

Have Skeptics No Intellectual Obligations?

“Come Let Us Reason Together” (Isaiah 1:18)

Skeptics express no hesitation at all in scrutinizing Christian claims under the relevant criteria of scientific, historical, and philosophical analysis as it pertains to the assertion that is under consideration. This is as it should be. A host of biblical passages affirm the obligation that Christians bear to submit our beliefs to such examination. St. Peter writes in 1 Peter 3:15, “*Always be prepared to give a reason for the hope that is in you.*” In 1 Thessalonians 5:21 St. Paul commands Christians to “[t]est all things,” while Jesus said to Nicodemus, “*If I told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?*” (John 3:12). In 1 John 4:1 St. John warns, “*Do not believe every spirit, but test [them].*” Now Christians aren’t always diligent in heeding these biblical directives. Sadly many of the same are woefully unprepared to meet the challenges unbelievers pose in our contention for our faith in our time (Jude 3). But the neglect of these instructions doesn’t have the blessing of Scripture.

All the while, sceptics habitually lob criticisms at our claims in an endeavor to undermine our message. I for one do **not** bemoan such a tactic as being unfair, but to the contrary actually encourage it.¹ The problem that this essay seeks to highlight is instead that they **fail to move beyond** this ploy. On numerous occasions I have sought to engage with skeptics by beginning with the single question, “*What is it that you [as a self-identified skeptic] believe?*” What consistently follows is a diatribe of charges as to where Christianity is deemed by them not to be intellectually sound. They judge that the evidence we offer in favor of Christianity doesn’t convince them that our position is correct. Yet what they habitually **fail to do** is offer evidence in its place which affirms their position to be superior to ours.

One example occurred at a public meeting that was sponsored by the Christian-based scientific think tank, “Reasons to Believe.”² In attendance that day was Tom,³ our “resident atheist.” Not only was he welcomed at our meetings socially, he was also encouraged to challenge our presentations on their specific claims and ask us hard questions. The speaker that day laid out the substantial list of the finely-tuned initial conditions at the very beginning of the universe. At the close of his presentation Tom stood up and declared that there is no scientific evidence for the existence of God at all; to which I publically challenged his assertion then and there. I replied to him that when the *scientific* data (as opposed to *abstract speculation*) is all taken into account, it all points to an absolute beginning of the universe out of utterly nothing material. Neither time, matter, energy, nor space, existed prior to it.⁴ So I asked him, “Tom, on the basis of your atheistic materialistic convictions would you please offer your proposal that you deem to be superior to our Christian view in scientifically-explanative power, as to how the universe that we all experience came into existence out of nothing?” His blunt reply was that what he would **not** do would be to appeal to the “Biblicist” assertion that God did it. What I ask you to notice from his half of the exchange is that he never offered a *scientific* case that supported his atheistic view, but only sought to undermine the Christian explanation for that beginning (Genesis 1:1) on the grounds that it was not a *scientific* cause of the universe. I argue however, against Stephen Hawking’s materialistic proposition,⁵ that a transcendent⁶ Creator is the **only** conceivable rational cause of both the existence of the cosmos itself and its present complexity within its timeframe of 13.7 billion years.⁷

¹ I hold this view because objections create a pathway to conversations in a way that apathy does not.

² www.reasons.org

³ Not his real name.

⁴ Hugh Ross. *The Creator and the Cosmos*. (RTB, 2018), p. 127.

⁵ Stephen Hawking and Leonard Mlodinow. *The Grand Design*. (Bantam, 2002).

⁶ A being or agent which stands outside of the system which is under consideration.

⁷ See my paper, “Was the Big Bang the Big Beginning?,” which, together with all my papers can be found at my website: www.christianityonthe-offense.com. ** See also Op.cit. (4), ch. 16, esp. p. 189.

Similarly, with respect to interpreting the *biological* history (or progression) within nature, Darwinists seek to impose a **double standard** as to what is permitted to qualify as confirmatory evidence. For example, the text, "Creationist's Trojan Horse"⁸ distorts the contention between Darwinism (Dm) and Intelligent Design (ID) in such a way that Dm is exempted from having to produce empirical evidence while ID, by contrast, is expected to make an air-tight case based on currently observed "*eliminative facts*" (EF).⁹ By EF is meant that the evidence decisively nails down the case in its own favor. Stated differently, Dm is effectively privileged to hold out for potential (yet-to-be-discovered) "path-ways" that *could conceivable* be *imagined* to successfully account for the present complexity of life, while ID is expected to prove its case up front. In reply to this distorted playing field, ID proponent Wm Dembski has remarked that "*Evolutionary theory is thereby rendered **immune to disconfirmation in principle, because the universe of unknown** [yet-to-be-discovered] **material mechanisms can never be exhausted***" (boldface mine).¹⁰ In other words Dm gets to propose certain enticing (yet non-existent) possibilities, while ID must produce slam dunks that literally decimate the competition!

It is important now to highlight that two categories listed in the first sentence of this paper do not, because they cannot, rise to the level of absolute proofs. Such is the actual nature of *phenomenal* evidence¹¹ (as opposed to *mathematical* or *philosophical* formulations pertaining to logic). So rather than seeking absolute proof in science and history, its researchers must limit themselves to probabilities and approximations.¹² Therefore the correct means of reaching valid conclusions in such phenomenal matters is to first assemble the relevant data pertaining to the object or operation under consideration. Then a multiplicity of hypotheses are proposed which seek to explain the phenomena that is in question. Since as I stated earlier, phenomenal considerations can't rise to the level of proof, the only conclusion that is attainable is that hypothesis which *best* or *better* explains the phenomena that are in view.

Disputes over the cause of the universe (science) and the character and deeds of Jesus, together with the events which surround him (history), I repeat, lie outside of the realm of proof. In place of agendas which seek such an impossibility, a different research program which successfully identifies the *strongest* hypothesis that is available must be deemed the correct course. The method that this paper proposes is called *inference to the best explanation*, also known as the *method of multiple competing hypotheses* (boldface mine).¹³ Under this method skeptics, too, bear an obligation to firstly acknowledge the phenomena, and then declare their own *hypotheses*, together with a body of actual evidence that is sufficient to explain away *biblical* data in a manner that is demonstrably superior to the Christian claim. We Christians must be prepared to confidently take that risk! The *skeptic's* resistance on the other hand, to step up to the plate on this matter, betrays an appeal to immunity from the same scrutiny that they rightfully impose onto Christians. Yet they are not intellectually entitled to that exemption!

Rev. Gary Jensen© April 24, 2019
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church (NALC), Berlin, PA

⁸ See my book review of Barbara Forrest and Paul Gross. [Creationism's Trojan Horse: The Wedge of Intelligent Design](#). (Oxford, 2004) at Op.cit. (7).

⁹ Wm. Dembski. [The Design Revolution](#). (Intervarsity, 2004), p. 222.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ "Phenomenal" stands for objects and operations that are perceived through our five senses.

¹² This actuality does not logically compel us to outright skepticism. Legal scholar and theologian John Warwick Montgomery highlights the current trend in *scientific* investigational circles of pursuing the legalistically fruitful standard of "proof **beyond a reasonable doubt**," as opposed to *absolute* proof. [History, Law, and Christianity](#). (Canadian Institute for Law, Theology, and Public Policy, 2002), pp. 61f., 91f.

¹³ Stephen Meyer. [The Signature in the Cell](#). (Harper One, 2009), pp. 154f.