

‘PROVING’ GOD EXISTS

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IN OUR empirically minded world possible proofs for God’s existence find it difficult to escape entanglement in the demands for ‘evidence’ we can somehow observe or palpably experience. Richard Dawkins, for example, takes only twenty-two pages to incapacitate the traditional proofs and then deftly transforms ‘design’ into an argument against God’s existence. Ultimately, he claims, God is a conjuring trick of the brain’s ‘simulation software’ deluding us into ‘seeing’ what is not really there.¹

Why persist then? One reason, even if not the principal one, is to try to preserve some reflection outside the ‘box’ of the empirical, within which so much of what it means to be human is nowadays trapped. Is everything about us to be explained in terms of physics and chemistry? Is the only form of valid reasoning the technological reasoning that has overrun our modern mindset? Is the resulting consumerism all there is to life?

Three recent works, undaunted by the current climate, revisit the traditional arguments with a view to reformulating them and attuning them to modern sensibilities. Robert J Spitzer in his finely argued *New Proofs For the Existence of God* begins with an extensive survey of the current scientific evidence concerning the origins of the universe and concludes that the low entropy (disorder) of our universe and its present radiation measures militate against there being huge numbers of cycles or bounces, so lessening the odds for ‘chance’ to be the explanation of everything: ‘there is’, he states, ‘an exceedingly high improbability of explaining our low entropy universe and the anthropic values of our cosmological constants by pure chance’.²

This clears the way for concluding that since the universe, both in its parts and as a

whole, is *conditioned* reality, that is, dependent upon some other reality for its existence, then for its full explanation ‘there must be at least one unconditioned reality in all Reality’.³

Once one understands the full implications of this Reality, we can then see, he maintains, that it grounds all the salient, otherwise unexplained, features of our own reality—our unrestricted desire to know, our tacit awareness of the unlimited intelligibility of all things, our search for unconditional love, the sense of absolute good and justice that grounds conscience, and the restless yearning we experience for more of goodness, beauty and truth.⁴

The second work is Alvin Plantinga’s *Where the Conflict Really Lies*, which, while covering similar ground to Spitzer’s book, targets the unfounded metaphysical claims of naturalism, particularly the claim that the universe is a ‘closed’ system, thus automatically ruling out any possible influence of the divine.⁵ To show scientifically that it is not ‘astronomically improbable’ for evolution alone to have produced our world, he claims, does not thereby show that it ‘must have happened that way’.⁶ Evolutionary theory, he concludes, has not shown ‘that possibly, all of the features of our world, including mind, have been produced by unguided natural selection’.⁷ On the contrary, both evolution and the fine-tuning of the universe are more probable with the assumption of God’s existence, than that it is all a matter of chance.⁸

Like Spitzer, he argues that our own cognitive powers go far beyond the requirements of reproductive fitness.⁹ Naturalism, on the other hand, by reducing everything, including mind, to physics, chemistry, and adaptive processes, gives us no confidence to believe that ‘our cognitive faculties are for the most part reliable’, for ‘truth’ is a matter of the content of beliefs and is not guaranteed by adaptation

and survival—false beliefs may be equally adaptive. At the very least, he claims, it certainly casts doubt on naturalism’s metaphysical claims to truth.¹⁰

The third work by Philip Clayton and Steven Knapp, *The Predicament of Belief*, while having wider concerns, confronts the same issues as the others. In particular, they explore the reasons we might have to look for further, more ultimate explanations, than those science can provide. The whole enterprise of science, they claim, rests on assumptions that are always in question: why, for example, ‘the most fundamental processes should exist in the first place’.¹¹

After consulting the data they conclude that someone who wants to explain them all in strictly physical terms faces a dilemma:

If she accepts the notion that there is only one universe, she is confronted by striking evidence of fine-tuning that at least seems to suggest that our universe was intentionally framed with initial conditions that would be conducive (in the long run) to the emergence of intelligent life. If, on the other hand, she affirms the theory that ours is only one of innumerable universes, she finds herself subscribing to a framework of universe-transcending laws, which in turn implies the existence of a mindlike realm that precedes or transcends the infinite succession of physical universes.¹²

Each of these works argues its cases in great detail, and, at the very least they show that the facts allow much more room for manoeuvre than the New Atheists care to admit. Science seeks to offer complete explanations within its own frame of reference, but as human beings we have other frames of reference we need to consider, so other explanations are also possible.

The inescapable question for us is our own existence. We are the outcome of an aeon-long evolutionary process that has produced beings who are self-aware, with an ability to remember the past, to relate to one another as subjects, and to act intentionally in the present to change the future. ‘Chance’ has played so great a part in who we are that if you rewound the process and kept playing it over and over again you would never



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get the same result. Yet here we find ourselves! Chance is a question, not an answer.

While nature has formed us, and science is best equipped to explore that process, we are above all created by culture and by our own reflection, relationships and choices. Ever since human history began some sense of the ‘divine’ has been the Answer to this human question mark.

The standard atheist objections to this answer are that it is mere wish fulfilment, fear of death, or infantile dependence—in general, an illusion or delusion. Dawkins trawls through shoals of evolutionary explanations: misfiring genes, overshooting agent detection, overstimulated trust, and cultural inheritance replicating itself (memes).¹³ It is a quite a catch!

Jesse Bering, an evolutionary psychologist, and also an atheist, in his recent book, *The Belief Instinct*, is prepared to discard most of Dawkins’ haul: the evolutionary origins of religion, he claims, lie rather in the fact that as a species we ‘are exquisitely attuned to the unseen psychological world’ by our ‘theory of mind’, which is our ‘particular trademark’.¹⁴

This ability, he argues, overshoots, (that verb again), perceiving intentions and messages where there are none, thus becoming the building blocks of religion:

The intoxicating pull of destiny beliefs, seeing ‘signs’ in a limitless array of unexpected natural events, the unshakable illusion of psychological immortality, and the implicit assumption that misfortunes are related to some divine plan or long-forgotten moral breach—all of these things have meaninglessly coalesced in the human brain to form a set of functional psy-

chological processes... leading our ancestors to feel and behave as though their actions were being observed, tallied, judged by a supernatural audience...¹⁵

Such evolutionary interpretations of religion may explain how we began to think and act religiously, but are not able to answer why we might continue to do so. To do that we have to approach the question from the inside of our lived experience, not from the outside as science does by considering it as an ‘object’.

From the inside of our subjective world facts about our origins are important (and instructive), but it is how we have configured and refigured our adaptive strategies that make us who we are. Bering (unwittingly) shows this with regard to ‘story’, which from the outside is simply ‘where things just happen’. He claims that in reality there is no story:

There is no tidy narrative arc, but just a rather messy, conductorless train of interconnected events hitched together in an impersonal and deterministic fashion, the links between them invisible to the naked eye and beyond the ken of everyday human intelligence.¹⁶

Yet, this outside view is not the only view and it misses what is crucially important to us as human beings. ‘Story’ is essential because we are subjects and agents who are able to create links and innovate by our intentions and goals. We fashion and give *content* to our lives and relationships by our own reflection and our choices for good or ill. This may be invisible to science but it is the ‘stuff’ of who we are.

Human beings live by *value* and *meaning* as much as by nature and facts. Religion too is rooted in nature, but it is central to the discovery and fostering of value and meaning, which contribute to the answer to the human question.

Faith, value, meaning and story cannot simply be swept into the dustbin of illusion. The bleak alternative is made clear in an interview with the novelist, Elizabeth Jane Howard, in the *Sydney Morning Herald*:

Does she worry about death? ‘Yes I think I’m afraid of it. One of the drawbacks if you don’t believe in Heaven or God, as I don’t, is that you are left thinking of yourself as a bit of a

dandelion seed, really—you go into the earth and that will be that...’¹⁷

Like mortality and the arts, religion has its own criteria of truth, different from those of science. It concerns the quality of our lives not the quantity. Its success or failure is given in the value it is able to add to our lives, the relatedness it builds, the resources it offers to live well in the midst of the challenges we face, the worth and meaning it gives, and the hope it offers, as well as the personal experience of God we have in our own lives.

Humanity is a work in progress, not just scientific and technological progress, but more especially in love, compassion, justice, reconciliation, care of the earth and peace. Who we are to become depends upon keeping the human question open to something ‘More’. Our lives are going to feel more and more cramped, more shallow and thin, more dandelion-like, if we don’t.

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