

Nikko Elliot :: God Questions? :: Athiest Perspective :: November 23

God can neither be conclusively proven or disproven to exist.

What we can talk about is the probability of God's existence. The manner in which we go about doing this is not too dissimilar from how a detective approach's a crime scene. Much like the detective we were not present at the time of the crime (I hope you'll forgive me for comparing the creation of the universe to a crime). All we can do is gather evidence and use it to narrow down our list of suspects.

Scientific evidence, or empirical evidence, is the best evidence with which to do this. The reason for this is that empirical evidence is, at least in principle, accessible to everyone. By definition it must be observable by the senses. This helps ensure that the evidence used to convict a suspect can be verified by alternative and independent sources. Without empirical evidence we could convict anyone we wanted to just by pointing and saying, "He did it."

Humanity, as you probably already know, has gathered a lot of empirical evidence about the origins of the Universe. I won't get into any technical details but the prime suspect is the Big Bang. We can say this with a degree of certainty because the math and evidence that tells us the Universe was created with the Big Bang has been looked at by other scientists and a majority of them have come to the same conclusion.

As I said at the beginning, God cannot be conclusively disproven. The Big Bang Theory does not disprove God. What it does do is give us an idea of how the Universe could have formed on its own. I contend that if we have strong evidence, independently reviewed and agreed upon, to suggest the Universe formed on its own, the probability that God was necessary to form the Universe is diminished. Going back to the crime scene example, if a detective believes a certain suspect committed a murder but in the course of his investigation finds compelling evidence that the victim died accidentally, it would be irresponsible of him to arrest the suspect. While evidence of the victim dying accidentally is not necessarily evidence against the suspect, it does weaken the case against the suspect.

It's certainly a possibility that the suspect made the crime look like an accident just as it's possible God set the Big Bang in motion and covered his tracks. But the possibility of something is not the same as its probability. The possibility of God creating the Universe is equal to the possibility that Zeus did, or Thor, or Odin, or Mithra. However, the probability of God's handiwork in the creation of the Universe is not equal to the probability of the Big Bang. Again, this is determined by independently reviewed, empirical evidence.

You might get the impression that science is being particularly harsh on God or Zeus or L. Ron Hubbard due to some anti-religious bias. It's important to note that there are scientific hypotheses that contend with the Big Bang. String Theory, for example, posits a different origin for the Universe; one that is completely based in scientific ideas and, in my opinion, more appealing than the Big Bang. I won't get into the details here either but suffice to say there is no empirical evidence to support String Theory. With no data to support the probability of String Theory, scientists remain convinced of the Big Bang. The same scrutiny applies to God.

Well what about eye witness accounts? Those are used as evidence and can't the bible be considered an eye witness account? Perhaps, but then we must give it the same scrutiny that any detective gives to a witness' testimony. A detective cannot take people at their word directly. He must interview them several times to detect any inconsistencies that could indicate a lie. Even if a person is not lying, they are not necessarily telling the truth. There are numerous examples in the court system as well as our own everyday lives that tell us people often are mistaken about what they saw or heard. To help safeguard against this it's important that a detective collect as many eye witness ac-

counts as possible. If the different accounts contradict each other then the validity of any given one is in question.

I shouldn't have to tell you about inconsistencies in the bible but I will go over one in particular that deals with the creation of the Universe. In Genesis we are told that light is created on the first day and it separates night from day (GE 1:3-5). Later it is said that light is created to separate night from day on the fourth day (GE 1:14-19). Admittedly, whether or not this is a contradiction is a matter of semantics. But semantics is not a reliable method of determining if someone's alibi or perception is accurate. A witness cannot say, "I saw the suspect leave the house at 6:35PM," and then later say, "I saw the suspect walk out of the house at 8:05PM," and further still qualify with, "When I said 'house' the first time, I meant I saw the suspect go into the garage." This problem is especially troublesome when it is not the witness doing the clarifying, as is the case with the bible.

Now, even if the bible were not rife with contradictions and that the "contradictions" were simply a matter of poor translation or wording, there's still the matter of all the other creation stories that exist in humanity. There are hundreds of creation stories each with an alternative sequence of events. What is a detective to do when faced with numerous witnesses, each giving a different account of events? He can only attempt to compare them to the facts recovered at the scene of the crime. If none of the accounts are backed up by the evidence then he can only move forward on the premise that the eye witnesses are incorrect.

Up to now I've focused a lot of my time on the idea that we should follow empirical evidence where ever it happens to lead us. Yet, I haven't addressed the idea that the evidence is only as strong as the faith you put in it. Relying on the empirical evidence for the Big Bang requires a certain degree of faith that we're not somehow wrong about the empirical evidence itself. Since technically nothing can be proven conclusively, there's always that small chance we're wrong about the Big Bang. It's certainly true that you can never be 100% sure about anything. That doesn't mean, however, that there aren't varying degrees of certainty. When a piece of empirical evidence is recorded by one scientist it only begins to nudge the certainty of its implications. But, if another scientist repeats the study and finds the same results, and this again is repeated many times by other scientists, we see the level of certainty go up more and more each time.

Independent verification is the key here. The more an experiment is repeated by different people the smaller the chances an error is skewing the results. The beauty is that independent verification also lets us know when we're wrong. If several scientists do the same experiment independently but get contradictory results, then that tells us we're not getting an accurate picture. Contradictory results are a problem that apply to God. The simple fact that there are other religions out there claiming the existence of different Gods is telling enough. Still, even amongst Christians the information is varied. One Christian can say they heard God tell them to spread peace and love and another Christian can say they heard God tell them to blow up an abortion clinic. So we've got different people doing the same experiment but coming up with conflicting data. This reduces the probability for any one of them being correct.

In light of this lack of evidence for God's existence, it's very easy for people to say, "Well, God's not a scientific claim. You can't find him in your telescopes or your microscopes. He exists in the beauty of a rainbow or in a child's laughter. You can see God when people do good for others for no reason." For anyone out there that follows this line of thinking, please listen very carefully to what I'm about to say. "Elvis is still alive, but that's not a scientific claim. You can't find Elvis in your telescopes or your microscopes. He exists in the beauty of a rainbow or in a child's laughter. You can see Elvis when people do good for others for no reason." My point here is that anything unsupported by evidence can be said to be outside the realm of science, but making that amendment doesn't move the case forward. It only blurs it to a point of being unrecognizable.

If I've lost anyone with talk of the Big Bang and empirical evidence and probabilities, I've got one more analogy I'll end with here. Imagine that you have a regular doctor you've seen your whole life. She's treated your illnesses consistently and you have no reason to doubt her skills. One day she

either moves or retires and you have to see a new doctor. When you arrive the doctor sits you down and without even examining you, he says, "I have some really bad news. You are very very ill. In fact, every person on this planet is ill. You see, it's something we're born with it. You probably feel fine, but you won't feel the effects of this illness until you die. Your body will show all the signs of death but you will actually be experiencing extreme agony for eternity. But, there is good news! I have the one medicine that can treat you and it's totally free! You just have to take this pill every day for the rest of your life. You'll also want to come see me every Sunday." You'd probably want to know how he knows this. He hasn't even examined you yet. The doctor says, "Oh, I don't need to examine you. I practice a special type of medicine. I get it from this book which is based on ancient texts that has all these stories, some of which are eye witness accounts, about how the illness is born into us and how this medicine is the only thing that can cure it." You tell the doctor that your previous doctor never said you were sick and that this doesn't sound at all like medical science. It sounds more like faith. "Ha! Faith!," he says, "Do you realize how much of medical science is based on faith? 25% of the time they're just guessing anyway! Technically they can't ever really be positive that your diagnosis is correct. Besides, this illness can't be detected by any of their tests. My book, on the other hand, says quite clearly that you definitely have this illness." Ok, but then what happens if you get, you know, really sick? "Well you can still go see a regular doctor. But on top of that you'll want to come see me more often and take more of this medicine to help the regular doctor out." Now what reason do you have to believe this doctor? Because he might be right? Or maybe you're thinking what harm can it do? Well what if I threw in another, similar doctor that claims her medicine is actually the correct medicine and the other doctor's medicine won't do anything for you? Then what? Obviously the choice is up to you. You're allowed to believe whatever you want. I just hope that after all I've said I've been able to show you why relying on empirical evidence and what it tells us about the probability of things is the most logical path to take. If not then I at least hope I've shown you why atheists do.

"GENERIC STATEMENT THANKING EVERYONE WHO PARTICIPATED"

In closing I'd just like to run over my main points.

Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence.

There is no empirical evidence for God's existence, making him highly improbable. If there were any evidence, science would have embraced the idea by now.

Believing in something without empirical evidence is your right, but it is not a reliable way of determining truth.

Claiming that an idea is not a scientific one is an ineffective way around this problem.

We accept evidence and expert analysis in a number of other fields in our lives. Ignoring them in other fields, especially ones so closely related, is illogical.

And finally, I'll end with a quote; "I contend that we are both atheists. I just believe in one fewer god than you do. When you understand why you dismiss all the other possible gods, you will understand why I dismiss yours."