THINKING TOOLS: THE SHERLOCK HOLMES FALLACY

Stephen Law

Thinking Tools is a regular feature that introduces pointers on thinking clearly and rigorously.

Suppose Sherlock Holmes is having a bad day. He just cannot figure out who dunnit. There are many people who might have committed the murder. It doesn't follow, though, that Holmes cannot rule anyone out. Perhaps the butler was in the room with Holmes at the time the murder was committed. If so, Holmes can be pretty sure the butler didn't do it, even if it is unclear who did.

The moral is: just because someone cannot solve a particular mystery doesn't entail that they cannot reasonably rule certain answers out.

Sometimes this is overlooked. For example, if an atheist admits that they cannot answer the question: 'Why is there anything at all?' or 'Why is there something rather than nothing?', the theist may take this as an admission that, for all the atheist knows, the Judeo-Christian God might, then, be the explanation. But it *may* be that, in the same way that, even if Holmes can't say who did it, he can pretty conclusively rule certain people out, so, even if the atheist cannot explain the existence of the universe, they can pretty conclusively rule out the Judeo-Christian God. For example, it might be that not only is there little reason to suppose the Judeo-Christian god exists, the fact that there is quite so much suffering and moral depravity in the world (suffering that afflicts not just us humans, but to countless sentient creatures over hundreds of millions of years before our appearance on the Earth) is ample evidence that no such maximally powerful and benevolent God exists. In which case, the atheist can be pretty confident that, whoever or whatever created the universe, if anything, it wasn't the Judeo-Christian god.

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Other examples:

'You admit you don't know the cause of this disease?'

'Yes. It's a mystery.'

'So you admit that, for all you know, it *is* caused by witches, then?!'

'Someone cast a magical spell on Mary.'

'There's no such thing as magic.'

'But then why did Mary fail her exam – she should have passed?'

'I don't know.'

'But then, for all you know, it *was* because someone cast a magic spell on her!'

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Think

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Fred Author, *Title of The Book* (Place: Publisher, 2002), p. 23.

D. Academic, 'Title of Paper', *A Journal*, vol.1, no.1 (1990), pp. 34-56.

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