

Friday, July 28, 2006

Theism and Its Piggyback Starting Point

This post continues a conversation between myself and a Christian named Chris which began in the comments section of John W. Loftus' blog [What Do You Think?](#) The discussion gravitated from a debate on whether or not the universe is eternal to a comparison of respective starting points. I have already written much on this topic and would suggest that Chris familiarize himself with my position by reading [this](#).

Responding to one of the other commenters in the combox, Chris stated:

It's not logical to assume that the universe has not been caused.

And in response to this, I asked Chris to indicate what he means by the term 'universe'. But instead of answering this, he seized on a statement of mine, namely:

Since I start with existence, there's no validity to the idea that existence needs to be explained.

In response to this, Chris reacted by declaring my starting point is "arbitrary," and though I asked him to present an argument to support this charge so that I can see how he came to this conclusion, he did not offer one. Perhaps it is not a conclusion to prior reasoning and thus has no argument. It may simply be a baseless charge. Chris gives nothing to rule out this possibility.

I had also pointed out that:

Existence is irreducible.

Chris complained:

You're repeating what you previously stated. It is your starting point. You make this statement definitively as if it requires no proof.

It should not be difficult to see why existence is irreducible. By irreducible I mean it cannot be analyzed or broken down into something more basic than itself. What is more basic than existence? Meta-existence? What is that? Does it exist, or not? Since I do not see any need to multiply distinctions beyond necessity, I would see the postulation of something called 'meta-existence' as ad hoc, merely an attempt to offer something instead of my position in order to be able to claim a difference. But is there a difference? Would "meta-existence" be irreducible? Why couldn't there be something like 'proto-meta-existence'? We could continue fabricating ever more primitive levels ad nauseum, but would that gain us more understanding of reality? I don't think so. In the end, either something exists, or it doesn't. There is no in between here.

Also, an objective starting point by definition does not need to stand on proof. All proof assumes the truth of my starting point. Proof is a process by which we make explicit the logical relationship between something that is not perceptually self-evident to that which is perceptually self-evident. That which is perceptually self-evident does not need to be proven. When you see a tree, you see it, you don't need to prove that it is there. A proof of existence would be superfluous. And to what would its premises refer, if not to things that exist? Blank out.

Chris:

I say that God is irreducible.

In a prior comment I had asked Chris to identify the means by which he is (allegedly) aware of what he calls "God." He has not done this. Why? He is aware of his god, is he not? If so, there must be some identifiable means by which he has this awareness, no? Most theists say that their god is *invisible*, and object to us rejecting their god on the basis of our inability to see it because we accept all kinds of things that we cannot see. For instance, theists have pointed to wind as an example of something we do not see, but accept as real nonetheless. True, we often do not see wind, and let's grant for argument's sake that we can never see wind. That's fine. But we need to remember that vision is only one of our five available sense modalities. We can *feel* the wind against our skin, as when we walk out into it. In fact, I've experienced some wind that was so strong it almost knocked me down. Wind is physical and scientifically

measurable, so wind is a very poor analogy for theism to draw on, unless of course theists are ready to admit that their theistic arguments are full of a lot of wind. (Memo to self: Ask theists hypothetical question: Can God break the perfect wind?)

Chris wrote:

You require proof of me to make this claim.

I know better than to ask a theist for a proof of his god. Instead I went for the jugular by asking Chris to identify the means by which he thinks he is aware of his god. I also asked how I can distinguish between what he calls "God" and what he may be merely imagining. Theists claim that their god is invisible, it's not part of this world, it can do all kinds of amazing things which we can all imagine one way or another. But they can point to no objective basis to support what they claim. I'm simply being honest when I point out that I do not believe that the Muslim's Allah exists, and I'm simply being honest when I point out that I do not believe that the Lahu's Geusha exists. Likewise, I'm simply being honest when I point out that I do not believe that the Christian's god exists. It doesn't bother Christians when I don't believe the Muslim and the Lahu, but it bothers him when I don't believe him.

Chris stated:

I require proof of you to make your claim.

The validation (which is broader than a formal proof) of my starting point is that it has to be true in order for Chris to deny it. For Chris to deny existence, he would have to exist, thereby refuting his own denial. Also, since his claim "God exists" piggybacks on my starting point by affirming the fact of existence, my starting point would have to be true in order for him even to contemplate what he calls "God." For Chris to contemplate the existence of his god or anything else, he would first have to exist. This alone is sufficient to validate my starting point. He then tries to make off with my starting point by smuggling it across the divide between atheism and theism, and attempts to enlist its service in support of theism. It is at that point that he swears allegiance to the primacy of consciousness metaphysics by affirming the view that the objects of consciousness ultimately find their source in a consciousness, as I have explained [here](#) and [here](#).

Meanwhile I can deny Chris' god, just as I deny the Muslim's Allah and the Lahu's Geusha, while remaining true to my starting point. But Chris cannot affirm his god without begging and borrowing from my starting point.

I wrote:

Don't you have a concept which includes everything, including your god?

Chris responded:

Of course not. God is apart from everything.

But since he affirms that this thing he calls "God" exists, he automatically includes it *ex hypothesi* in the class of things which exist. The universe is the sum total of things that exist. (This is in direct keeping with [Webster's](#), which defines 'universe' as "the whole body of things and phenomena observed or postulated.") Therefore, if Chris' god exists, it exists *as part of the sum of all that exists*, which means: it is *member of the universe*. If Chris maintains that his god is not a member of the universe, then it is not a member of the class of things that exist. Which means: Chris is telling us that his god doesn't exist. There, we have agreement. And he said "we are at an impasse"!

Chris continued:

Including God in the definition of the universe, is to make him subject to it instead the Causer of it.

Here Chris is telling us that he has reasoned from undesirable consequences. Essentially he's saying "I don't want to use a concept that includes both everything in the universe *and* my god because I don't like what this might imply. My god's bigger than anything, dammit!" It's like a kid on a schoolyard insisting that his GI Joe is bigger than everyone else's, and therefore should be excused from all contests. He exhibits no concern here for conceptual integrity for he slashes himself off from a perfectly good concept and offers none in place of it. Thus he divides existence into two categories, the actual (which is represented by the finite universe of real objects) and the imaginary (which is represented by his god and arbitrarily elevated above the actual, as if the actual found its source in the imaginary).

Chris stated:

The bible says he is without beginning or end, from time indefinite to time indefinite.

This is not an argument. Also, if Chris learned about his god from the bible, then he is acknowledging that his god could not be his starting point. He had awareness of the physical material making up his copy of the bible before he had awareness of its content. Ignoring this fact and asserting that the god he imagines came prior to and is responsible for creating the materials which make up his copy of the bible and everything else we find in the universe of real objects, is just an expression of frustration with the actual universe prompting a retreat into a realm of his own imagining where his god rules over all. Meanwhile, he continues to make use of my starting point, but does not explain where he got it. So he stands before us red-handed, his mouth full of cookies and the cookie jar lying broken on the kitchen floor. What does he say for himself? He does what all Christians eventually do: he appeals to the bible and hopes that serves as an adequate surrogate for an explanation to exonerate himself.

Chris asserted:

The name Jehovah means 'causes to become'.

This too is not an argument. And to the extent that it is true, it is at most trivial and uninteresting. The name of the Lahu's deity is Geusha. It has numerous meanings, such as "before the before," "the one before all," "the supreme ever," etc. So what?

Chris claims:

He is the First Cause.

But the concept 'cause' does not make sense outside the context of the universe - i.e., outside the context of that which exists. Since Chris refused his god membership in the sum total of existence, he commits the fallacy of the stolen concept by referring to his god as a cause, whether foremost or collateral.

Chris wrote:

You prefer to relegate this concept to "the universe" or existence itself. Again, you have no evidence of this so therefore you must have faith that your argument is correct, as I do.

This misconstrues my position. I do not posit a "first cause." I have not identified the universe as a "first cause." Nor is the universe an *effect*; to call it an effect would commit the fallacy of the stolen concept. Why would one do this, unless he doesn't care about the logical implications of his position?

Also, since I have awareness of my starting point by directly perceiving it with my senses, no faith is needed to affirm its true. Everything that exists is evidence of itself, which means: my starting point is ubiquitously attested.

by Dawson Bethrick

posted by Bahnsen Burner at [6:00 PM](#)

5 Comments:

[Chris](#) said...

Oh Dawson, you've incinerated me. I admit that I cannot keep up with you. Your verbal gymnastics are extraordinary.

I suppose I should be flattered that you felt the need to devote an entire post to little ole me. My wife will be jealous. Better cut it out.

Of course your brilliance is only surpassed and mightily dimmed by your arrogance. Perhaps you can put down your verbal sword and have a civil discussion?

If theism is not useful in man's natural desire to know why he exists, what is? Do you not seek greater understanding of life's many mysteries? Are science and philosophy your religion? Are you confident that in time you will be able to figure it all out? Or perhaps you already have? Yes, I think that must be it, because your steadfast foreclosure of all things theistic is a clear indication that you have it all figured out.

You must know something that I don't know (other than all those neat words and verbal deconstructions), otherwise you wouldn't spend so much time telling me I'm wrong for believing as I do.

The universe existing is not in question. The questions are why it exists and how did it come to exist? I believe you made the claim, perhaps it was someone else, that the universe is eternal. It doesn't have a starting point. That claim can be nothing more than a statement of faith, since no evidence is offered to back it up.

I understand that you don't buy the theistic reasons for creation, because your mind requires evidence and a logical progression of cause and effect. You cannot contemplate a Divine hand in creation because it is not tidy, it is not mathematical, and it is not sensory based. You require facts, evidence, and logic. Nothing short of God revealing himself to you personally will do. So you retreat to the discernable universe and instead of asking the questions of why and how, you make yourself comfortable with the notion that it just is.

To answer your challenge of how I am aware of my God (to spare my jugular), my spirit attests to his spirit. My heart knows God, even as my mind struggles to keep up. I have felt God's spirit in my life. I have felt his directing hand. I have felt his assurances. When I become agitated, my appeals to him for relief are answered. This of course, is unsatisfactory to those whose requirements for belief are completely captive to the "sense modalities".

You say that the universe is neither a cause nor an effect. Again, I say that a statement like that requires faith, because you cannot present evidence supporting it. I say that God is the cause and the universe is the effect. Evidence? Plenty, but none to your satisfaction. Again, I assert impasse.

[July 28, 2006 9:15 PM](#)

[Daniel Morgan](#) said...

Chris,

If theism is not useful in man's natural desire to know why he exists, what is?

Theism confers no useful knowledge. Science cannot answer questions of existentialism. Philosophy is useful in helping us to come up with possible ways to look at our existence, and so is theism, but neither provides an answer, *per se*

It is useful in many ways to believe in a god of some sort. Jumping from admitted belief to dogmatic religion is another story entirely.

Do you not seek greater understanding of life's many mysteries?

I certainly do. I cannot speak for Dawson. I have chosen to devote my life to the pursuit of knowledge of the mechanisms by which matter interacts with other matter and transforms (chemistry). I find it highly rewarding to probe mysteries -- unknown things, using the scientific method, because we derive from it useful knowledge. I could just sit around and posit "matter gnomes" that explain the natural phenomena, but they wouldn't confer useful knowledge, just as theism doesn't.

Are science and philosophy your religion?

Now that is a silly question. The functionalist definition of religion is what theists tend to use in asking such questions, or, "whatever you spend the most time doing, or like the most, is your religion." Unfortunately, in the fall, college football must become my religion, at Thanksgiving, eating must become my religion, etc., etc. It is a ridiculous way to define "religion" which loses the significance of the term.

The modern definition of religion is much more useful -- belief systems which incorporate elements of the supernatural. Since science *de facto* excludes supernaturalism (we cannot test it), it isn't a religion. Since philosophy is not a "belief system", *per se*, although it includes metaphysics, which are potentially questions that one answers with supernatural entities, it isn't a religion either.

Are you confident that in time you will be able to figure it all out?

I can't answer for Dawson here, but I'll answer for me -- hell no.

Or perhaps you already have?

Again, hell no.

Yes, I think that must be it, because your steadfast foreclosure of all things theistic is a clear indication that you

have it all figured out.

No, it goes back to the primary method by which we form reliable conclusions -- is it reasonable to posit God or a god? Why? (your next question follows well from this point)

The questions are why it exists and how did it come to exist? I believe you made the claim, perhaps it was someone else, that the universe is eternal. It doesn't have a starting point. That claim can be nothing more than a statement of faith, since no evidence is offered to back it up.

Let us say that the answer is, then, "I don't know," to your first two questions. What next? Do you commit *argumentum ad ignorantium* and posit a god from ignorance?

No. Because that would be committing the same error as you accuse Dawson of -- making a statement of faith without evidence to back it up. Thus the "impasse" is actually the default mode -- agnosticism/atheism (where atheism is defined as "one without faith in god(s)")

All that we do know from science indicates the primacy of matter/energy -- they cannot be created or destroyed by any known process within the universe. So when we ask the question "how did they get here?" we ignore the natural answer immediately -- that they have always been. Our universe has an "age" because of a defined amount of time and events since the expansion of the universe (Big Bang) into its current state. That does not imply that the prior states of the universe are either: i) known, ii) finite, iii) accessible to science or knowledge.

Therefore, the best scientific answer to your question is that matter and energy do not require "creation". The "evidence" for this claim is that science is able to posit no known process by which either matter or energy are created *ex nihilo* or destroyed *in nusquam*.

In the end, God is a logical leap which I (and Dawson) are unwilling to make. And, when you consider the state of the universe, its absolute vastness, the statistical probability of planets around stars such as ours, the age of the universe, the pain and suffering we witness both today and in the fossil record of history...is it really reasonable to believe some loving deity planned it all?

[July 30, 2006 2:43 AM](#)

[Not Reformed](#) said...

This post has been removed by the author.

[July 30, 2006 7:22 PM](#)

[Not Reformed](#) said...

Dawson,

Nice article, although it brings up a question:

Why do believers tend to get so upset by the fact that you are "literate," a "wordsmith," and that you "check your spelling?"

I've seen that complaint a lot over the past year. Perhaps you should "dumb it up" a bit. Perhaps throw in a few more "I Donno, must be God Dit it" type answers.

Thanks!

[July 30, 2006 7:23 PM](#)

[Aaron Kinney](#) said...

Dont you dare stop writing so well and checking your spelling! :)

[August 01, 2006 4:55 PM](#)