

MHCC Sermon

How do we know there is a God? Part 2

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18/11/2012

Readings

GENESIS 1:24-27

ROMANS: 1:19-20

Introduction

In my last sermon I talked about some of the challenges I faced once I started asking some tough questions about my faith. I noticed a lot of voices cropping up from my past - critical, judgmental voices that I was straying from the true path. And I was also afraid of disappointing my friends in the event this path was no longer the right one for me.

At the end of the talk I was relieved to hear, not brick bats, but support from many of you, because you've been struggling with similar issues. In fact, the most common thing I heard was to stop apologising. Well, I promise to do that today - the gloves are off.

What I want to do today is give a very brief review of just a few of the books I've been reading, books that have left me challenged and in awe of this incredible universe. And finally, I'll describe where I'm up to in making sense of all that.

You'll remember I started my sermon with the question "How do we know there is a God?" I said it was a daft question because it changes depending on where you put the emphasis. Nevertheless, it's been useful for helping me clarify the questions I'm really interested in, such as:

- Has matter always existed?
- Why does anything exist?
- How did life begin?
- Is God just a God of the gaps?
- If there is a God, what can we say about that God just from observation?

And as I said last time, I've been trying to ask these questions without going anywhere, just sitting in the moment, keeping the baby with the bathwater until I have a better idea of which is which.

Some books I've read

Of the couple of dozen or so books I've read over the last few years, these are the ones that have been most significant for me:

- Matthew Alper. *The God Part of the Brain*
- Richard Dawkins. *The God Delusion*
- Paul Davies. *The Goldilocks Enigma*
- Paul Davies. *The Origin of Life*
- Antony Flew with Abraham Roy Varghese. *There is a God*
- N.T. Wright. *Surprised by Hope*

The first two are by atheists who are dismissive of any thought of a supernatural reality, with the latter, Dawkins, being openly hostile and patronising towards anyone who believes in God. The next two are also by an atheist, but this one won the Templeton prize for spirituality in 1995. That's quite an achievement. The fifth is by someone who was a card-carrying atheist and celebrated philosopher for fifty years before deciding there was a God. And the last is by an Anglican bishop and biblical scholar.

Matthew Alper. *The God Part of the Brain*

After getting a degree in philosophy, Matthew Alper set out on a journey to discover whether or not there exists a spiritual reality, or God. His best-selling book, *The God Part of the Brain*, is the story of that journey. His particularly approach was to use science as a toolkit for understanding and explaining faith and spirituality. So, in some ways, it's similar to my own.

He studied disciplines from physics through to biology and became convinced the whole of life could be explained without having to resort to the supernatural. For example, Immanuel Kant demonstrated we are born with a built-in understanding of time and space. We are not blank slates. So could this apply to knowledge about God? Could our desire to worship God be physically hardwired?

Alper gave many examples of built-in behaviour: planarian worms that move instinctively towards light; bees that build hexagonal honeycombs; spiders that weave intricate webs. These are instinctive behaviours, not learned ones. And examples exist all the way up the phylogenetic tree to primates - courting, foraging, child-rearing, fight or flight, even smiling is instinctive.

He concluded that religious behaviours can be described neurologically, and there is no reality of God outside our own brains. It is a hardwired response that probably came about as a by-product of natural selection.

Well, yes, it's true. I can imagine if we were to fry the light-seeking part of the worm's neural chord (it doesn't have a brain), it would no longer seek light until the chord repaired itself. But no-one would say that light therefore didn't exist. Similarly, if we to mutilate a part of the brain we knew corresponded with a specific response, we'd no longer respond in the same way. But what does that prove? If a worm's response is hardwired, surely it's because, over evolutionary time, the real, external, existence of light has somehow impacted on its genetic development?

I think the real problem here is that Alper has already decided there is no supernatural reality. He says that up front. So he's destined to get the answer he started with.

Richard Dawkins. *The God Delusion*

Richard Dawkins doesn't mince his words. He has published lots of books, but his most famous is *The God Delusion*, where he rails against the destructive effects of religious fundamentalism. I can understand his rage at the things that have been done in God's name. But it's still a bruising book to read.

Mind you, there is something to be said for hardening up. I think Christians have had this coming for a long time. We've enjoyed a privileged place in Australian society, resting on the myth this is a Christian country. It hasn't been that for some time. Judging from recent events, the chickens are coming home to roost for certain organisations that have enjoyed State protection, until now.

In this book Dawkins dismisses various arguments for God's existence, such as Aquinas' proofs, various arguments from beauty and personal experience, and from Scripture. It was amusing to read this: "There are still some people who are persuaded by Scriptural evidence to believe in God." And his point is? I think this says more about Dawkins' ignorance of religion than anything else.

One point he makes, which I actually support, is about the *God of the gaps*. What does he mean by the God of the gaps? He's talking about that thing people do whenever there's some kind of amazing event or phenomenon that happens, with no obvious explanation. "Well, that proves God

exists, because only God could do that." Or, alternatively, "Ah, yes, that was definitely the work of the Holy Spirit.", when we don't really know if it was any such thing.

Just because we don't understand something, doesn't mean it's a miracle, or that God therefore exists. It could just as easily be a gap in our knowledge or experience. For example, what used to be called a demon in the first century is now more likely to be considered epilepsy, or mental illness. And what we call the Holy Spirit's activity could be no more than us joining the dots to suit our own understanding.

The problem with always interpreting phenomena as a sign of God's existence is that we're in danger of creating a God based on our own ignorance. That kind of God is really vulnerable to any new understanding. It can cause us to arbitrarily stop listening, or shut down intellectually whenever our faith is threatened. And the problem with always spiritualizing events is that we're in danger of putting our own words into God's mouth.

But back to Dawkins. His central argument for the book is this: the argument that because the universe is so incredibly complex there must be a God doesn't hold up, because a God capable of designing a complex universe must, by definition, be even more improbably complex. You wind up creating more questions than you answer.

Paul Davies. *The Goldilocks Enigma and the Origin of Life*

I have a lot of time for Paul Davies. His scientific credentials are impeccable. He calls himself an atheist, but carries that view with grace and openness. He is also scrupulously honest about what he thinks is knowable and what isn't using science. I recommend both these books - they'll widen your horizons, by about 13 billion light years.

The Goldilocks Enigma looks at way the universe appears just right for life, while *The Origin Of Life* focuses specifically on how did life start? Here are some interesting facts and theories from the Goldilocks Enigma:

- Most physicists believe that all the matter in our universe can be traced back to a single beginning - the big bang, an infinitesimally huge explosion that released enough energy to create all our stars and planets.
- Current estimates of the age of the universe, as measured by the furthest things we can see, is 13.7 billion years old, and the Earth is about 4.56 billion years old.
- No-one knows what caused the big bang, or what happened before it.
- Mathematically, at the point at which the big bang occurred, we appear to have had a singularity where there was infinite mass consuming no space, and no time.
- The 2nd law of thermodynamics says that all things tend from order to disorder. Energy tends to dissipate and even out. This answers one of my questions. The universe *must* have had a starting point - it can't have been there forever in its current state, otherwise all the suns would have burnt out by now. I was quite disappointed when I read this.

In his book *The Origin of Life*, Davies explores what life is, and how it might have begun. So how *did* life begin?

Consider this: all living things have cells. Cells are incredibly complicated, even in single-cell bacteria. Cells have many parts, each of which plays an essential role in maintaining its viability. For example, the cell wall is an amazing piece of engineering in its own right, that allows substances to pass in one direction but not the other. The cell also contains a soup of amino acids, proteins and enzymes that provide energy for creating various molecules, including DNA.

One of the essential characteristics of life on earth is that it replicates. The way most life replicates is through DNA - the double helix. DNA contains the instructions for how to create every part of the organism: cells, arms, snot, everything. It stores this information as a complicated sequence of molecules drawn from just four: adenine, guanine, cytosine and thymine (AGCT). The replication

happens by the double helix splitting apart, and it's quite easy to model, surprisingly. The order of the molecules has to be accurately maintained, otherwise you get mutations that are usually harmful.

So: you need a cell to create the environment in which DNA can form and replicate. But the instructions for creating a cell are contained in DNA. So how did very first cell get created? Was there a basic kind of DNA? But if there was, how did that DNA get created?

Many scientists say it was just a very lucky chance; a lightning bolt on a warm pond. Which sounds plausible, if you take it over geological time. But it's not as easy as that. Davies explains that the probability of life forming in this way is so infinitesimally small it would just never happen, not even within a geological timescale. The chances of the right combination of amino acids and conditions required to produce DNA that replicates accurately and consistently is effectively zero, even with 3.5 billion years to play with.

But what about all the billions of planets out there - that must surely even up the odds? But, Davies says, even incorporating the trillions of stars we know about in the measurable universe, there are still not enough stars to measurably increase the odds. And don't forget, you're always fighting against the 2nd law of thermodynamics.

Antony Flew with Abraham Roy Varghese. *There is a God*

Antony Flew was a British philosopher who set the agenda for modern atheism for over fifty years. He was the atheist's atheist, a kind of parallel with the apostle Paul before the road to Damascus. He built an international reputation on challenging the basis for supernatural belief, and he was widely admired and respected.

Then, in 2004, he did the unthinkable: he publicly stated he had changed his mind and now believed there was a God - not the personal God that Christians espouse, but nevertheless a supernatural being or force that designed and created the universe.

His primary reason for now believing there was a God was "...the apparent impossibility of providing a naturalistic theory of the origin from DNA of the first reproducing species." This is essentially where Paul Davies left us.

In the appendices of *There is a God*, Flew includes a discussion with historian and theologian N.T. Wright. That discussion is basically Wright answering a set of questions from Flew, and he said this:

- Nobody seriously disagrees that Jesus existed.
- About resurrection itself, Wright says:
 - People in Jesus' time either didn't believe in resurrection at all, or did *not* believe in an immediate physical resurrection. At best they believed in a resurrection at the end of time, after a long sleep, where everyone would be resurrected at the same time. The early Christians were the first to talk of an immediate resurrection.
 - The common ideas about resurrection were either that you got the same body back, warts and all, or you got a disembodied, ghost body. The early Christians were the first to talk of a bodily transformation into a perfect, physical body.
 - They also believed the Messiah had been killed and raised from the dead. No-one else believed that the Messiah would be killed, much less rise from the dead.
 - While there were many variations of what resurrection meant to first century Jews, there was no spectrum of view amongst the early Christians. This specific view occurred almost immediately after his death. It did not develop years later.

When you put the above together, Wright says the most reasonable explanation is that "something happened". Something amazing actually happened that caused the start of a movement with no precedence that continues to this day.

Wright gets very excited by the untidiness of the narrative - the inconsistency of the gospels, the role of women as the first witnesses. He says, "... As historians, this is gold. The early Christians would never had made this up, or it would be an own goal."

Flew thought this was the most compelling argument he had ever heard in defence of physical resurrection, and he called it "fresh and original".

Flew died only a couple of years ago. Flew's motto was always "I have to go where the evidence leads." We don't know if the evidence brought him to faith, but it certainly led him to its doorstep.

Conclusions

So where does that leave us?

- While science has a good handle on what happened just after the big bang, there is still, as yet, no reasonable explanation for what happened at time zero, or why it happened.
- Both naturalistic and supernatural explanations for our existence have major holes, in my view. Each explanation seems to raise even bigger questions. From the perspective of Occam's Razor, no-one really has an advantage.
- Therefore, people of faith should not be cowed or intimidated by scientists. We all live in a conundrum, and we should all be humbled by this.
- The problem of life's beginning is also seemingly intractable. So much so that a world-famous atheist came to the conclusion there was a god and effectively committed profession suicide.

I am utterly blown away by this situation. Naturalist scientists are faced with an awful possibility - that the only reasonable explanation for why we are here might include a spiritual one. But Christians don't get off easily either. We've been too quick to resort to a God of the gaps, trying to create our own certainty rather than sit in the mystery of what we don't know.

But for me that's not the end of the story. There is another source of knowledge. The New Testament tells of a man unique in history. His life, death and apparent resurrection changed history overnight, in a way that Tom Wright says affords only one reasonable explanation - that the story of Jesus and the resurrection actually happened.

By taking on the story of Jesus, we are invited to view the world through a different lens, to see it, and humanity, as part of a divine event, a divine revelation.

And this is the point where faith kicks in. Because I don't think science and rationality can take us any further. The discussion about God is not about proof. Technically, *there can be no proof* - only an invitation to see differently. How does this work?

The next time we marvel at a beautiful sunset, we should try sit in the moment and accept its beauty, without trying to read too much into it. Because the miracle is not that the sunset is so beautiful there must be a God. The miracle is that *anything* is beautiful in the first place. Beauty comes from seeing the world in a certain way. By trying on the lens of Christianity, we might suspect that beauty itself is a thing of God. With his image within us, it is not surprising we should get swept up into the colours of the cosmos. To say that beauty doesn't exist, which is where Dawkins leads us, is to be blind to what it means to be human.

So we all need each other. Christians desperately need scientists, to stop us from inventing God out of our own ignorance. But equally, scientists desperately need people of faith, so that in their enthusiasm to understand, they don't kill the very thing they're examining. Let's face it: both scientists and Christians stand on fragile ground. We should walk humbly and learn from each other.

So where does that leave me? There is a choice in this for me. I could have been born a Hindu, or a Muslim. But I wasn't. I was born here. And the choice I'm making, for better or worse, is to try on the story of Jesus.

Like Davies and Flew, I find the argument for design absolutely compelling. But I can't say much more about the designer through reason alone, except this: when I look at the Earth, I see life abundant. Everywhere, life pokes through the cracks, in the most hostile situations. And when the conditions are right, life replicates itself on an almost wasteful scale. Life is everywhere, when by rights it shouldn't exist.

As I've already said, you can't prove there is a God, and even if you could it wouldn't make any difference to someone determined not to see. But there is, on the face of it, a remarkable resurrection event, and for over two thousand years a great cloud of witness that are not to be sneezed at.

So, at this stage, I'd describe my faith as a working hypothesis. Looking through the lens of Jesus seems to make the most sense of the world. I know there are gaps, but I don't have a better alternative. To follow this journey with any integrity, I need on the one hand to live as if that hypothesis is true, while on the other not rejecting new insight or information, wherever it comes from. So despite my emotional investment, I'm going to try and emulate Flew, and follow where the evidence leads. The journey continues...

Any questions?