INTRODUCTION: SHOULD I BELIEVE IN GOD?

Here's a brief introduction to this debate – which includes my own personal slant.

When we look up at the night sky, many are struck by the questions: where did all this come from? Why does the universe exist? Why is there anything *at all*?

For many, the answer to these questions seems obvious: God. God created the universe. In fact, it's God's extraordinary power and intelligence that is supposed to explain not only why the universe exists, but also why it contains so many otherwise-hard-to-explain features – including us. If the universe were a product of pure, random chance, how likely is it that it would have the Goldilocks property of being 'just right', not just for life to emerge, but for *consciousness beings* to appear? The answer, say many, is that this is extraordinarily unlikely to have happened by chance. Some draw the further conclusion that the universe is a product, not of chance, but of a cosmic intelligence that deliberately designed the universe to have us in it. That intelligence is God.

Arguments based on the thought that the universe shows signs of design can be found in the writings of St Thomas Aquinas (1225–74) and William Paley (1743–1805).

But of course, not everyone finds such arguments compelling. After all, we humans habitually, and often unjustifiably, jump to the conclusion that some hidden, extraordinary being must be responsible for things we can't explain. When we couldn't explain why plants grew every spring, we supposed they must be made to grow by nature spirits. When we couldn't explain why the planets moved in the strange, uneven ways they do, we supposed they must be gods. When we can't explain why our keys ended up under the sofa when we placed them on the table, we can neatly

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explain their mysterious movement by appealing to gremlins. Appealing to invisible beings with both the power and desire to make happen what we can't otherwise explain allows us conveniently to account for whatever strikes us as baffling. Hidden magical beings can *always* explain what we can't otherwise explain. Yet in most cases these explanations have turned out to be wrong, and in many cases were pretty ludicrous explanations from the outset. Just because an invisible cosmic intelligence would neatly explain why the universe exists and has the character it has doesn't necessarily make belief in such a being justified.

Sceptics about God may also insist that even if there is some sort of cosmic creator, it's a huge further leap to the conclusion that the creator is God, as traditionally conceived. Philosopher and theist Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) noted that the design argument

> proves at most intelligence only in the arrangement of the 'matter' of the universe, and hence the existence not of a 'Supreme Being', but of an 'Architect'.

Why, for example, should we suppose that the cosmic architect is good, and worthy of our worship and gratitude? Why couldn't the designers of the universe be the superintelligent alien inhabitants of some previous universe, for example? Why couldn't this universe be a virtual universe created by a superdooper computer running a program in which we are immersed, a bit like the humans in the film *The Matrix*? Why must the cosmic architect be *good*? Why must he deserve our praise and gratitude? Why couldn't the designer be evil, say? Or, more plausibly, neither good nor evil? If any of these other hypotheses is true, then, while the universe may indeed have a designer, that designer is not what religious people usually mean by 'God'.

Sceptics may add that not only do we have little if any reason to suppose that our cosmic architect is good, there's actually overwhelming evidence that, if some sort of architect exists, he's *not* particularly good. Our world

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contains immense amounts of suffering. For example, there's the suffering of the other sentient inhabitants of this planet – including our own ancestors – over hundreds of millions of years before we made an appearance. There's also human suffering. For example, science reveals that during the 200,000-year history of humans, on average about a third to a half of every generation of children died before reaching the age of five. We have only very, *very* recently brought child mortality rates down. It appears our cosmic designer, if he exists, is responsible for killing children on an industrial scale, often painfully and horribly. Some sceptics conclude such a creator can't, on any reasonable understanding of 'good', be considered good.

After all, while we may not know why the universe exists, we can reasonably rule out *some* designers. For example, it seems we rule out an all-powerful, *all-evil* God. Clearly, there's far too much good – too much love, laughter, ice-cream and rainbows – for this to be the creation of such an all-powerful, all-evil deity. But if we can rule out an all-evil God on the basis of observed goods, then why can't we similarly rule out an all-powerful all-good God on the basis of observed evils? Surely there's too much pointless pain and suffering in this universe for it to be the creation of such a good God.

In response to these sceptical arguments, those who believe in a good God may insist they also have some *other* good arguments for why the designer *must* be a good and loving God. And perhaps they do. Or they may insist that they can know a good God exists in some other way – not on the basis of *evidence* gained by looking at the universe – but by means of some sort of direct religious experience. They may insist they can 'just know' God exists because God has directly revealed himself to them.

This is adapted from a pre-publication draft of a chapter of my book What Am I Doing With My Life?

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