

## LETTER TO A YOUNG FRIEND ABOUT GOD'S EXISTENCE

7/27/11

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

I have known you and loved you all your life, so please indulge me as you might a concerned grandparent. I gather from various bits of information that you are having doubts about the existence of God, at least God as he is generally conceived (one who is omnipotent, omniscient, and good). I do not know how thoroughly you have explored the question, but as one who at the age of twenty six made the journey from atheism (practical if not philosophical) to Christianity, I want to share with you some things you may not have considered. This is not a challenge or something to which you need to respond; I am not seeking a debate. It is me providing some information and ideas that I think should be weighed before you close the door on one of the most important questions in life, a question that has occupied the greatest minds on the planet from time immemorial.

I prefer to write things because it forces me to organize my thoughts, and unlike oral discussions, freezes my statements so they can be reflected upon and subjected to critical evaluation. Because you are exceptional for your age, I will write to you as I would an adult. Much more could be said on this general subject and on the specific points presented (countless books have been written), but I pray that the things I sketch below will at least provide some food for thought.

Do your best to suspend your current doubts until you have considered what I have to say. That will help you to evaluate the points fairly.

### **1. The origin of the universe requires a cause outside the universe.**

Everything that begins to exist has a cause for its existence; it is brought into existence by something. As expressed in the ancient Latin adage *ex nihilo nihil fit*, out of nothing comes nothing. That should be obvious.

We know the universe began to exist because, among other things, the second law of thermodynamics establishes without exception that processes taking place in a closed physical system always tend toward a state of equilibrium. In other words, every such system eventually will run down and cease having energy available for work. The universe cannot have existed forever because it would already have reached equilibrium, what is popularly known as "heat death." Since it cannot have existed forever, it necessarily had a beginning.

Since the universe had a beginning, there necessarily is a cause for its existence and that cause necessarily is outside of the universe. It could not be part of the universe because it caused the universe. A cause that is beyond the universe, which includes space and measurable time, and which brings the universe into existence is a cause that is eternal, nonphysical, and powerful. Moreover, the fact this eternally-existing cause did

not create the universe until a finite time ago requires an explanation. How could it not have produced the universe earlier than it did? If the cause is a personal being rather than a mindless force there is a ready answer: the act of creation was an exercise of the being's will. He created at a time of his choosing. All of this fits squarely with traditional concepts of God as an eternal, nonphysical, and powerful being.

Note that it is only that which begins to exist that must have a cause for coming into existence. That which has no beginning, which has always existed, like the God envisioned by the great religions, requires no cause for being. (God's eternity does not conflict with the second law of thermodynamics because that law applies to the behavior of matter and energy not to a nonphysical being that transcends the universe.) So the assertion that God has no cause of existence (is self-existent) does not justify the assertion that the universe has no cause of existence. There is a crucial distinction between the two. The universe *must* have a cause of existence because it had a beginning. To ask "What caused God?" is to commit the category fallacy in that one is incorrectly assigning God to the category of things requiring a cause. It is to ask what caused the uncaused, which is nonsensical. It is akin to asking what time tastes like.

## **2. An objective moral standard cannot exist without God.**

Are moral standards objective or subjective? When you say it is wrong to rape someone or to slit a baby's throat for fun do you mean it is really and truly wrong, wrong no matter who says otherwise (objectively wrong), or do you mean it is merely contrary to some current human opinion that is subject to change like clothing styles (subjectively wrong)? If the Nazis had succeeded in conquering the world and convincing people that slaughtering Jewish children was a noble purification of humanity, would killing them still be wrong?

The question is not whether atheists can be good people. The question is whether atheists can have a rational basis for claiming that any conduct is objectively wrong, wrong in a sense independent of human opinion. They cannot. After all, in their view all of existence is necessarily the product of purposeless natural forces. How could such forces generate moral obligation?

If blind, purposeless forces, such as wind or dripping water, created marks in sandstone that spelled "Do not eat grapes," there would be no obligation to abstain from eating grapes. Anyone who appealed to those marks to condemn those eating grapes would be ridiculed and taught that mankind is not obligated to obey the fortuities of nature. If the prohibition against slitting a baby's throat is the product of the same mindless forces as "Do not eat grapes," it could be no more binding. Any contrary sense would be an illusion.

In the words of atheist philosopher Richard Taylor, "The concept of moral obligation [is] unintelligible apart from the idea of God. The words remain but their meaning is gone." Another atheist, Joel Marks, Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at the University of New Haven, recently put it this way:

I have given up morality altogether. I have been laboring under an unexamined assumption, namely that there is such a thing as right or wrong. . . . I experienced my shocking epiphany that religious fundamentalists are correct; without God there is no morality...the long and short of it is that atheism implies amorality, and since I am an atheist I must embrace amorality...even though words like "sinful" and "evil" come naturally to the tongue as a description of, say, child molesting, they do not describe any actual properties of anything. There are no literal sins in the world because there is no literal God.

Notice how even here the atheist cannot live consistently with the demands of his philosophy. Dr. Marks states, "since I am an atheist I *must* embrace amorality." Must? As in "I am *ethically obligated* to live consistently with my philosophy?" But if there is no morality, if it is all an illusion, whence the obligation to live consistently with one's philosophy?

We know intuitively that there is an objective morality, that there are moral *facts*. We know that some things are wrong no matter who says otherwise. Because atheism is incompatible with the existence of objective morality, our moral sense bears witness to the falsity of atheism.

### **3. Free will cannot exist without God.**

Humans are able to think and act in a genuinely nondetermined manner. We can choose to write a letter, eat an apple, or sing a song, and we can choose not to do those things. If there is no God, then the universe and everything in it is the result of physical laws (gravitational, electromagnetic, chemical, mechanical, thermodynamic, and radiation) acting on matter/energy over time, which is an exclusively deterministic process. In other words, things occur solely because the laws of nature dictate that they occur. The question is how this strictly deterministic process could give rise to beings that act in a nondetermined manner. What evidence is there that physical laws can create free will, can create a state in which beings act in a way not determined by those laws?

Recognizing the problem, some atheists argue that human choices and conduct are in fact determined by physical laws the effects of which are too complex to be traced with any certainty. In the words of Bertrand Russell, perhaps the most famous atheist philosopher of the twentieth century, Man's "hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms." This leads naturally to the claim that humans are not responsible for their actions, being in essence sophisticated robots. For example, the prominent British atheist Richard Dawkins has written:

But doesn't a truly scientific, mechanistic view of the nervous system make nonsense of the very idea of responsibility, whether diminished or not? Any crime, however heinous, is in principle to be blamed on antecedent conditions acting through the accused's physiology, heredity and environment. Don't judicial hearings to decide questions of blame or

diminished responsibility make as little sense for a faulty man as for a Faulty car? ["Faulty car" refers to a skit on the British show *Fawlty Towers* in which a man beats his car for not working properly.]

Why is it that we humans find it almost impossible to accept such conclusions? Why do we vent such visceral hatred on child murderers, or on thuggish vandals, when we should simply regard them as faulty units that need fixing or replacing? Presumably because mental constructs like blame and responsibility, indeed evil and good, are built into our brains by millennia of Darwinian evolution. Assigning blame and responsibility is an aspect of the useful fiction of intentional agents that we construct in our brains as a means of short-cutting a truer analysis of what is going on in the world in which we have to live. My dangerous idea is that we shall eventually grow out of all this and even learn to laugh at it, just as we laugh at Basil Fawlty when he beats his car. But I fear it is unlikely that I shall ever reach that level of enlightenment.

In the last sentence of the quote, Dawkins acknowledges that he cannot live consistently with the logical consequence of his position. He knows that he holds people responsible for their actions despite the fact his atheism gives him no basis for doing so. Nancy Pearcey reported in her 2010 book, *Saving Leonardo: A Call to Resist the Secular Assault on Mind, Morals, & Meaning*, that Dawkins was pressed on this inconsistency during a book signing event. A young man asked Dawkins, "If humans are machines and it is inappropriate to blame or praise them for their actions, then should we be giving you credit for the book you are promoting?" Dawkins responded, "I can't bring myself to *do* that. I actually do respond in an emotional way and I blame people, I give people credit." The man said, "But don't you see that as an inconsistency in your views?" Dawkins replied, "I sort of do, yes. But it is an inconsistency that we sort of have to live with -- *otherwise life would be intolerable.*"

#### **4. The origin and diversification of life requires intelligent design.**

The simplest imaginable single-cell organism would require such an astonishing level of integrated complexity that it is absurd to think it could have arisen by blind, purposeless processes. A cell is not some bag of goo that can be whipped up from a mud pool; it is an amazingly sophisticated robot factory with a host of nanomachines performing an orchestrated ballet. It truly is amazing. The last sixty years of intense research has brought the quest for a naturalistic explanation of the origin of life no closer to an answer.

Rather than provide a flood of quotes to confirm this is true, let me just cite the recent remark of Dr. George Whitesides of Harvard University, who has the highest Hirsch-index ranking (an index of scientific research impact) of any living chemist. When asked how life came about from non-life, he stated, "How? I have no idea. On the basis of all chemistry I know, it seems to me astonishingly improbable." So it is not surprising that John Horgan, no ally of religious folks, titled his February 2011 *Scientific*

*American* report on a top-level origin-of-life conference, "Pssst! Don't tell the creationists, but scientists don't have a clue how life began."

A major difficulty for all naturalistic origin-of-life scenarios is that the many proteins necessary to accomplish the tasks essential for a living cell can only be produced by a very specific arrangement of nucleotide bases on the DNA molecule. Those bases cannot be arranged in any old way. Rather, they must be arranged only in ways that "spell" the correct instructions for the specific proteins needed, and there is nothing about the chemistry that favors any sequence of bases over any other.

In other words, the coding regions of DNA function much the same way as a computer program, directing operations within a complex material system through highly complex yet specified sequences of characters. As Dawkins has noted, "The machine code of the gene is uncannily computer-like." Similarly the famous software developer Bill Gates stated, "DNA is like a computer program, but far, far more advanced than any software we've ever created."

In every case where the cause of this kind of specified complexity is known, it is an intelligent agent. Complex computer programs like Windows and Word cannot assemble on their own; they require an intelligent determination of the coding sequences to achieve their function. That is the entire premise of the SETI program (Search for ExtraTerrestrial Intelligence). It takes for granted that an intelligence must be behind any radio signal that exhibits specified complexity (e.g., a long sequence of prime numbers).

Since the only cause that is known to be able to produce specified complexity is intelligence, the most reasonable inference is that an intelligence was involved in producing the specified complexity that is found in DNA. As the renowned philosopher Anthony Flew acknowledged in 2004, after having spent a career arguing for atheism, "the findings of more than fifty years of DNA research have provided materials for a new and enormously powerful argument to design."

The creation of all life forms on the planet from the first "simple" life by means of blind, purposeless processes (random mutation and natural selection) likewise has insurmountable problems. There simply is not enough time under any atheistic scenario for the vast array of proteins (and other essential biological products) present in those countless life forms to have been generated, let alone integrated into new functioning systems, without some kind of intelligent input or direction. This subject is too complex to be pursued properly in a letter, but lest you think it is a claim of the uninformed, I can direct you to the works of some highly trained scientists who develop the point.

## **5. The resurrection of Christ points to God.**

No known natural process can restore life to a person who has been dead for days, so if Jesus was raised from the dead he necessarily was the object of a supernatural power. Given that Jesus claimed a unique relationship with the God revealed in the Old

Testament, that God is the most likely power to have raised him, a claim made repeatedly by the New Testament writers.

Whether Jesus was in fact raised from the dead can be investigated *historically*. By that I mean it can be investigated without assuming or relying on the inspiration of the Bible. Even if one treats the New Testament documents as one would treat any other ancient documents, there are powerful reasons for believing that Jesus rose from the grave.

This does not mean the resurrection can be proven through historical inquiry with absolute certainty. Historical inquiry is detective work in which one infers the most likely explanation of various bits of data; absolute certainty is beyond its grasp. The question is whether the historian can ascertain with a reasonable amount of certainty that an event occurred. As Gary Habermas and Michael Licona explain:

[V]irtually nothing can be established with 100 percent certainty. Can we know with 100 percent certainty that George Washington was the first President of the United States of America rather than a mythical figure? Perhaps documents were forged and stories invented in a conspiracy to encourage the citizens of a new country. We can know that this was not the case with a high degree of certainty.

The evidence for Jesus' resurrection is so strong that Boston College philosophers Peter Kreeft and Ronald Tacelli assert that "Christ's resurrection can be proved with at least as much certainty as any universally believed and well-documented event in ancient history." I can here only summarize the highlights of my online paper "The Historical Case for the Resurrection of Christ." I encourage you to read that paper to assess how well I support the various points of the argument. It is available at <http://members.cox.net/theoutlet/The%20Historical%20Case%20for%20the%20Resurrection%20of%20Christ.pdf>. Here is the case in a nutshell.

The disciples sincerely believed Jesus had been resurrected; they were certain of it. (I am aware that sincerely believing something is true does not mean it *is* true, but follow me and you will see why this is so significant.) We know this because we have multiple early and independent sources that make clear the disciples believed Jesus had been resurrected and because numerous facts and circumstances corroborate what these sources tell us about the disciples' belief. It is like having testimony from multiple moviegoers that they believed there was a fire in the theater *and* having evidence that they broke through doors and fled the theater in a panic. The testimony about what they believed is confirmed by other facts consistent with that belief. Virtually all scholars accept as a fact that the earliest Christians at least believed that they had encountered the resurrected Jesus.

The deep conviction of the early Christians that Jesus was raised from the dead could have come about only if they were convinced (a) that Jesus' tomb was empty *and* (b) that they had encountered him as a resurrected person and not simply as a ghost or

hallucination. Either alone would not have been sufficient. If they believed they had encountered the risen Jesus but his body was still in the tomb, they would have been as quick as anyone to explain the appearances as some kind of ghostly visitation or hallucination. On the other hand, if the tomb was empty but the disciples were not convinced they had encountered the risen Jesus, they would have assumed his body had been taken, whether by grave robbers or enemies. In neither case would they have concluded that Jesus was raised from the dead.

To illustrate the point in a modern context, when the grieving widow in a mystery story is convinced that she glimpsed her dead husband walking down a street, they dig up the coffin to see if his corpse is still in there. If it is, then there is another explanation for the evidence that he is alive. On the other hand, if it is learned by accident that a coffin is empty, no one concludes from that fact alone that the person who died has returned to life. Without good evidence of his being alive, one assumes the body was sold on the black market by an unscrupulous funeral home, cremated by mistake, or stolen by someone.

Since the early disciples believed Jesus had been resurrected they clearly believed his tomb was empty and that he had appeared to them bodily. All the available historical evidence indicates the disciples became convinced the tomb was empty because they saw with their own eyes that it was empty and indicates they became convinced Jesus appeared to them bodily because he gave every indication of being present in body.

No theory other than Jesus' resurrection can plausibly explain how from the earliest days the disciples were convinced Jesus' tomb was empty and that they had encountered him in bodily form after his death. Many alternative theories have been proposed, but for anyone whose mind is open to the possibility of God's existence (and thus to the possibility of Jesus' resurrection), they must be judged abject failures. They simply do not explain the facts that must be explained.

Well this is a longer letter than I intended to write, but from my perspective the stakes are immense. I could not in good conscience remain silent while thinking that you may be drifting toward a conclusion I consider tragically wrong. Be assured that our relationship is not in question; Meg and I will love you no matter what you think about these matters. I just needed to say something.

With love,

[Ashby]