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What Questions Should I Ask Someone Who Claims He Only Believes in Things He Can See?

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#STRask - Stand to Reason

Questions about what to ask a strict empiricist who claims he only believes in things he can see, the purpose behind God making people with senses that can't find him, and thoughts on whether a particular way of introducing the topic of objective truth is adequate.

- * What questions should I ask someone who claims he only believes in things he can see?
- * What is the purpose behind God making animals and people with senses that can't find him?
- * Does my way of introducing the topic of objective truth encompass the main idea enough?

Transcript

This is the hashtag-STRask podcast with Amy Hall and Greg Kogel. Welcome! Welcome! Alright, Greg. Here is a question from Eric.

How might I engage in the tactics approach with someone who claims to be a strict empiricist? In other words, what are some of the things that are questions I can ask someone who claims that he only believes in things he can see. I'm hoping to demonstrate that it is impossible to live this out consistently. Oh yeah, of course it is, because virtually everything, let me back up, a massive amount of the things we know with a certainty have nothing to do with what we've learned from our five senses.

All right. I actually had this come up during a talk that I gave at a university in the south somewhere and a student raised his hand and offered this challenge. And I simply asked him, and by the way, the way to deal with this is just to offer clear case counter examples.

In other words, examples of things that are obviously so but are contrary to the person's point of view. So I said, do you know what you're thinking right now? And he said, yes, I said, are you smelling it, tasting it, feeling it, seeing it or hearing it, trying to get all the five in there, right? No, you know that you know what you're thinking through a different faculty. And that's direct cognition, direct awareness.

We all right. So all of the sensations we have, all the thoughts in our minds, all the beliefs that we have, we know all of these things, but we don't know them by our five senses. Okay, think about everything that you're pretty confident you know about things that happened before you were born, like all of history, all right, or things that are the case in places you've never been.

How do you know all those things? Not by anything that you're five, including most of what you know about science. You know those things not by the deliverance of your five senses, you know those things by authority. Now, you need your five senses to be able to attain the information from an authority about something, but it isn't the, it isn't the five senses that renders that information true.

It's reliable because you rely on the authority. And so, so it is true. There's all kinds of knowledge we have that we're quite confident in that has not been a result of a deliverance of the five senses.

And by the way, that challenge or that point of view is itself self-refuting because the individual, and if I could kind of put it in a more crisp way, I know that we can't know anything except those things that are delivered to us by our five senses. Okay, that's empiricism. But wait a minute, that sentence that you know is not something that proposition that you've just made is not something you know by the deliverances of your five senses.

You think it's justified for a different reason, but not because anything about your five senses has taught you that. So, it doesn't fulfill its own requirement. It suffers or it's invalidated in language.

And so, this is where these kinds of questions can be used. Do you know what you're thinking? Do you know when you were born? Do you, do you know, I mean, I'm just trying to think, maybe that's not the best one when you were born, but yeah, well, you know, when you were born because someone told you, you know, but all of these things that we know that we have no access to by our own personal five senses, all right? In other words, those things are not what justifies our knowledge. And then pointing out that this point that's being made is self-refuting.

So, the question would be that thing that you just said, that empiricism is the way to know things. That's the only reliable way of knowing things. Do you think that's true? Yes, of course I do.

Would you say you know that? Yes, of course I know that. Okay, tell me what empirical method validates that statement. Okay, there's your questions going to the point of the self-refutation of that particular proposition.

And I mean, that ought to be adequate. No, it ought to be adequate to any reasonable person. And by the way, there's a whole bunch of very, very popular ideas that eventually gave way to this understanding that is self-refuting.

Verificationism, which is a very popular notion in the early 20th century, and endured for a while, it's a version of this empirical claim, was the idea that unless you can verify any proposition by the scientific method or by use of the five senses, then the statement is meaningless. So, when we say that rape is wrong, for example, we are just, we're not saying anything meaningful because there's no way to verify that by any scientific test, by any sensory experience. Therefore, all we're doing is expressing our emotions.

This view is called a motivism. Okay, very popular. Verificationism collapses into a motivism with these kinds of statements that can't be verified in that way.

Of course, verification lost ground because people began to reflect. And I don't know why they didn't get this right away, that the notion of verificationism cannot be verified by the five senses or any scientific method. And this is why it eventually died on the vine.

There are a lot of points of view that are like that. And this one, that's being stated as an example. You mentioned a moral statement.

And those are, that's another example. You cannot prove a moral statement with scientific experiments. You can't, you can prove, maybe you can prove that something causes someone to feel pain, but you can't prove right and wrong.

You can't, you can't prove any sort of moral quality. You can't demonstrate that causing them pain is a right thing to do. Exactly.

Exactly. Okay, let's go into a question from Scott. What is the purpose behind God making animals and people with senses that can't find him? So if we can't find God through these empiricist means, why would God make us that way? Okay, well, well, there's an assumption there.

Okay, so this is, this is an example of a complex question. The question assumes something that hasn't been established. And the basis of that assumption, the question is asked.

The classic way of putting this, you know, obviously silly is, are you still beating your wife? Well, that presumes that you had been beating your wife and you ask if you are now, so you say, no, or yes, then you're still stuck with implicitly affirming this other thing that's not been established. It's also characteristic of when people say who created

God, the assumption there is that God was created. Now you're asking who did it.

Okay. But why would we think that God, the kind of God we're talking about would be a God that needs to be created. That's the question.

Okay, in this particular case, could you read the question once more and I'll show you what I mean. What is the purpose behind God making animals and people with senses that can't find him? Oh, okay, the presumption there is that, that human beings have senses that have no ability to be used to draw the conclusion that God exists. Why would anybody say that? An atheist would say that.

I'm not sure what Scott's view is, but Romans 1 says, behold nature, Romans 1, what, 18 and following, that which is known about God can be seen through what has been made. In other words, we look at physical things, the nature of the universe, and we can properly infer the existence of God. And by the way, apart from the theological issues, we do this all the time.

We look at the weather, Jesus famously said, you can read the signs of the weather, you can't read the signs of the times. Well, we read the signs of the weather. We infer certain things from physical manifestations.

We infer things about other people, you know, because that we can't see their consciousness, their ability to make decisions and exercise their will go through moral motions and all of that. All of these things are invisible things, but we watch the physical behaviors and from the physical behaviors, we infer certain things about non-physical things. This happens all the time and it certainly happens with God.

A classic case, more recent case of an expression of what Paul was talking about in Romans 1 is the DNA double helix and the information on that. I mean, this is like millions of books of information that are encoded in the DNA double helix of human beings. The question is, who wrote that code? The fact that there's code is an indication that someone wrote the code.

So I'm looking at your computer right now and I see words you're reading from them, right? But I can read from them. And what I conclude from that, if you weren't here, is that someone type this stuff out into language that I can read. So I am inferring an agent, even if I don't see you, all I got to see is what's on your screen.

And I know that an agent has been involved in producing that. Okay. So I have senses that I'm using to look at physical elements that turn off to be tokens regarding linguistic communication.

And in fact, I can read it because I know how the tokens work with the types, what the letters and the words represent, so I can get information from it. The fact is there are all kinds of ways we use our five senses to come to the conclusion that an agent is

responsible for what we see. And sometimes that's easily explained by a human agent, my example with your computer.

But sometimes we have a circumstance where we see things like complex code, writing that can't be explained by a human agent. And that's the DNA double helix. That's just one of many examples, by the way, in the natural realm.

But but there you go. So we have evidence that we see of teleology of purpose and design in nature that parallels human activity. We see human beings as agents producing things like this.

And we know that they wouldn't be produced apart from agency. That's why Microsoft guy, what's his name? Richard Bill Gates. Bill Gates looks at the DNA DNA molecule or the double helix and says, this is computer code.

That's what it is. And we know where code comes from. So in this case, there is no human agent that is feasible, possible being responsible for the code that's on the on the gene.

Therefore, there must be some nonhuman agent. No natural agent must be a supernatural agent. So this is something we presume that we are able to access through our senses that give us reason to believe there was a supernatural agent that was involved in the creation of the universe.

And of course, God also interacted with people in history. All you have to do is look at all the ways he interacted with Israel, audibly, and through miracles and through various events. I mean, there were all sorts of ways that he interacted just as we can look back in history at other interactions people have had and know that those people existed.

Jesus reveals the Father. Here he is. He also revealed revelation.

We have access to revelation. That's something we can read that we can hear directly from God. So there are all sorts of ways God has revealed himself and it's all available to everyone, including what you mentioned in Romans 1 where people can know about God's power and what does it say? He's a by nature.

And by the way, if God is an atheist or he's offering the challenge of an atheist, the atheist might say, well, I don't accept any of those things. Well, fine. You're not obliged to accepting the evidence that our senses are able to deliver to us is different from saying our senses have no ability to gather evidence regarding God.

That's the point we're making here. The challenge is not a legitimate challenge. There's a presumption that's not sound that's behind the question.

Also, if it's the case that no one can find God because our senses have we're completely

cut off from him, why is it the case that every people group, every culture throughout history that we know of has always believed in some sort of supernatural world. So how is it that people not connected with each other at all? It's not as if it's spread to all these different cultures, but everyone has had some awareness of a supernatural world. So in that sense, atheism is really the odd view because people don't naturally come to the conclusion that there's nothing but meet all the way down, so to speak, and nothing but molecules clashing in the universe.

That is a modern notion, although it shows up an ancient philosophy, but characteristically, as you say, this is people's natural response, what they see in the world. They infer from that because it implies that there is a divine creator. In fact, I think that they've done studies.

I'm trying to think of what exactly when this was, but where children, I remember reading an article where the atheists were like, we have to beat this out of children. Not literally beat it out, but we have to teach children not to infer from design the existence of a supernatural. And it's something that children automatically do.

And so this is why I object to the idea when atheists say they're the default position. They're not the default position. If they were the default position, be defaulting to it.

It's not the case that nobody believes in anything supernatural. We all have to go out there and work to try and convince them. It's the opposite.

Even the children of atheists, right? I'm familiar with the same quote. I wish I knew where it was, but I heard it just recently. So this is just a matter of research that they've unveiled this.

This is because, as Doug Axe has pointed out, we all have a design intuition. We know when we see something that takes know-how to make it. And that's what we see in the universe, just like this computer.

There's your iPhone. Here's my, you know, the writing on this page. That takes know-how.

And we have the ability to see that also in the natural realm. Here's a question from Ethan. Would this be a good way to introduce the topic of truth? And here's his quote.

We all know objective truth exists. Proof. Some of you agree with what I just said.

It's true. And some of you are mad about what I just said. It's not true.

Does that encompass the main idea enough? Yeah, I think so. Certainly the first half does, but that they're mad is itself a statement of fact about the world. So if they're angry, forget about the content of their belief that caused them anger, just their anger, if

you are accurately identifying anger, then that they're angry is a fact and a truth is a fact.

Sometimes we get, I think, overly confused by this notion of truth. And we talk about truth as correspondence and all that's appropriate. But the simplest way to characterize it is a truth, as a fact.

It's something that is how not to use the word truth here in this definition. But the fact is an appropriate synonym. It is so.

What we are saying is so. It's a fact. It's a truth.

So whenever anyone says something is so, or you can identify something is so about the person who's saying it like they're angry, well, then you have identified a truth. I'm curious. I mean, the simple response is the first one given.

When somebody says there's no truth, you ask, is that true? See, the statement itself purports to be so. It's purports to be an accurate statement. It's purports to be a factual statement.

So this is why even that statement is self-refuting. If it's true, it's false. And if it's false, it's false.

There's no way it can be a true statement. I've heard people say, and this is really lame, but they say, okay, the only thing that's true is that there is no truth. But why would somebody restrict their claim to that? And in fact, even to utter the words, you have all kinds.

I did this once. I wrote a piece many years ago, and I thought about all the things that have to be so for you to make the claim there is no truth. I mean, just think of all the grammatical things that have to be so, in the ability to understand language, for example, and to perceive things, whatever.

There's all kinds of things that have to be the case, even to utter the statement, there is no truth. So this point of view is self-refuting in a whole bunch of different ways. I think Ethan is right on the mark here.

It's, relativism is, what's so funny is that you cannot be consistent in that for five minutes, and it has held so much sway in this country, but only when people want it to. Right. That's right.

So when they get their paycheck and they're shorted, now they complain. Well, all morality is relative until it's their morality that they want to push, and it ends up being kind of a way of shutting people up until they want you to agree with them on some moral principle, and then suddenly it's objective. But this isn't even about moral relative,

this is just truth in general, which it's, I don't know, Greg, do you feel like people are starting to, are you starting to hear less about relativism now, or do you think it's getting better, or do you think it's still being appealed to? No, I think it's getting worse, actually, and this is why I actually have written about this a lot in the street smarts, because if you don't understand the force of relativism, the culture, the way it's taken on so much momentum, and so consuming of people's ideas, etc., then you're not going to understand what you're up against.

All right. Now, I actually, my conviction is that every human being deep down inside is a common sense realist, even when it comes to morality. Okay.

But what they're trying to do is they're trying to suppress that truth, all those truths in unrighteousness, because they want to do their own thing. And this is why the best they can do is they're inconsistent, and you can find these inconsistencies all the time. By the way, just for a point of information, there's a difference between kind of a broad-based relativism, there is no truth, and moral relativism.

Okay. Moral truth is a subset of all truth. All right.

So there's all these truths, and at least in principle, there are these moral truths that's a subset. Now, someone could say that there are no moral truths, but still hold to other truths. So they won't be a thorough-going relativist.

They wouldn't be self-refuting if they said there are no moral truths. What gets them in a bind is what I call practical suicide in the tactics book, is when they start acting as if morality was objective when they claim that it isn't. For example, somebody says, you know, morals are completely subjective, therefore it's wrong for you to force your morality on me.

Well, notice on the one hand they're saying morals are relative, and then they are asserting an objective moral principle saying, okay, it's wrong for you to do this. It's like saying there are no moral rules. Here's one.

So that's self-refuting in a practical sense. That doesn't prove that there's morality. What that shows is that in practical terms, they are doing the very thing they say they shouldn't be doing.

That's why I call it practical suicide. Now, there's a reason why they're doing that, and the reason that they're doing that is deep down inside. They really do believe in objective moral truth, but they're picky about applying it, and your observation is so good here.

They want to do what they want to do, but when other people want to do what other people want to do towards them, then they become complainers. Oh, you shouldn't be doing that. That's wrong for you to do that.

So they're very picky on that, and that's the way we see this in culture. The whole gender stuff, all of these things, is all based on realities on the inside, what I believe about myself and not on the outside, okay? But they can only take that so far, obviously, because if we could know reality on the outside and count on it, we'd be dead in the day. Thank you, Eric and Scott and Ethan.

We appreciate hearing from you. Send us your question on Twitter with the hashtag STRS or you can go through our website at str.org. This is Amy Hall and Greg Cocoa for Stand to Reason.