

Worldviews in the News

Harold Camping's failed prediction of the end of the world in spring of this year was recast as a "spiritual" end of the world, with the "physical" end of the world coming (he is using the word "probably" at the point) on Oct 21¹. Considering his previous attempts at end of the world forecasts² is anybody making plans for this October?

Internationally recognized Atheist, Dr. Richard Dawkins, wrote a book "The God Delusion" which has come under repeated attacks from philosophers, including Dr. William Lane Craig. Craig is visiting London this October, and Dawkins has been strongly encouraged by many (including fellow Atheists) to debate Craig on the subject matter of his book. He has publically and repeatedly declined, leading to an onslaught of amusing YouTube videos³, and a bus ad campaign in Oxford⁴. Despite his stated refusal, a chair will be made available that evening just in case Dawkins changes his mind at the last minute. Which is more likely, that the world will end on October 21, as Camping predicts, or that Dawkins will show up to defend his book on October 27?

A Muslim scholar of some influence has gone on record as claiming that the prophet Mohammed may not have actually existed⁵. This line of reasoning is not unfamiliar to Christians; some scholars doubt that Jesus existed⁶. Going one step further, clergy in certain "Christian" circles are convinced that even God does not exist⁷. On a related note, a somewhat recent poll of Brits revealed that many of them suspect that their former Prime Minister, Sir Winston Churchill, may have been a fictional character⁸. To what extent can a belief system accommodate explicitly contradictory perspectives before the label of said belief system

In this Issue

- Worldviews in the News
- Letters from the Front
- Food for Thought
- Five quick counter-arguments to Kalam (*HJ Hornbeck- NAY*)
- Science, God and Miracles (*Paul Buller-YEA*)

Jesus, the Truth? may be freely distributed. If you are reading a paper copy, an electronic version with hyperlinks is available at www.whyjesus.ca. The views presented in this journal do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the members of the NCAC. Submission guidelines are also available at our website.

¹ <http://www.christianpost.com/news/harold-camping-update-rapture-will-probably-finish-oct-21-57197/>

² <http://www.amazon.com/1994-Harold-Camping/dp/0533103681>

³ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RC1xgS1XGSg>

⁴ <http://www.bethinking.org/what-is-apologetics/introductory/theres-probably-no-dawkins.htm>

⁵ <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB122669909279629451.html>

⁶ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jesus-Myth>

⁷ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-14410482>

⁸ <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/top-stories/2008/02/04/churchill-a-myth-to-many-115875-20308945/>

becomes practically meaningless? Why is there this trend toward hyper-skepticism with respect to historical figures?

The Wall Street protests have hit the headlines. Comparisons and contrasts have been made between these protests and the so-called Tea Party protests. The former seem focused on big business while the latter are more concerned with big government. To what extent are the two movements looking at the same problem from different perspectives and to what extent are they offering fundamentally different solutions to the problem? Also, to what extent do these two groups attempt to pin societies problems on something external to the individual, and how much of societies problems are rooted in the human condition?

Letters from the Front

<http://youtu.be/qCdCVto2MNS> - An Atheist reflects on being Evangelized and Evangelism in general.

Food for thought

It has come to our attention that the "food for thought" section hyperlinks did not always work as intended when the word document is converted to PDF. All previously provided hyperlinks are summarized here (and a few new ones added), and a modified format will be utilized in future editions. Sorry for any inconvenience.

Articles

<http://www.str.org/site/News2?page=NewsArticle&id=6661> – Knowledge, Wisdom, Character; from Stand to Reason.

<http://www.christian-thinktank.com/trin03f.html> – The Trinity, a brief overview.

<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2010/november/27.40.html> – The Leavers: Young Doubters Exit the Church. Sociological trends among a recent generation of “deconverts.”

<http://edwardfeser.blogspot.com/2011/02/why-are-some-physicists-so-bad-at.html> – Why are some physicists so bad at philosophy? A thought-provoking, albeit somewhat edgy, article.

<http://www.firstthings.com/blogs/firstthoughts/2011/05/20/the-rapture-and-the-singularity-have-much-in-common/> - Theistic and Atheistic end times stories compared.

<http://www.thenewatlantis.com/publications/what-scientists-believe> - Book reviews with some interesting perspectives on the relationship between scientists and spirituality.

<http://www.firstthings.com/onthesquare/2011/05/being-faithfully-unreligious> - Reflections of a Christian Ex-Atheist.

<http://edwardfeser.blogspot.com/2011/07/so-you-think-you-understand.html> - So you think you understand the Cosmological Argument? Another instant classic by Edward Feser, and timely considering the article published below.

Podcasts/Videos

http://johnlennox.org/index.php/en/resource/the_christian_use_of_the_mind/ – John Lennox describes the need for an intellectual love of God.

<http://ccapologetics.wordpress.com/2007/06/13/10-five-limitations-of-apologetics/> – Five limitations of Apologetics. More of a summary of how Apologists err than inherent limitations of Apologetics as a discipline.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uJCcsX4g9LI> – Dr. Craig Evans talks about his book, Fabricating Jesus, and related subjects.

<http://skeptoid.com/episodes/4191> – Did Jewish slaves built the Pyramids? Pop quiz; where does the Bible claim the Jews built the pyramids?

<http://www.bethinking.org/truth-tolerance/intermediate/hobbits-heroes-and-jesus-christ-is-christianity-a-myth.htm> – Hobbits, Heroes and Jesus Christ: Is Christianity a Myth?

<http://www.veritas.org/Media.aspx#!/v/1003> – God, Math and the Multiverse, by a supercool Mathematician.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wb10QvaHpS4> – Thoughts from Daniel Dennett (an Atheist philosopher) on William Lane Craig (Christian philosopher and Apologist).

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r5Ylt1pBMm8> - Dr. Peter Williams shares a very interesting, quantitative, analysis of New Testament data that speaks to its authenticity. Geeks should love this!

<http://bloggingheads.tv/diavlogs/38888> - Oxford Physicist (and Atheist) David Deutsch defends immaterial realities, free will and more.

Websites

<http://www.infidels.org/> – The premier Atheist website on the Internet.

<http://www.answering-islam.org/> - Pretty much what the name says.

<http://www.bigquestiononline.com> – Theists, non-theists and others explore life's big questions from philosophical, scientific and other perspectives.

<http://plato.stanford.edu/> – An excellent resource for general philosophical research. Tough reading, but a great, scholarly, resource.

<http://christiananswersforthenewage.org/> - a website hosted by a former Astrologer.

<http://www.st-edmunds.cam.ac.uk/faraday/Multimedia.php> - Over 350 resources (audio, print, etc) exploring science and religion from various perspectives.

<http://godkeepourland.ca/> - a Campus-based Apologetics ministry in Western Canada.

Five Quick Counter-Arguments to Kalam

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- a. Whatever begins to exist has a cause.
- b. The universe began to exist.
- c. Therefore, the universe has a cause.

Ah, Kalam. This version of the Cosmological proof is so simple and elegant, it seems impossible to form a single good counter-argument.

Which is why I have five.

Obviously, I'll have to gloss over some details for space reasons. Don't let that fool you, four of these arguments can be re-written in the formal language of first-order logic. Fortunately, Kalam's very simplicity lets me pack a lot of counter-argument into a small space.

1. Let's start with a stupid question: can you prove your chair exists? That should be an easy one, since you can see, feel and (if you bend that way) taste it. We'll solve the problem of absolute knowledge with the usual Bayesian approach; even if my senses are lying to me, there are multiple lines of evidence that are consistent enough to declare a provisional basis for reality. There, done and answered.

Next stupid question: can you prove the universe exists? This seems trivial; we've proven a chair exists, and we know the universe contains the chair, ergo universe. But you've only shown me a chair, and a universe is not a chair. What photons are coming from the chair, and which are coming from the universe? Fine fine, you say, and start pointing to everything around you. I nod along, but argue that you've been pointing to everything within the universe, and not the universe itself.

The problem here is that "universe" is a definition, an abstract container that you can never touch, see, or interact with directly. It is nothing like a physical object or force, can never be proven to exist in the same way... and yet Kalam insists on treating it just like a physical object or force. It's like trying to feed an equation into a meat grinder; the very idea is nonsense, but the fuzziness of language gives the impression that it's not.

2. While we're on definitions, the universe is defined as anything which can or could interact with us. Pondering the "outside" is absolutely useless; we'll never learn anything about it, since we have no way to examine it, and therefore can say nothing meaningful about it. The "multiverse" is thus badly misnamed, since if proven to exist it must be the true universe, and our old view of the universe was a mere slice of this greater whole.

Anyway: Kalam proposes the universe was caused. Causality, however, relies on having a "before" and "after;" there must be some point where the caused object didn't exist, and one where it did.

So what existed "before" the universe existed? Or more plainly, what existed "before" everything existed?

This makes as much sense as pondering what's North of the North Pole. The universe contains everything, so referencing anything outside of it is either impossible or illogical. And yet Kalam depends on being able to point outside the universe, in a logically valid way. Again, language has led us astray.

3. I'd also like to point out that the oldest counter-proof to Cosmological is still valid. You know, the "if everything was caused then what caused God?" one. Kalam tries to guard against this by dividing existence into two camps (things that began, and things that didn't), and placing God in the one Kalam ignores. Unfortunately, that's just an assertion with no evidence. Given the sheer number of things that began, the default assumption should be that God began too until proven otherwise.

If we're allowed unsupported assertions, what's stopping me from asserting the universe is an exception too and derailing the entire proof? It may seem odd to claim the universe didn't have a beginning, given that we know everything within it has had a finite lifespan, but that's exactly the point. As pointed out in counter-argument 1, "everything in the universe" and "the universe" are two separate things. Perhaps the Jains got it right, and the universe proper is cycling, periodically destroying everything contained within but otherwise eternal.

We can put this proof back on track with evidence, but again the counter-proof is on firmer footing here. Ludwig Boltzman, for instance, pointed out that given enough time, all the molecules in a box of gas will compress down into a single object. An analogy: the odds of shuffling a deck of cards into order are incredibly small, but if you shuffle enough times it'll happen. Small clumps of matter are much more likely than big ones, and could give rise to stars, planets, even us. By invoking the anthropic principle,¹ I know these fluctuations were big enough to spawn life. Since life requires chemistry, and the easiest way to create that is a Big Bang, hey presto we've got a cyclic universe that looks like our own.

I can sense your scepticism from here, and I'll be honest: there are flaws in this line of reasoning. They're not where you expect, though. The net energy of the universe is zero overall,² so we can pluck matter out of nothing provided we balance it by introducing gravity. As for where the laws of the universe comes from, that's easy: if the laws of the universe are a core component of the universe, instead of a separate entity like we tend to assume by default, then we get them for free when we create a universe. The biggest remaining hole is to prove a Big Bang is the easiest way to create a lot of varied matter. *That* isn't easy.

But what about the theistic side of the fence? The Christian evidence for a cause-free God flows from a single book, the Bible. If the Good Book doesn't mention God's causal status, or is shown to be an inaccurate interpretation of God's Word, or some experts disagree on the interpretation of those key passages, or can be shown by scholarship to have an entirely human origin, all the evidence goes "poof." To compare, there's no similar threat against known physical laws and probability.

(I should also confess that my argument is almost a century out of date; I didn't substitute a stronger one like, say, Alex Vilenkin's quantum tunnelling approach because I don't like to advance an argument I don't fully understand.)

1 Never heard of it? It's a tautology: we exist, therefore we exist. By carefully expanding the tautology, we can come to some interesting conclusions. To name a spectacular example, Fred Hoyle reasoned thus: I exist. I need Carbon to exist; therefore, the universe must have some way to create Carbon. I, Fred Hoyle, have bashed my head against this problem for years, and can only think of one way to create Carbon. Therefore, that way is how the universe created Carbon. While there's some sketchy logic in there, Hoyle was bang on.

2 No, really: http://www.astrosociety.org/pubs/mercury/31_02/nothing.html

4. Speaking of evidence, it would be great if I could point to the creation of something from nothing. Kalam depends on every link in the causal chain leading back to a single point. If something can "poof" itself into existence, then at best there are multiple Gods, and at worst it makes us question why these cause-free things should be called Gods. Oh, and it also defeats the core premise that everything that exists has a cause, since a cause cannot be nothing.

Fortunately for me, science has provided. Dark Energy is a mysterious force that's causing the universe to accelerate. That "service" doesn't come for free, and yet no-one can figure out who's paying; there is no decrease in mass over time, no signs that Dark Matter is evaporating. The latest studies show that Dark Energy is spread evenly across the cosmos, suggesting it might be empty space spontaneously creating more empty space.

This puts us in a bind. If we declare empty space to be "nothing," we're ignoring the quantum foam of particles that occupy it. These have real, measurable effects; the Casimir effect and Lamb shift both depend on this foam, for instance, and it's a core component of Quantum Electrodynamics. If instead we call empty space "something," then we have nothing we can call "nothing," which removes the need for a creator to pluck something from nothing.

5. Even if we ignore all the above, there's still an empty space in Kalam. I deliberately left out the last line:

1. This cause is the God of Classical Theism, and is a personal being, because He chose to create the universe.

Read over the first three lines again, and see if you can spot how this fourth line is a logical extension of the rest. Show me where they prove the First Cause sent his Son down for man's salvation. Or the reasoning that proves this cause is omnipotent, or is a personal being, or had freedom of choice.

Religion loves to use Kalam as a proof of God's existence, and yet it doesn't prove God's existence at all! It says nothing about which God is the correct one, or whether that God has been worshipped, or even if "God" is the correct term. At best, it merely says the universe was caused, and there's plenty of room in there for a materialistic "creator." Theology just tacks on a fourth line, "and thus my God is proven," and pretends this assertion makes as much logical sense as the rest of the argument.

Ironically, it does. Kalam is no proof of God, it's not even close. And yet this flimsy proof is frequently held up as the strongest religion has to offer.

It makes my inner Atheist smile.

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Science, God and Miracles

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One of the oft-repeated claims about Science is that it has somehow disproven the supernatural. A slightly more conservative assessment is that Science has merely “found no proof for” the supernatural; a claim which should be trivially obvious. The focus of Science is the natural world.¹ The very word “supernatural” involves the prefix “super” – meaning something that is “over; above.”² The supernatural is that which is “over” or “above” nature, or put another way, the supernatural is “over” or “above” that which Science studies. Therefore the very idea that Science might be equipped to directly address questions about the supernatural is absurd, by definition. It would be like trying to use chemistry to make stock-market decisions.

Some people take a slightly different approach and suggest that the laws of physics are so inviolable and fixed that there simply is no room for divine intervention. In other words, Science may not have answered whether or not there is a supernatural realm, but it has confirmed, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that if such a realm exists it certainly does not interfere with the natural world. Ever. Anywhere.

Suppose a rock falls from a cliff and is descending toward an innocent bystander walking below. From a scientific perspective, the law of physics of primary importance here is earth’s gravitational acceleration (9.81 m/s²) causing the rock to arrive at a certain spot at approximately the same time as the bystander.

Let’s think in general terms about “falling events” such as this. On an average day, how often do things – anything from rocks to baseballs to individual droplets of water in a waterfall – move toward the earth as a result of gravitational forces? How many “falling events” occur each day, worldwide? There’s no way to know for certain, so let’s pick some reasonable numbers. There are around 7 billion people on the face of the earth, and I think it’s safe to assume that everybody drops something at least once a day. Toddlers are notorious for making sport of dropping things, so they easily make up for any of us who never drop anything; not even our pen on the desk, our keys on the table or the scraps of food off our dinner plate into the garbage. Considering only those “falling events” that are associated with humans, it would be difficult to imagine fewer than 7 billion of them per day. Considering planet earth in its entirety, the actual number would be several magnitudes higher than this unreasonably conservative estimate.

[For simplicity sake I am considering only our planet; within the entire Universe the number is obviously billions of magnitudes higher.]

How many of those falling events are scientifically observed by humans? When I say “scientifically” observed, I am envisioning some kind of distance measuring device and some kind of time measuring device. Think back to grade school when the Science teacher had you drop objects from some fixed height and time their descent. Given the fairly established nature of 9.81 m/s² I suspect grade school students represent the

¹ The word “science” has two broad meanings; a “branch of study” in general, or more specifically, the study of the “physical or material world” (i.e. “nature”) I use it in the second sense. Technically one could have a “science of the supernatural” according to the first broad definition, but most Skeptics/Atheists would balk at the idea.

<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/science>

² http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/british/super_4

largest number of people studying falling events with scientific precision; scientists have moved on to more cutting-edge matters.

Those kinds of Science experiments are typically conducted between grades 7 and 12 inclusive; a six-year span. If humans live, on average, to about 60 years of age, that means that about 10% of the human population, or 700 million people, are likely to conduct such an experiment on any given day. If class sizes are approximately 30 students we have about 23 million classrooms. In any given year there are approximately 200 school days, which means on any given day there are, potentially 116,666 (23 million / 200) classes that may be conducting a falling experiment. Let's round it up to 200,000 per day; nearly doubling it.

Of the total 7 billion falling events (a preposterously low estimate) 200,000 of those events (a high estimate) are likely to be observed, scientifically. That's 200,000 out of 7,000,000,000, or about 1/35,000. That means that roughly 0.0028% of all falling events are scientifically observed. These numbers are extremely generous in favor of Science. In all likelihood the actual number of scientifically observed "falling events" is several magnitudes lower than this so we would need to put a lot more zeros between the decimal and the first integer. Despite its limitations, let's use this estimate.

Let's put that number in perspective. Suppose I've been commissioned to see if anybody currently living in Calgary is from Brazil. I randomly walk through the city and ask 1/35,000 Calgarians (0.0028%) if they are from Brazil. Of the approximately 1 million citizens of Calgary, I will end up asking roughly 30 people. When I return from my assignment, not one hour later, I declare with a confidence bordering on religious fanaticism that "not a single person in Calgary is from Brazil!" I would be laughed at and fired from my job, though I'm not sure in which order.³

It is equally unreasonable that a negligibly small sample size like this can give us any confidence whatsoever to claim that the laws of physics are never violated. Never? Really? Of the 7 billion falling events on any given day, 6,999,800,000 of those events occurred without a stopwatch or a tape measure in sight. And some will claim that we KNOW God never intervened in any of those cases, and we KNOW that the rate of descent was exactly 9.81 m/s² in all those cases. Where's a Skeptic when you need one?

There is another feature of miracles that makes Science an even more unlikely tool to discover them. Unlike purely natural events, miracles are the product of intelligence. As with humans, God is an intelligent being, and one feature of intelligence is intentionality, as opposed to randomness. One should expect that if God chose to intervene in human history via miraculous events, those events would serve a divine purpose. If his purpose, for instance, is to save our innocent bystander from being struck by a falling rock, then he may intervene to temporarily modify the laws of physics in that isolated context. When I drop my keys on the table, or a Scientist drops a weight in the lab, there is not likely to be a divine reason to intervene in those circumstances. Given the non-random nature of miracles, the likelihood of ever witnessing one under scientific circumstances becomes even more unlikely, bordering on guaranteed-to-never-happen.

³ Some people may be tempted to compare this to public opinion polls and point out that they can be very reliable with a very small sample size. The point of such polls is fundamentally different. Like Scientific experiments, they are looking for trends, we are looking for exceptions to trends. Other fundamental differences exist that make the comparison flawed.

But, one could argue, would it not serve His purpose to prove He exists? And could He not achieve that purpose by allowing us to scientifically document a miracle? Consider carefully what that would look like in practice. Suppose God decided to instantaneously and permanently alter the gravitational acceleration to something like 9.5 m/s^2 ⁴ which is far enough from the current 9.81 m/s^2 to deserve explanation. As soon as the news spread that one or more Scientists had discovered the alteration, Scientists everywhere would grab the nearest stopwatch and confirm the discovery. Suppose the next day the gravitational acceleration returned to 9.81 m/s^2 . Would they naturally conclude, immediately and collectively, that God had tuned the “gravity dial” to a different number for one day in order to prove He existed? I seriously doubt it. Instead, theories would abound about space-time distortions, quantum fluctuations, magnetic field variations or some other such naturalistic explanation; God would not be considered a serious contender as an explanation for the very miracle he caused. This is not to fault Scientists for missing the truth; rather this is precisely what their job description entails. Science is about finding patterns in nature. Miracles represent a disruption of the patterns and therefore Science is not really equipped to handle them, should they ever accidentally stumble upon them.

The underlying reality here is that the “god theory” should never come up if a Scientist is doing their job properly. Similarly, no Scientist (or Science-lover) should ever be taken seriously if they claim that Science is the right tool to address these conversations. The success of Science is to be found in its area of research, namely nature; questions of the supernatural – even the question of whether or not the supernatural is real – must be left to other disciplines. When dealing with questions of a religious nature, Science has little of value to add; try Philosophy and/or Theology and let the Scientists get back to finding a cure for the common cold.

Gesundheit!

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⁴ We must ignore the discovery of the anthropic principle that suggests such a change might completely destroy life as we know it.