

Saturday, February 17, 2007

Exapologist's Message to Non-Theists

In the comments section of the blog "[No evidence?? Really??](#)" by Victor Reppert, Exapologist wrote the following message to non-believers:

A message to my non-theistic buddies with full sincerity and respect: prima facie, the universe is a contingent being; prima facie, the fundamental constants are fine-tuned so as to permit the emergence of life; prima facie, consciousness is not reducible to any standard account of the physical. Taken together, they can legitimately be used to offer decent support to the hypothesis of theism. Maybe you could add the Moreland/Reppert argument from reason -- I don't know enough about the relevant literature to pretend to know. Against this backdrop, it makes sense to talk about the principle of credulity and religious experience. This isn't shabby inductive or abductive support for some form of theism.

I want to say up front that I do appreciate Exapologist's concern to warn non-believers from overstating their certainties. Many non-believers seem prone to affirming more than they could possibly know when it comes to considering religious defenses. However, I wanted to post some thoughts in response to his three "prima facie" points, as they are in desperate need of correction. For there are many things that we can know and affirm without the theistic believer's approval.

The first of Exapologist's points was the following:

prima facie, the universe is a contingent being;

One could accept this position only if he first accepted a host of unstated assumptions packed into his understanding of the concept of 'universe'. For instance, that the universe is not all that there is, that it "came into existence" somehow, that maybe it "arose from chance," that something outside it caused it to exist, or that it depends on something outside itself for its existence, etc. None of these assumptions themselves are prima facie true, and I know of no good reasons to accept any of them.

It is important, when making general statements about the universe as a whole, to clarify what we mean by the word 'universe'. At minimum we need to know what we're talking about. Exapologist did not do this in his brief message to his non-theistic buddies, so I will. The universe is the sum total of everything that exists. By this definition, it includes *anything and everything* that exists. This is not an arbitrary definition nor a fiat stipulation, for it serves a legitimate conceptual need: we need a concept which encompasses the sum total of all that exists. Universe is that concept. By definition, then, there could be no such thing as something that exists "outside" the universe, for this would constitute a contradiction. Also, since 'universe' includes *everything* that exists, if there are things that are necessary and there are things that are contingent, they would *both* exist within the universe; they would *both* be *part* of the universe.

Also, the universe is not an *entity* - it is not a single entity to be distinguished from other entities. To say that the universe is one entity to be distinguished from other entities would ignore the fact that there are no entities that exist "outside" the universe; there is no "outside" the universe. On the contrary, the universe is a *collection* of entities - the collection of *all entities* - not a single entity as such. So what we can be certain of, is the fact that the universe exists, and *only* the universe exists.

So on this definition, how could it make sense to posit something that exists outside the universe? How could we posit something that exists outside the totality of all existence? If one objects to this definition of 'universe', it falls upon him to defend an alternative definition of 'universe' and also identify an alternative concept which performs the conceptual task that 'universe' performs as I have defined it here. If 'universe' does not denote the sum total of all existence, what does it denote, why does it include some things and not others, and what concept does denote the sum total of all that exists?

Now for those who insist that something exists beyond the universe, however they wish to define it, there's a

fundamental problem which they need to address: How could they know this? By what means of awareness would one have awareness of something that exists beyond the cosmos, for example? This is where we find theism at its murkiest, in its disguised failures to answer questions about the acquisition and validation of knowledge. This is because theism, especially Christianity, fundamentally misidentifies the nature of the human mind, selling it short on the abilities that it does have (denouncing them summarily as expressions of “autonomy”) while holding it responsible for knowing things one could never discover and validate even if they were true (resting on the notion of “revelation”).

Consider this: If someone handed you a sealed box which you never saw before, and asked you to tell him what is inside it, how would you know? The exterior of the box has no markings to indicate where it came from, to whom it is destined, or what is inside it. So how would you know *until you looked inside it*? In the end, you’d have to say you didn’t know. So if you cannot know what is inside a box that is two feet before your eyes without looking in it, how could you know what exists “beyond” the universe without looking “beyond” it?

Here the theist will say that his god is not known by means of the senses. Well, we know this. This is essentially an admission to the fact that there is no evidence for the existence of what theists describe as their god. Theists then typically try to discredit the epistemological importance of sense experience in some way (which is their way of telling us that they believe knowledge can be held without consciousness). They then hasten to tell us that we can know their god by some alternative means, a means without any identifiable or understood method, one which they dub ‘revelation’ but which is indistinguishable from imagination. It is by turning inward, consulting internal impulses, misconstruing the mind’s own operations as evidence for supernatural things and projecting attributes that have been inflated beyond any actual measures found in nature, and casting those projections imaginatively “beyond” the universe. Well, if there is nothing “outside” the universe in the first place, then it makes no sense to speak of something that exists “beyond” the universe. So the theist can defend an alternative conception of the universe, one which allows us to assert the existence of something “beyond” it and can explain how one can “know” what exists “beyond” the universe even though we cannot know what is inside a sealed box two feet before our own eyes, then he has just accepted a [stolen concept](#) by asserting existence outside of existence, i.e., in a context which denies existence. This is absurd, but in fact it is inevitable when it comes to theism.

Exapologist’s second point was a follows:

prima facie, the fundamental constants are fine-tuned so as to permit the emergence of life;

This statement could make sense only if we assume that the requirements of life come first, and then the universe, in which those “fundamental constants” have been installed, were subsequently created, fashioned, or modified to accommodate those requirements somehow. But again this assumption commits the fallacy of the stolen concept by affirming the concept ‘life’ outside of or prior to the sum totality of existence. The universe is the sum totality of existence (see above). And even if this conception of ‘universe’ is denied (which invites its own set of problems - again see above), it commits the fallacy of the stolen concept by implicitly affirming the concept ‘life’ outside the environment in which life’s required constants obtain. If life requires certain preconditions (and this of course is true), how could the concept ‘life’ have any meaning outside a context which includes those preconditions which life requires? Blank out.

To make matters worse, we should note that theism holds that the agent which allegedly “fine-tuned” the universe to accommodate life, is itself alive. So if life requires certain preconditions (or “fundamental constants”), and those preconditions needed to be installed and “fine-tuned” by some agent which itself is said to be alive, we invite ourselves into the never-ending morass of an infinite regress: a living agent is needed to explain the fine-tuned fundamental constants of one class of living beings, and another living agent is needed to explain the fine-tuned fundamental constants of the living agent that explained the fine-tuned fundamental constants of that class of living beings, and so on ad nauseum. Since this is unsatisfying, the theist wants to arbitrarily stop the chain of inference with his god, which he can only “know” by means of imagining it. This is the essential substance of what can be appropriately called [the tape-loop apologetic antics of presuppositionalism](#). As a debating ploy, presuppositional apologists will challenge non-believers to “account for” what they call “the immaterial,” while the apologist himself “accounts for” what he calls “the immaterial” but by pointing to something he says is “immaterial.”

The tendency among religious defenses which seek to single out life as some sort of evidence for a supernatural deity, is to treat life as if it were some kind of exception to the natural world. By smuggling such assumptions into one’s conception of the world at the beginning, he’s on the path to confirming the stolen concepts identified

above. Since life is thought to be something alien to the universe, we need to posit something outside the universe to explain it (something that is itself said to be alive).

However, biology is not an exception to nature. Indeed, it is part of nature. Biological causality is a type of causation, and it has identity just as mechanical, geothermal, chemical and other forms of causation. Moreover, inherent in biological causality is an organism's ability to adapt to the environment in which it exists, at least to a certain extent. If it does not or cannot adapt to its environment, it will need to find an environment to which it can adapt itself, or it will die. The environment does not rearrange itself to accommodate life's requirements; organisms need to act in order to meet their own life requirements, or they stop living. None of these points in any way diminishes our curiosity of it, or renders our discoveries about how life functions insignificant or impertinent to our endeavors. They simply allow us to constrain science to the rational context it requires by slashing off arbitrary notions at their base, before they can grow like weeds and choke our reasoning.

The standard problem of theism is that, as an explanation, it simply pushes the original question back a step, but unfortunately into the fake environment of an imaginary realm. For instance, if the agent which allegedly "fine-tuned" the fundamental constants of the universe to accommodate life is itself alive, what fine-tuned the fundamental constants of supernatural reality to accommodate its life? The original question still remains unanswered, and now there's a new question to occupy us, one that leads us to losing sight of the importance of the original issue and replacing it with nonsense that could have no value for human life. So asserting the existence of a god does not offer any bankable explanations, and it simply complicates matters all the more. Even worse, it invites arbitrary standards which could only be based in one's imagination.

Exapologist's third point was the following:

prima facie, consciousness is not reducible to any standard account of the physical.

Why suppose that consciousness needs to be "*reducible* to any... account of the physical" in the first place? Consciousness is *irreducible*, both conceptually and metaphysically. This fact does not imply theism any more than it implies that *The Wizard of Oz* is true. Man is an integrated being of matter and consciousness. So are other animals. If only reptiles and fishes existed, would we need a god to "account for" these?

Consciousness is both axiomatic and natural. When asking for an explanation of consciousness, what exactly is being sought? Consciousness is its own kind of existence, just as rock salt is its own kind of existence, and the element of helium is its own kind of existence. Each has its specific identity. Consciousness is no exception to this - it has its own identity.

That consciousness is irreducible means that we can identify it without needing to come to our awareness of it by first understanding it in terms of some non-conscious components which make it up. That is, we do not need to argue for its existence, for argumentation presupposes the reality of consciousness by virtue of the fact that argumentation is a conscious activity. What it does *not* mean is that consciousness is by itself an *entity*. Consciousness is an *attribute* of entities, not an entity all its own. An organism's consciousness is an integral part of the organism possessing it, and it depends on a very complex set of physiological systems which support it. So while consciousness need not *reduce* to the physical, it does nevertheless *depend* on the physical. Both rational philosophy and science concur on these points.

Meanwhile, I have seen no credible evidence which suggests that consciousness is possible without the neurophysiological processes which have been discovered and understood through scientific research. Again, we can *imagine* disembodied "spirits" which float around and inhabit a magic kingdom beyond the reach of our senses, but this is the stuff of fairy tales and storybooks.

When men fail to understand the nature of their own consciousness and choose not to put forth the needed effort to discover and understand their consciousness, they often resort to misusing it in their efforts to "explain" it. But again we come back to the tape-loop apologetic antics of presuppositionalism: how does positing a conscious deity "explain" man's consciousness? How does asserting the existence of a conscious agent explain the consciousness which we possess?

It doesn't.

by Dawson Bethrick

Labels: [Presuppositional Gimmickry](#), [The Universe](#)

posted by *Bahnsen Burner* at [12:00 PM](#)

2 Comments:

[Malky](#) said...

I thought that this posting was the best response I have seen on this to date.

[February 18, 2007 2:42 PM](#)

[breakerslion](#) said...

So did I. I also think the whole argument surrounding reducibility is peculiar at best. Whether or not a thing is reducible depends, to a greater or lesser part, on your point of view. I contend for example, that the modern Victor mouse trap is reducible to a thrown rock.

Consciousness is sensory and reflective. Higher forms of consciousness are extrapolative, and farther along that gradient one achieves hallucinatory. So far, I have never seen anyone achieve these states of being without learning, sensory organs, a physical brain, and vital support organs. Take away enough of any of these and you lose consciousness. Overwhelm the sensory organs and you lose consciousness. That would suggest to me that these are necessary components of consciousness. So much for "Spooky Vision", Holy or otherwise.

[February 20, 2007 4:34 PM](#)