

Discourse on Religion

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“...I was astonished that the foundations (of mathematics), so strong and solid, should have no loftier superstructure reared on them. On the other hand, I compared the disquisitions of the ancient moralists to very towering and magnificent palaces with no better foundation than sand and mud...”

- Rene Descarte

In Euclidian logic, one begins with *axioms*, statements which can be assumed to be true because they represent some rule or property. Two plus two is known to be four, it is an axiom true by definition. We can derive and test *theorems* from the axioms, allowing us to make truth claims. This is what gives mathematics its solid foundation. Unfortunately the mechanics of the universe are a black box; any axioms we derive from it are merely educated guesses. Without axioms, we have no way of proving *anything* about the real world.

All philosophies (which includes religions) are ultimately assumptions. Some assumptions are useful; they allow us to simplify and conceptualize. Others are not and are forgotten. We may not have axioms, but we do have *time* we can leverage to test if assumptions are useful. In this sense, philosophy is a sort of science. Hypothesize, experiment, observe, repeat; it's the scientific method! This is how humans deal with the unprovability of real-world ideas, by making and testing broad assumptions. This is broadly referred to as *generalizing* in learning theory.

Power and Control

One cannot ignore the fact that religion is ingrained into every echelon of human society from isolated tribes to the forums of Greece to modern bustling metropolises. In fact, you would be hard-pressed to find a society without some form of religion; even those which developed in absolute isolation. It is something that is a natural product of our circumstance. Atheists will be quick to shrug their shoulders and declare that man uses religion as a means to explain natural phenomena, but I don't think that captures the whole picture.

In the centuries leading up to the scientific revolution, there was a conflict between animism and the mechanical philosophy. On the side of animism was *alchemy*, the idea that God or some metaphysical force was directly involved in the nature of things. Most major figures of the scientific revolution, including Descartes and Newton, were better known in their time as alchemic philosophers. The alchemists believed that gold was “born from the womb of the earth” and any other metals were abortions of that process. Alchemy was attractive because Europeans noticed God increasingly absent from scientific literature. Fearing such a reality, scientists doubled down on their efforts, seeking to once again find God apparent in nature. In hindsight we now know that the concept of God and the soul is useless in medicine and science. Time has shown us that the mechanical philosophy is, at the very least, a more accurate generalization than animism. I say this to bring attention to the property of religion as a powerful motivator. Early scientists were not just inventors; they were religious men searching for God.

The Romans were masters at leveraging religion to motivate their men. Historians draw a scene of a general in flowing purple robes riding out in front of his legion, reminding them of the rewards they would receive in Elysium if they fought bravely. The general would remind them Ares and Zeus were on their side, protecting and watching over them. These are men who as children were regaled with stories of heroes long ago performing extraordinary acts of bravery for Rome, or for their parents, or for the gods. They watched soldiers return from battle with piles of spoils and laurel wreaths over their shoulders. Roman society was *built* for war, and religion was integral to its design.

Many beliefs are really just rules imposed by religious institutions. One powerful example is the wearing of head and body coverings in Islamic societies. It is a rule imposed on women to stop the trade of women-as-currency; it was created to protect women from lust, but it is not viewed by many members of the religion as a protective measure but rather as a divine order.

It is clearly accurate to describe religion as a tool to control behaviour. It acts as a social glue; a common ground that allows populations of scale to unite. More importantly, it enabled religious figures (such as priests or pastors) to motivate the behaviour of a whole society. It doesn't matter if the religion is *true* or not - it just has to be useful. This utility is a real problem for anyone trying to prove religious beliefs. It seems much more probable that those beliefs are a natural product of our circumstance.

Fear, Pride, and Guilt

A question that all religious people must ask themselves is "Am I willing to accept the *possibility* that my religion is false"? Most religious people have an emotional reason for believing in God, perhaps as a way to deal with the inevitability of death, the unfairness of our societies, the smallness of our lives. Many of them may not believe in God at all; but on the off-chance that God *is* real, they believe at least in word out of fear of hell. It is extraordinarily difficult to convince a christian that God is not real because of the emotional bonds that are formed instead of logical processes.

Islamists are a proud people; to be born into an Islamic family is a point of high pride. In such families to abandon Islam is equivalent to abandoning your family, and leaving that pride behind. Thus it is difficult to convince an Islamist of the falseness of his religion or the truth of another, you are not only asking him to abandon his faith, but also his family, friends, and his pride.

All religious institutions rely on emotional connections to maintain power. From theocracies of the Middle East, to the catholic cathedrals of Europe, to the decentralized protestant churches of the United States, are built on the emotional dependency of the people they subjugate. It is what keeps the offering plate full.

The Bible

I will not attempt to claim that the Bible is without merit; much the contrary. There is a reason billions of people study its content. But just because the Bible tends to be useful lends no credence to the claim of divine inspiration. In order to establish the truth of the Bible, we must make assumptions about the truth of the experiences of the people who wrote it. We must assume that when Moses climbed Mt. Sinai and received the ten commandments that the words were literally carved into the rocks with lightning from the finger of God. We must assume that Saul (later Paul) was blinded by Jesus while on the road to Damascus, and that the cataracts on his eyes fell off when the hands of Ananias covered them. How can such assumptions be made? It cannot be proven that God has any involvement in any of these things - or that they even happened in the first place.

I want to draw attention to the fact that while historical accuracy may be attainable, the claim of divine involvement cannot be proven. Not enough primary-source documents from the old testament era exist to prove much of miracles happened at all and even if it did it would be easy to dismiss as a historical anomaly. The Roman Empire fathered some of the best historians, allowing us to establish the accuracy of the new testament, but we still cannot prove new-testament miracles really happened, historians did not record enough for us to reasonably say.

Jesus

As touched on in the previous section, we have very good historical records of some of the new testament thanks to the Roman Empire. In fact, we have more evidence that Jesus existed than we have of Emperor Tiberius. 40 verified historical documents exist that indicate (at the very least) that

Jesus did in fact exist, compared to Tiberius's 3. But these documents' don't help us prove miracles, and don't help us establish the divinity of Christ. Even our best arguments for it conclude in "we think Jesus was *probably* divine" rather than a concrete conclusion. It simply isn't productive to debate the divinity of Jesus for either side.

Salvation

"Many will say to me in that day, Lord, lord, have we not in thy name prophesied? and in thy name cast out demons? and in thy name done many mighty things? 23 and then I will acknowledge to them, that I never knew you, depart from me ye who are working lawlessness."

- Matthew 7:21

If a man can cast out demons and speak prophecies in the name of God, and still not meet the standard, how can any man be certain of his salvation? If this is true, then why does it matter if we believe or not? Even if we ignore this statement, the line of demarkation between eternal damnation and bliss is not well defined. Christians will say that the only requirement be that you "give your life to Christ" before you die, but this just creates more questions than answers. What if a man lives a life of sin, then on his deathbed professes belief? What if a man lives in a remote, cannibalistic tribe and never hears about christianity? What about those who die young? Do they get a free pass to heaven? If miscarried children go to heaven, all women should have late-term abortions. Better to be guaranteed to go to heaven than risk damnation by being alive. Do people who never hear about Christianity go to hell? What about people with intellectual disabilities? The vagueness of biblical salvation is open to interpretation; christians pick whatever view makes them the most comfortable.

Demons

If one is to accept the bible as infallible, they must accept that demons exist and are directly involved in the world. Our hindsight, however, tells us that demons are an archaic way of explaining negative natural phenomena. For example, it is where we get the word 'seizure'. Christians use the concept of demons allegorically to explain our tendency toward wrongdoing; we 'struggle with our inner demons', etc. But if we are willing to accept that demons are not actually real *in the capacity that the bible says they are* then we must accept that the bible is fallible. We cannot pick-and-choose what is literal and what is interpretive; if the bible says 'Jesus cast out demons', then he literally cast out demons.

Evolution

If we take the Bible as literal, often called *Fundamentalist* christianity, the universe and earth is roughly ten thousand years old and it was created in 7 days. It's easy to explain *how* this is possible; God is infinitely powerful. Christians mostly focus on disproving alternative explanations. If God had a close involvement with the creation and design of the universe, his signature should be apparent in the nature of things. However, as our technology has advanced, we have found this increasingly less apparent.

When discussing 'big E' Evolution (Macroevolution) we mean change over generations from one species to another. 'Little e' evolution is better referred to as adaption, or small changes between individuals of the same species. Christians are willing to accept adaption because it is apparent in our observations of living things; we can reasonably assume that species adapt. Evolution on the other hand is a more difficult subject; the amount of time it takes for Evolution to occur is so great we cannot reasonably demonstrate it occurring in the span of a human lifetime.

One common way Christians attack Evolution is through gaps in the fossil record. The response is with the concept of *Punctuated Equilibrium*, the idea that long periods of equilibrium were punctuated by relatively short periods of rapid Evolution. Christians are quick to dismiss this

concept as wild assumption, but mathematics tells a different story. Let us consider a graph where the x-value is a particular DNA sequence, and the y-value is the probability that the sequence will survive and reproduce. Obviously this graph would be extraordinarily complex, but we will simplify for the purposes of demonstration. It might look something like this:

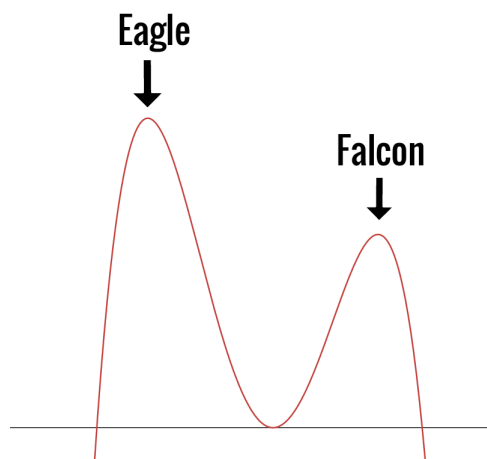


Figure 1: An environment where an Eagle has a higher survival rate than a Falcon.

Let us assume that the Eagle does not exist yet, and the Falcon does. Each time that the Falcon reproduces, random mistakes in gene duplication cause the DNA of the offspring to be slightly different, causing the probability of survival to either increase or decrease. In this sense, we can think of stillborn offspring as being in a 'valley' (0% survival rate) and species as being 'peaks'. Naturally all members of a species will migrate toward the nearest peak in this space over time, since members at higher survival rates are more likely to reproduce.

There exists some probability that a gene duplication error occurs that results in an offspring of the Falcon species being *on the slope that leads to Eagle*. At this point, the 'equilibrium' (the Falcon species) has been broken. If this intermediate member and its offspring survives, the species will evolve into Eagles as those genes become more pronounced, following the slope. Once the species has fully evolved into Eagles, equilibrium is restored, since they have reached a peak.

The idea of *change* as slopes of probabilities forms the foundation of machine learning and artificial intelligence. It is clear that this is an accurate representation. This is why the presence of gaps in the fossil record do not disprove evolution, but support it. The point here is that the more you scrutinize Evolution from a purely mathematical perspective, the more it makes sense.

The Origin of Life

The origin of first life is *by far* the greatest challenge faced by those seeking to prove a God-less universe. Even our most advanced scientists cannot create basic life forms; how could they come about as the result of natural processes? We don't have a good explanation, but that does not *prove* God.

The Age of Earth

If the Earth is ten thousand years old, we would expect our discoveries to support that theory. However, our studies of geology tell a story billions of years old. There are many examples, but it is not helpful to list them. It is more telling what these discoveries say about the character of God. He presents himself as a loving Father, not as a trickster. Why would he design the Earth and Universe in such a way that it *appears* to contradict him? Would he not want to guide us to him? The fact is,

when taking an objective look at the raw data the universe appears to be billions of years old, not ten thousand. It is the more reasonable assumption.

The Alternative

It doesn't make sense that anything would exist at all. And yet, here we are. The only thing that can be known for certain is that *something* exists because we perceive our surroundings. We can't know if our surroundings exist, sure, but that perception must come from somewhere. If we are to assume that there is no involved God, we must have a way to explain why the universe exists.

Consider an infinitely large library; on each shelf is every possible combination of characters of a given length. On shelf 3 is every possible 3-character book. On shelf n is every possible n -length book. Within this library is the story of every man, woman, and child who has ever lived and will ever live - in fact, it contains every possible story that *could* be told. An overwhelming majority of these books would be random gibberish - at least to us - but it would be there. Now, let us think of the rules of our universe as a unique sequence of values - a book in the library. Given infinite space within these universes, every possible thing or event that *could* exist would exist in at least one of the universes.

A being who constructs such a library would be god-like and have a practically infinite amount of resources. It is also highly probable that our Earth would be uninteresting to this being; we have a lot of problems. At any rate it doesn't really matter - it's all conjecture anyways.

Conclusion

I am not opposed to the concept of God. Nothing makes me sadder than the realization that he is not real. If God presented himself to me such that I can reasonably assume that he is real, I would not reject him. But regardless, the ideas of Christianity is not what the world needs or is looking for.

If God is truly good, then he will judge you on the content of your character, not how frequently you went to church, or how much you prayed, or how closely you followed the ten commandments. If God is loving, he will be understanding of our struggle with uncertainty. The best we can do in this life is build our character - for the good of ourselves, and for the good of humanity as a whole.