferences.

Furthermore, that objective standard must be absolutely good; otherwise it couldn't serve as the final standard of what is good or bad. If the standard weren't absolutely good, then there would have to be some higher standard by which we judge it to be less than absolutely good. So our objective value judgments take for granted that there's some absolute standard or measure of goodness by which everything else can be judged.

Atheistic worldviews face insurmountable difficulties in explaining what could ground objective values. If the universe came from nothing and has no objective meaning or purpose, what sense does it make to say that some things in the universe are objectively good or bad?

If we say that some aspects of the universe are objectively good (e.g., butterflies) and other aspects are objectively bad (e.g., diseases), there must be some standard of goodness independent of the universe by which we're judging those different aspects of the universe. And that standard must be *pure* goodness. But for the atheist, there's nothing beyond the universe that could serve as that standard.

The Christian worldview, however, faces no such problem. God is absolutely good, and God exists independently of the universe. So there is indeed an absolute, ultimate, objective standard of goodness by which things can be judged to be good or bad. God's existence underwrites the objective value judgments we make as a matter of routine, including our assumption that such judgments are actually grounded in reality rather than fiction.

God and Morality

My third argument is really an extension of the second. The most important value judgments we make in life are *moral* judgments. We believe that some actions are good and right, while others are bad and wrong—in some cases even wicked or evil. Moreover, we take these to be *objective* moral judgments. When we say that what ISIS has done to innocent civilians in Iraq and Syria is wrong, we don't mean merely that it's wrong *for us* (and by implication, not wrong *for them*). What those murderous people have done is objectively immoral. Indeed, it's absolutely immoral.

The moment we say that, however, we're assuming there are moral standards that are objective and absolute. We're presupposing there are moral laws that transcend human individuals and human societies. So who or what accounts for these moral standards or laws? Once again, this is a glaring problem for atheistic worldviews, which hold that the universe has no ultimate meaning or purpose. In the end, there's no right or wrong way for the universe to be. The only ultimate laws are the laws of physics, but those laws have nothing to say about morality. The laws of physics tell us how things *do* behave, but not how things (including humans) *ought* to behave.

Atheists who want to make objective moral judgments will often try to explain those judgments in terms of cultural conventions or human happiness. The flaw in such views is that often we make moral judgments that distinguish between different cultures and different pleasures. Some cultures have practiced child sacrifice and female genital mutilation; when we judge those practices to be immoral, we're presupposing moral standards that *transcend* human cultures and societies. Likewise, what some people find pleasurable causes distress to others. In practice, no one treats human pleasures as the final arbiter of good and evil. Rather, we make moral judgments that distinguish between good pleasures (e.g., finding happiness in marriage) and bad pleasures (e.g., getting aroused by child pornography).

There can be transcendent moral laws only if there is a transcendent moral lawgiver. Moral imperatives can issue only from a personal source, and one with proper moral authority.² If the universe is God's creation, then God has authority over us. He made us for a purpose and has the right to say how we should live. Just as the rules of a board game are determined by its inventor, so the rules of human life are determined by our Creator. Indeed, God gives us moral laws *for our own good*. They're the Maker's instructions.

Objective moral judgments, then, presuppose the existence of God. What's interesting is that there are numerous atheists who concede the point. Friedrich Nietzsche and Jean-Paul Sartre provide two famous illustrations; Joel Marks and Alex Rosenberg serve as more recent examples.³ These so-called "hard atheists" agree that God is required for objective morality, but because they object to theism, they're willing to jettison objective morality. While one has to admire their consistency, the problem with their stance can be simply stated: that some things are objectively morally wrong is *far* more evident than that this is a godless universe.

² John M. Frame, *Apologetics: A Justification of Christian Belief*, ed. Joseph E. Torres (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2015), 98–103.

³ Joel Marks, "An Amoral Manifesto (Part I)," *Philosophy Now*, September 2010; Alex Rosenberg, *The Atheist's Guide to Reality* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2011). See also my review of Rosenberg's book in *Christian Research Journal* 36:3 (2013).

God and Reason

Critics of religion often like to cast the debate in terms of *reason* versus *faith*. Atheists stand on reason, we're told, while religious folk have to fall back on faith. In reality, there's no conflict between reason and belief in God, for there are excellent reasons to believe in God. In this fourth argument, however, I want to make a more provocative claim: *our very ability to reason presupposes the existence of God*.

Just as we take for granted our ability to make meaningful moral judgments, so we take for granted our ability to *reason*: to judge between truth and falsehood, to extend our knowledge of the world using logical inferences and evaluation of evidence, and to decide what's reasonable and what's unreasonable. We take our ability to reason for granted, but it's a truly remarkable thing that we possess the intellectual faculties that we do. Few of us ever reflect deeply on why we have them or how we acquired them. No other species on this planet has the ability to reason as we do.

How then do we account for this truly remarkable human ability, this indispensable feature of our lives? Once again, we find that Christian theism makes excellent sense of this obvious fact. The ultimate reality is a *rational* reality. God is the supreme intellect. What this means is that our universe has its source in a rational mind. While there may be aspects of it that defy *our* rational understanding, the universe as such isn't intrinsically irrational or unintelligible.

Furthermore, Christianity affirms that we are created *in God's image*. One aspect of that is our capacity to make moral judgments; another aspect is our capacity to reason. Just as human morality finds its source and explanation in God's absolute goodness, so human rationality finds its source and explanation in God's absolute intelligence.

Atheistic worldviews, however, face great difficulties in accounting for our rational faculties. The central problem can be simply stated: atheism is committed to the idea that *reason* came from *nonreason*. Atheists have to believe that rational beings arose out of entirely nonrational materials and processes. That's no easier to swallow than the idea that moral beings arose out of entirely nonmoral materials and processes.

Atheists usually will appeal to an evolutionary explanation: humans gradually developed the ability to reason over millions of years by a process of natural selection. Our reason gives us a

clear survival advantage, so it is argued. But this explanation has a fatal flaw. Our faculty of reason has to be *truth-oriented*; its very purpose is to direct our beliefs toward truth. Naturalistic evolutionary processes, however, care only about how an organism *behaves*, not what it *believes*. From an evolutionary perspective, it's irrelevant whether an organism has true beliefs, false beliefs, or no beliefs at all, as long as the organism can effectively preserve and pass on its genes. Evolution isn't *truth-oriented*. It's only *survival-oriented*. If our cognitive faculties are the product of blind, unconscious, naturalistic processes, we have no reason to think that those faculties are geared toward *true* beliefs rather than merely biologically useful beliefs.⁴

In the end, the crucial question is this: what's the most reasonable account of reason itself? Is it that our reason has its source in a Higher Reason, or that our reason has its source in no reason at all? If our very ability to reason depends on God, nothing could be more contrary to reason than denying God.

God and Mind

Another self-evident fact about our experience of the world is simply this: *we have experiences of the world*. We're conscious beings, each of us having a distinctive first-person perspective on the world and a mind that contains complex thoughts and ideas. More than that, we are *self-conscious* beings with the capacity to reflect on our own consciousness (as we're doing now).

The fact that we have conscious minds is so obvious and familiar to us that we don't recognize just how remarkable it is. But it's worth asking this question: *how did we come to possess the minds that we do?* How is it that there are *any* conscious minds within this physical universe?

Modern atheism takes the view that *matter preceded mind*. In the beginning, the universe was pure matter, but over the course of billions of years, through gradual, undirected evolutionary processes, physical organisms developed conscious minds. On this view, mind is a product of matter—more precisely, an accidental byproduct of blind material forces. Unfortunately for atheists, no scientist or philosopher has come anywhere close to explaining how conscious minds could be generated by nonconscious physical structures, no matter how

⁴ Alvin Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 307–50.

complex those structures become. This has been dubbed the “hard problem of consciousness,” and for good reason!

As with human morality and reason, atheists typically resort to evolutionary explanations. They’ll argue that a conscious mind gives an organism an evolutionary advantage, and a more sophisticated mind offers an even greater advantage, thus evolution can explain how our remarkable minds came into existence. This sounds plausible until you recognize the basic flaw in this argument: *naturalistic evolution cannot explain how consciousness appeared in the first place*. Evolutionary forces can only operate on things that *already* exist. So the evolutionary account actually *assumes* the emergence of consciousness rather than explaining it.

Christian theists face no such difficulties, because we take the position that *mind preceded matter*. Not human minds, of course, but *God’s* mind. God is an eternal, self-existent, transcendent, personal being with a *mind*—and not just any mind but a perfect, absolute, infinite mind. Furthermore, God created a universe that had both material and mental aspects from the outset: He created humans with minds as well as bodies. We can manipulate the universe physically with our bodies but we also can *think about* the universe with our minds. Our finite minds aren’t the first minds to exist in the universe; on the contrary, our human minds are dependent on an eternal divine mind. We’re literally designed to think God’s thoughts after Him. This view of the universe and our place in it has a profoundly important implication: *it makes science possible*. And that leads me to my sixth argument.

God and Science

Atheists who claim to have reason on their side often will insist they have science on their side, too. They will cite statistics about how scientists are less likely to believe in God than nonscientists. They will argue that science has disproven many of the central claims of Christianity. While it’s important for Christians to address such challenges, I want to do something else here: to dig below the surface of these objections into the foundations of science itself, to show that the very existence and success of science *presupposes the existence of God*.

It's rarely recognized that science rests on a whole host of philosophical assumptions about the universe and about human beings that science itself cannot justify. No scientific experiment can prove these assumptions, but if those assumptions were false, science itself would be futile.

One assumption is that there are objective moral values: scientists have a moral duty to be thorough and careful in their research, and to be honest and accurate when they publish their results. Another is that we have conscious minds that allow us to make reliable observations of the physical world and draw rational inferences from those observations. Both of these assumptions, I've already argued, presuppose a theistic worldview.

There are two further assumptions on which science rests:

1. The universe is an orderly and rational place.
2. The orderliness and rationality of the universe aligns with the orderliness and rationality of our minds.

The idea that our minds are equipped to discover and understand the basic laws of the universe rests on both of these assumptions. But science itself cannot *prove* that nature is basically orderly and rational. It's impossible for humans to observe the universe at every point in space and time directly. Only God could know in advance at a basic level that the universe is orderly and rational. God would know that, of course, because God would be *responsible* for it.⁵

Science can be no more rational than the foundations on which it stands. However, it's all but impossible to justify those foundational assumptions rationally from an atheistic perspective. If the universe is a gigantic metaphysical accident, with no rational mind directing and governing it, why should we assume that it operates in an orderly and rational fashion? And why should we assume that our minds are equipped to perceive and understand it accurately?

⁵ Contrary to popular misconceptions, quantum physics doesn't reveal that the universe is disorderly or irrational at a foundational level. Quantum effects can be expressed in terms of mathematical law-like equations (such as Schrödinger's equation) that can be rationally understood by scientists, even though the *interpretation* of those equations is a matter of debate.

If the universe is the creation of a personal God, whose mind is supremely rational and orderly, and if our minds are designed and equipped by God to discover truths about the natural world, then it makes perfect sense to pursue science—and we have an explanation for why science has been so successful. It's no accident that the pioneers of modern science (such as Johannes Kepler, Robert Boyle, Isaac Newton, and Michael Faraday) were believers who looked at the natural world through the lens of a biblical theistic worldview.

When we think more deeply about the kind of worldview on which science rests, we can see how misguided it is to say that science and religion are sworn enemies. On the contrary: *science itself depends on God.*

Existence, values, morality, reason, mind, and science. We take them for granted and depend on them every day, but we can make sense of these things only if we acknowledge the reality of God. Although atheists rely on them in their efforts to evade that reality, the deep irony is that they can do so only because God exists. Indeed, trying to run away from God is like trying to run away from gravity. Without gravity, you wouldn't be able to run at all.⁶

⁶ This article has been adapted from James N. Anderson, *Why Should I Believe Christianity?* (Christian Focus Publications, 2016), chapter 4.