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There's No Such Thing as an Atheist Argument

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#STRask - Stand to Reason

Questions about whether there's such a thing as an atheist argument, whether one can ask a nonbeliever to prove a negative, and how to respond to an atheist who says morality is determined by consensus in a society and may change over time.

- * There's no such thing as an atheist argument. We don't have to make an argument against the Loch Ness Monster either.
- * Is it a fallacy to ask a nonbeliever to prove a negative? How much time would I have to spend disproving flying pigs if someone believed in them? Isn't it that person's burden to argue for them?
- * What do you say to an atheist who says morality is determined by consensus in a society and may change over time?

Transcript

Welcome back to the hashtag SDR-esque podcast. Hey. Welcome, Greg.

Hey. Alright, let's start with the question from Stuart. There is No Such Thing as an Atheist Argument.

We've been told X exists, but nobody has ever seen X. I don't have an argument against the Loch Ness Monster either. I guess I'm not entirely sure what his point is. I would ask probably, are you saying that I'm not entirely sure what his point is? I mean, if we haven't seen it, then it's not legitimate for us to claim that it exists.

Because if he's going to say that, I'm going to ask him, have you ever seen your own thoughts? I mean, there is a multitude of things that we know exist and we have access to them. We perceive them in a different way than from our five senses. Okay? And therefore, we know about those things.

So to say, well, we've never seen it. Okay, then that means there's a... We have no good

reason to believe it exists. And see, that's the mistake.

Now, I am somewhat sympathetic to the concern. Like people will say, look, you can't prove a universal negative. You can't prove the Loch Ness Monster doesn't exist because you have to be omniscient to know everything, to know that Loch Ness Monster was not part of the mix there.

Okay, I'm sympathetic to that. I think it's not a wise way for theists to go. I think it would be fair to say, for atheists to say, I have reasons why I disagree with those who think that a God exists.

Now, then give those reasons. Well, you might say none of the evidence that I have seen in favor of God is convincing. Okay, well, that what you'd have to be saying then is that the evidence is so unconvincing that it is more probable that God exists.

Okay, but the atheist has to account for certain things that make it look like there's a God. So let me give an illustration. All right, let's just say you were sitting in the room and I was sitting with Kyle.

And Kyle says, Amy doesn't exist. And I say, there she is. She's sitting right there.

Now, of course, the atheist will say that's not a illustration because you can see it. Seeing is just one way of evidence in the truth of a claim. Okay, there's lots of different ways to do that.

I'm just using that one. So, as I mentioned, it's not the only one. You can't see your thoughts, but you have direct access to them.

You know what your thoughts are. So you can not see something that really exists. So this, I think illustration still works.

Okay. Now, I think it would be beholden upon Kyle, then to say, why is it? He would be his responsibility to explain what I think I see as not being you or nothing being there at all. Because I have this apprehension of you, you know, and maybe you're moving around, you're making noise.

Maybe you're talking, all these things. Maybe you write a note to us or something like that. I said, look at here.

There she is. We can see her. We can hear her.

Here's a piece of communication from her. Okay. Now, you say she doesn't exist.

So what are you going to do with all of these things that seem to indicate that she does? That's kind of the broader parallel here. Okay. And so I, in the street smarts book, I have a little dialogue that I've had a number of times with others that want to evidence for the

existence of God.

And I look at, okay, things exist. They haven't always existed. They came into existence.

What caused it? What banged the Big Bang? To put it most simply. Now, it's either something or nothing. So that's something that the atheist has to answer.

They have to say, well, if there is no God, then he could not have caused the universe to come into existence. So what caused the universe? We don't know. But wait a minute, it would have to be something outside of the universe, right? It would have to be something pretty powerful.

Have to be an agent because that agents begin causal chains as the philosophers would put it. They make things begin to happen. So we already know from what we know about causality, which we depend upon for example, for science to work, some of the things that have to be a characteristic of the originator of the universe.

So how are you going to explain that away? Well, then the way they explain it away is to say the universe popped into existence, out of nothing for no reason. Okay. Now, it best what you have is a competing miracle, you know, in both cases, you've got a miracle.

So this is a sewer, I think, is just taking the track that the atheist has to do with the human being. It has no obligation to deal with any of the arguments or evidences for something. Look at even even the Loch Ness monster.

There are evidences for it of some sort. Now, whether they're compelling or not, there's no other issue. But you could ask the person who's the naysayer about Nellie.

What do you make of these pictures? Oh, they're forged or they're too blurry or this was taken at a zoo or whatever. You know, you've got to deal with that. That's the evidence in front of you.

So the the the objector to Nellie or to God, since there is evidence on the table for the existence of either evidence of some sort, these are things the atheist has to deal with the atheist can't just shrug his shoulders and say, well, I have nothing to prove because I'm not I'm not advancing a belief. I am advancing a non belief. This is another way they put it.

Okay. Well, this is that's double talk. They have no belief in God.

That's true enough. But there's a reason why they have no belief in God. It's because they believe there is no God.

That's why they have no belief in God. And I deal with that also in the streets marks. But this is why I think if I were an atheist, I would never take this angle.

Any of these kind of distractive things. I think the problem here is that they're assuming that atheism is neutral. That that theists are just coming in and adding some possible theory to a worldview, but that atheism is like the neutral place where everyone starts.

Well, we're starting with the flying spaghetti monster as one of their characterizations. Yeah, it's just not the case that atheism is neutral. It is it the idea of naturalism is a worldview that has many other ideas that are entailed by the idea that there is no God.

It's not a neutral position. It's a specific position that has many implications. So just as you said, Greg, they have to make arguments for what we recognize from our common experience.

They have to make arguments for something from nothing. They have to make arguments for the fact that there's no objective morality, even though it seems as if there is or they have to make sense of how there could be any sort of real morality. They have to make our arguments that natural forces can create information, meaningful information.

There are all sorts of things like, like you explained so well, Greg, there are all sorts of things that we recognize in the world that are evidences of God that point towards God that they have to have, they have to explain. And that's perfectly legitimate. There's a related question here that I think, just see if you have anything to add to this previous one.

This one comes from Sam. Is it a fallacy to ask a non-believer to prove a negative? If someone tells me they believe in flying pigs, how much time do I have to spend disproving that? Isn't that their burden? Well, I think in that case the answer is yes, it is their burden because they're making an extraordinary claim that flies in the face of common sense and known facts. All right.

So, I mean, if I said, yeah, I saw Amy, Amy floating around the office from the other day, I think the burden of proof would be upon me because I'm making the claim that is radical and extreme and so contrary to everything we know, our claim is just the opposite. We are making a claim that fits our universal common experience of how things work. A moral laws need a moral law giver.

Things coming into existence needs cause causes adequate to that effect. The appearance of design, especially unbelievable appearance of design, I mean, unbelievable like radical design, these require a designer. I like Doug Axe.

He gave an illustration when he used to do his talks. He didn't do it just recently, but he's when I was with him, but he, in the past, you do an origami bird. All right.

He had a picture of that. And of course we all recognize it as origami bird and you pull it one end and the wings flapping, whatever. And he said, you show that to a kid and a kid

likes it.

And what the kids are going to say is show me how to do that because the kid recognizes that that's the kind of thing that takes know how to make. Then he puts a picture of a swan, a real swan up on the screen. He said, how is it that this fairly simple origami folded paper bird requires, and we know, requires a creator, a designer to make this, yet we want to see in the next breath, that this bird that's complex beyond all imagination compared to.

This origami figure happened by accident. We are trading on common intuitions about our understanding about the way things work, the way things are made, and it's the atheist then that is making the claim that seems to fly in the face of the facts. Incidentally, this is admitted implicitly by Richard Dawkins in the first line of his famous book, *The Blind Watchmaker*.

He says, it starts like this, biological realm as a complex realm that gives the appearance of having been designed for a purpose. But that didn't happen, of course. It wasn't the watchmaker that did it.

It was the blind watchmaker Darwinian evolution. Okay, now what is required there since he's acknowledging that this is what it looks like, okay? It's complex. It looks like it's made for a purpose.

Okay, we can see that. All right. What his effort is, and for this, I tip my hat to them, he realizes that he bears a burden, a responsibility, to show that something that looks like it's been designed for a purpose.

This has not been designed for a purpose, but happened through accidental, non-purposeful, non-teleological natural causes. At least he's accepting some of the burden to prove there. And that's appropriate.

Now, I don't think his project succeeds for a number of reasons, but at least he's acknowledging that he has to answer that charge. Okay? And that's just an example of what we're talking about here. If somebody makes a claim that is contrary to common sense and are native intuitions about things and flies in the face of well-known established facts, well, then, you know, we don't have any, I think, responsibility to disprove something like that.

It's their responsibility to demonstrate otherwise that they have the right explanation. There was really a flying pig or whatever, which is exactly what Dawkins attempts to do. He realizes and admits that his project flies in the face of obvious intuitions and facts that we seem to know about the universe.

We've been mistaken, and here's why that's his project. And I think that's the appropriate way for an atheist to go about it. So it's not that we're asking him to prove a

negative.

It's that we're asking them to give a reasonable explanation for what we observe about the world. That's right. That's right.

Exactly. I don't think having them prove a universal negative is appropriate. But I mean, look at when you say, here's going back to our forensic kind of illustration.

Here is a, here is a dead body. Here, the evidence is that it was a, it was a homicide. Now, you did it, Amy.

It's your job to prove the negative. Okay. In this situation.

Well, look, yeah, yeah, there, it's not the obligation of someone to prove the negative in that circumstance because there's nothing that points the crime to you, so to speak. Nothing that indicates that you're the perpetrator of that crime. It is their job to take the existing evidence and find who the criminal actually is.

But you see, this is precisely what is going on with our evidence for God. We are looking at all of these things that have all of the signs of intelligent intervention, whether it's a cosmological argument, whether it's the moral argument, whether it's the design argument, and a whole bunch of other kinds of arguments that people offer in favor of Christian theism. And so it is beholden upon the atheist then to tell us why the obvious conclusion that we would draw from these things, and this takes us right back to Paul's, you know, intelligent reflections in Romans chapter one, why these obvious conclusions based on the obvious evidence are mistaken.

That's their job. Let's take a question from Mr. Speedy. What do you say to an atheist who says evil slash morality is a consent, a consensus among society and may change over time? I would say why are we obliged to obey society? That's the first question.

Notice that this is a social contract idea. Okay. And there are all kinds of problems with it.

That's one of them. What's often smuggled into these characterizations is the presumption that we have an obligation to do what society tells us because it's for the good of all. So that's one difficulty.

Why do we have to obey it? Well, you'll survive better if you obey it. No, everybody else will survive better if everybody else obeys it. That doesn't mean I need to obey it if I can get away with doing something wrong.

So what is your argument against me if I'm powerful enough getting away with it? Okay. Now for a long time in South Africa, they had apartheid. All right.

And we had a lot of Americans campaigning against apartheid, the type of racism that

was going on there. Well, wait a minute on the view that was just suggested society makes its own rules and society is the ground of morality. So whatever society says is going to be what's moral by definition.

So if another society has a different set of rules, upon what basis do we object? Do we say, well, we wouldn't do it that way? And the South African say, so what? You do it your way. You have your social construction of morality. We have ours.

There is no morality above cultures to appeal to to assess these other cultures. So that's a second problem. There is no basis by which you can say other cultures have false views.

By the way, this was the defense of the Germans at Nuremberg. We were just doing what our culture, our officers, we were following instructions. This is what we do.

This was our plan, our culture, our thing. Okay. Who are you to judge us? And the answer by the judges at Nuremberg was there are laws above the law.

There are universal laws above human law to which those universal laws, human laws, we hold them. That was our argument. You have no argument like this given this characterization of morality.

Part of what I'm pointing out is that's a good start for trying to make sense of the moral project. What's going on when we do morality? But when you start thinking about that when you realize, well, this doesn't comport with our common intuitions about the nature of what we do. What we're dealing with, okay, it doesn't work for these reasons.

All right. Not only is there the inability to judge some other culture, you can't even judge within your culture. So you have a culture, let's say Jim Crow culture in the 50s and the 60s.

Let's say the 40s and the 50s began to change the late 50s and then in the early 60s with the Civil Rights Act of 1964. One of the people that was significant in accomplishing those changes. Was a Reverend Martin Luther King.

All right. And he was a social reformer. But what was he telling society? You have a standard in your society that you are all living by and that standard is wrong.

On the social contract theory, the social contract was what everybody agreed to, the majority. That's the standard. So who is wrong now? The society or the so-called social reformer? The person is wrong on that view would be a Reverend Martin Luther King because he's going against the status quo.

What is the basis for his complaint that the majority is mistaken? The only basis could be a law above the law, a law that's transcendent that judges human law and human

activity. And this is exactly what he did. That's why I didn't say Dr. Martin Luther King.

People secularize him. He was a pastor. And because he was a pastor, whatever might be true about his personal life or his theology or whatever, he understood foundational things that were native to a Christian view of reality, a Judeo-Christian worldview.

And that is all human beings have intrinsic value being made to the image of God. And this kind of treatment was wrong. This kind of prejudice was wrong, even if everybody in the culture agreed to it.

Okay? That can only work if there is a law above the law that judges cultures, not if the culture itself is the source of the law. But that is the case with social contract theory. There's no possibility of moral progress under social contract theory.

You can't get better. What does that even mean? What are you going towards? What are you moving towards? There's everything is equally good all throughout history. This is just another species of relativism on a group level.

So all the problems of relativism on an individual level are also applicable here. And that's one. There can't be any moral improvement.

All you can do is change. That's it. All right? And you can do that.

Even though this sounds appealing and a lot of people opt for this as a way of explaining the moral project, it is beset with all kinds of difficulties that are violations of our common sense moral intuitions about the nature of the world. This can't be the right explanation. The book relativism that Frank Beckwith and I wrote 26 years ago or whatever covers all of these details.

Okay? All of the liabilities of what what I've called because I wrote the chapters on this society says relativism. Now there's we're obliged to do what society says to do. That's a social contract.

Of course, the question is what obliges us to do with the society says that implies that there's a law above society that says we auto base society. But if we're obliged to obey society, then society can do whatever it wants in any direction. And there's no basis upon which we can object morally since the society simply is the moral ground for our actions.

Well, thank you, Greg. And thank you Stuart, Sam and Mr. Speedy. We appreciate hearing from you.

And we'd love to hear from you. If you have a question on Twitter with the hashtag STRask or go to our website at str.org. This is Amy Hall and Greg Cogle for Stand to Reason.