

God at University College Dublin

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On 8 October 2008, the Literary & Historical Society of University College Dublin sponsored a debate on the motion “That this house finds it irrational to believe in God.” In the 19th century, philosopher and lay theologian Søren Kierkegaard warned against such occasions; in his *Concluding Scientific Postscript* he asked whether raising such a question was not like standing in the presence of a mighty king and demanding evidence that he exists.

Nonetheless, I accepted the Society’s invitation to head the “God side” in this debate. Why? For one thing because of the prestige of the Literary & Historical Society. It was founded in 1855—before University College itself—and by no less a personage than the great Christian apologist John Henry Newman. The Society remains the largest and most distinguished university society in Ireland—comparable to the Oxford Union and Cambridge Union debating societies in England. Among notables who have been invited to speak at the Literary & Historical Society: W. B. Yeats, James Joyce, every President and Taoiseach (Prime Minister) of Ireland since the founding of the Republic, Noam Chomsky, John Mortimer (of Rumpole fame), J. K. Rowling (Harry Potter), Oxford philosopher Richard Swinburne, and Harvard philosopher Hilary Putnam. It seemed to me that in that context God deserved a proper hearing—particularly in light of the secular reactions to a legalistic Roman Catholicism which have driven many Irish (for example, James Joyce and Samuel Beckett) to radical unbelief.

There were to be three invitees on each side of the debate. Supporting the proposition: Dr Sean M. Carroll, a theoretical cosmologist, currently senior research associate in the physics department at the California Institute of Technology; Fred Edwards, executive secretary of the American Humanist Association; and Dr Lewis Wolpert, English developmental biologist and Fellow of the Royal Society (who, the day of the debate, notified the Literary & Historical Society that, for reasons of health, he had to cancel; he was replaced by a substitute from University College).

I chose in support of the opposition Dr Angus Menuge, professor of philosophy at Concordia University Wisconsin and fellow and diplomate of the International Academy of Apologetics, Strasbourg, France; and Dr Alistair Noble, chemist and intelligent design expert from Scotland.

The debate took place in a University College auditorium seating 400; roughly 350 students and faculty members attended. Each speaker was given 7 minutes to present his case, and this was followed by questions to the speakers from the audience, and, finally, the audience vote. The order was: Edwards followed by Menuge; Carroll followed by Noble; and the Wolpert substitute followed by Montgomery.

Edwards’ argument was simply that humanity is the highest value and that the notion of God is hopelessly confused (theism? pantheism? polytheism?) and thus irrational. Carroll, in line with his published article, “Why (Almost All) Cosmologists Are Atheists,” declared that there was no reason why the universe needed to have a beginning; indeed, when he had taught an undergraduate course on the history of atheism at the University of Chicago he had found that reason had little or nothing to do with whether students were believers in God or atheists. As a typical Californian, Carroll dressed informally and quipped that a good reason to disbelieve in God was the presence of Sarah Palin as Republican vice-presidential candidate in the 2008 election! The Wolpert stand-in presented the argument of Wolpert’s latest book, *Six Impossible Things Before Breakfast: The Evolutionary Origins of Belief*: “Religious beliefs . . . all had their origin in the evolution of causal beliefs, which in turn had its origins in tool use.”

How did our “God team” counter these arguments?

Edwards’ claim that human values are enough left aside the critical need for an absolute ethic and inalienable rights. Water doesn’t rise above its own level—and standards deriving only from the human condition are inevitably limited and tainted by the human beings and societies formulating them. The humanist has no rational way of condemning, for example, the atrocities of the Hitler or Stalinist régimes, since the disvalues at the root of them were also human products. As Ludwig Wittgenstein declared in his *Tractatus*, “Ethics is transcendental”—meaning that values, to be absolute, would have to arise from outside the human situation. Moreover, as is well documented, atheistic régimes in modern times have committed vastly more atrocities and violations of human rights than can be attributed to believers in prior centuries—and the reason is clear: if there is no God, people have no inherent worth and can be manipulated (indeed, eliminated) with impunity to serve any political or ideological end. “Without God,” Dostoyevsky, observed, “all things are permissible.”

Carroll’s claim that the universe can rationally be regarded as infinite—as all there is—runs into gigantic difficulties, and we pointed them out. First, on the basis of the Second Law of Thermodynamics, Olbers’ paradox, etc., most cosmologists consider the universe to be finite. The Big Bang, supported by the Hubble/Doppler red-shift, is seen as the beginning of matter, energy, space and time, and thus requires an explanation (which God does not, since he is self-

existent, having no beginning). Einstein himself moved from a belief in an eternal universe to an acceptance of Big Bang cosmology—viewing his own effort to correct his General Theory of Relativity to support an eternal, non-expanding universe as his “biggest blunder.” Indeed, an actual infinite constitutes an irrational notion (as mathematician Georg Cantor and logician David Hilbert have shown); it follows that the universe cannot have this property, whereas God, as a spirit, is not subject to such a restriction. Further, cosmologist Alan Guth, in an important article, has shown that “inflationary spacetimes are not past-complete,” i.e., that “inflationary models require physics other than inflation to describe the past boundary of the inflating region of spacetimes.” So, even if the universe is perpetually “inflating,” it still had a beginning—which can only be accounted for by the existence of a transcendent God not bound by space-time considerations.

Moreover, as Martin J. Rees and others have so effectively shown, the universe is finely-tuned, requiring an intelligent creator. The so-called Anthropic-principle argument that this may seem to be the case only in our universe as compared with the infinite possibility of “multiverses” is little more than (as convert from atheism Antony Flew has well put it) an example of “escape routes . . . to preserve the nontheist status quo.” Why? Because the existence of universes other than our own has zero empirical evidence supporting their facticity; and even if they existed we would have no grounds for asserting that they would not be finely-tuned; and, finally, were there to be a multiplicity of universes, we would need a “multiverse generator” to explain them—which would simply push the need to assert God’s existence a step backward, in no sense eliminating it.

Fascinatingly, in private discussion, Carroll said that he was now trying to find a way to show that the Second Law of Thermodynamics was not necessarily applicable universally—thus allowing for an eternal universe. This, to be sure, revealed Carroll’s underlying metaphysical bias—his commitment to reductionistic naturalism—and the great gulf lying between his atheism and scientific objectivity. Naturally, we are waiting with bated breath for his repeal of the Second Law of Thermodynamics!

My presentation came at the very end. My object was briefly to deal with Wolpert’s thesis and, more importantly, to pull together the arguments of the God-side.

The notion that tool-making led to an understanding of causation and that in turn led to belief in God suffers from two appalling logical fallacies: post hoc, ergo propter hoc (the fact that two things—here, causation and religious belief—happen together does not in any way show that the one produces the other), and the genetic fallacy (the idea that the origin of something determines its ultimate truth value). In the latter case, we should remember such examples as the discovery of ammonia by the alchemist Brandt whilst he was boiling toads in urine: the value of ammonia is not (fortunately) dependent on the circumstances of its origin. And suppose we found that mathematical ability had a strictly genetic basis: would that mean that mathematics was invalid? It follows that even if religious beliefs had their source in tool-making cum realisation of causation, this would say nothing as to whether those religious beliefs might in fact be true. One must determine whether the object of religious belief (God) is a reality—and that is an entirely separate question from the determination as to how beliefs come about psychologically or developmentally.

As for Wolpert’s reductionist-materialist account of the human mind and its beliefs, two further points were worth making. First, such scholars as psychologist Paul Vitz (*Faith of the Fatherless*) have argued that God-denial is a psychological aberration, explicable by the unfortunate experiences of the atheists holding that viewpoint. Secondly, there is powerful evidence that the mind and personality cannot be accounted for by the genetic uniqueness of the brain. Nobel Prize winner in physiology Sir John Eccles, in dialogue with Karl Popper, declared: “I am constrained to believe that there is what we might call a supernatural origin of my unique self-conscious mind or my unique selfhood or soul.” The same point has been made by Mario Beauregard in his recent book, *The Spiritual Brain: A Neuroscientist’s Case for the Existence of the Soul*.

I then endeavoured to point up the common element in all the atheist arguments presented by the other side. They all were in fact variants on the celebrated comment of Laplace when Napoleon, having read Laplace’s groundbreaking *L’Exposition du système du monde* (1796), commented: “Your work is excellent but there is no trace of God in it.” Laplace: “Sire, je n’ai pas eu besoin de cette hypothèse” [I had no need of that hypothesis]. The issue of God’s existence is, at root, whether his existence is or is not needed to account for our world, our history, and our needs.

Fascinatingly (and this came up in the audience question time), the same point was made in the famous Flew-Wisdom parable: “Once upon a time two explorers came upon a clearing in the jungle. In the clearing were growing many flowers and many weeds. One explorer says, ‘Some gardener must tend this plot.’ The other disagrees: ‘There is no gardener.’ So they pitch their tents and set a watch. No gardener is ever seen. ‘But perhaps he is an invisible gardener.’ So they set up a barbed-wire fence. They electrify it. They patrol with bloodhounds. (For they remember how H. G. Wells’ *The Invisible Man* could be both smelt and touched though he could not be seen.) But no shrieks ever suggest that some intruder has received a shock. No movements of the wire ever betray an invisible climber. The bloodhounds never give cry. Yet still the Believer is not convinced. ‘But there is a gardener, invisible, intangible, insensible to electric shocks, a gardener who has no scent and makes no sound, a gardener who comes secretly to look after the garden which

he loves.’ At last the Sceptic despairs, ‘But what remains of your original assertion? Just how does what you call an invisible, intangible, eternally elusive gardener differ from an imaginary gardener or even from no gardener at all?’”

The striking thing about this parable is that one of its authors, Antony Flew—probably the most influential philosophical atheist of the 20th century—became a believer in God in 2004. Flew’s sea change was due to the force of the evidence for intelligent design, especially for the fine-tuning of the universe. The “eternally elusive gardener” was not at all as elusive as the parable suggested!

I concluded with what I see as the most fundamental and most relevant reason for the God hypothesis: the impossibility otherwise of successfully accounting for Jesus Christ. I observed that Harvard astronomer Owen Gingerich (another scientist giving the lie to Carroll’s claim that “cosmologist” is virtually synonymous with “atheist”) noted in the conclusion to his book, *God’s Universe*: “Jesus is the supreme example of personal communication from God. When the apostle Philip requested, ‘Show us the Father,’ Jesus responded, ‘Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.’”

Jesus’ words and acts were reported by reliable, primary-source eyewitnesses in the New Testament records—documents “far better attested than that of any other work of ancient literature,” according to Sir Frederick Kenyon and other preeminent textual critics. In these solid historical sources, Jesus rises from the dead, attesting his claim to be God incarnate, come to earth to die for the sins of the world. Humean arguments against the miraculous fall by the wayside in the face of an Einsteinian universe open to the possibility of all events, including miraculous ones—Hume’s case having been decimated even by secular philosophers such as John Earman (*Hume’s Abject Failure: The Argument Against Miracles*). Indeed, Archbishop Richard Whately—of Dublin fame—produced his wonderful satire, *Historic Doubts Concerning Napoleon Buonaparte*, having the theme that if the Humean arguments against the reliability of the Gospel accounts of Jesus were applied to Napoleon, one would have to deny his existence.

One is reminded of John Stuart Mill’s sage observation in his *Three Essays on Religion*: “It is of no use to say that Christ, as exhibited in the Gospels, is not historical, and that we know not how much of what is admirable has been super-added by the tradition of his followers. Who among his disciples or among their proselytes was capable of inventing the sayings of Jesus or of imagining the life and character revealed in the Gospels? Certainly not the fishermen of Galilee; as certainly not St Paul, whose character and idiosyncrasies were of a totally different sort; still less the early Christian writers, in whom nothing is more evident than that the good which was in them was all derived, as they always professed that it was derived, from the higher source.”

I emphasized that proof depends largely on what is to be proved and that there are conditions connected with a given object of proof. If someone in the audience were to deny the fact of electricity, I could of course provide abstract and theoretical arguments in behalf of its reality; but it would be more effective if I stuck his or her finger into a light socket! By the same token, the biblical accounts of Jesus claim that these texts are the very word of God—constituting the “power/dynamic (Greek, *dynamis*) of God unto salvation.” New Testament scholar J. B. Phillips said that translating those documents was like “wiring a house without turning the mains off.” And J. R. R. Tolkien, author of *The Lord of the Rings*, said of the Gospel story: “There is no tale ever told that men would rather find was true, and none which so many sceptical men have accepted as true on its own merits.”

Are you the audience willing to go to those documents? I asked. No more than a “suspension of disbelief” is required. If you do, you will not be able to account for Jesus apart from God—apart from his in fact being God. Some years ago André Frossard, a French journalist, published his autobiography with the title, *Dieu existe, je l’ai rencontré* [God exists: I’ve met him]. That can be your story as well.

Ponder two unsettling quotations. Pascal: “There is enough light for those who really want to see—and enough darkness for those with a contrary disposition.” And (inevitably) John Henry Newman: “We can believe what we choose. We are answerable for what we choose to believe.”

The audience voted to defeat the proposition. For them it was not the case that “this house finds it irrational to believe in God.”

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