

Why I Am Not An Agnostic

I was trying a benzene case. There were over 400 families living in a subdivision with the water well pumping out water polluted with over 10,000 times the legal level of benzene. Benzene is a clear hydrocarbon that is poisonous and can cause certain types of leukemia. It does NOT belong in our drinking water.

The court had carved out five families for the first trial, including a 12-year-old boy who had spent the last two years battling for his life with leukemia. All of these families had used the water as their principle source of cooking, drinking, and bathing for years.

The benzene came from an underground blowout of a high pressure oil and gas well from 50 years before. The blowout leaked the equivalent of eleven Astrodomes of benzene into the aquifer used by the subdivision. The oil company never reported the blowout, and never worked to pull out any of the leaked hydrocarbons.

We had a lot of issues to fight through in the case. A key issue was whether or not the benzene actually caused the medical problems the plaintiffs suffered. In the American system, the plaintiff goes first (to meet the “burden of proof” discussed in the first chapter). If the plaintiffs put forward an adequate case of proof, the defendants then present their “case,” offering any contrary evidence. We had reached that point in the trial.

The defendants called to the stand an expert toxicologist who testified that 10,000 times the legally acceptable level of benzene contaminants in drinking water was absolutely safe. The expert told the jury that since even that high level of benzene was safe, there was no way the benzene had caused the medical conditions. We recessed for the night, and I was set to begin cross-examining the witness the next morning.

After court, I returned to my office. I met with a chemist at Rice University, one of the very best universities in the United States, and asked him to prepare me a mason jar of water contaminated with benzene at the 10,000 times legal level. The jar was sealed and appropriately marked with the amount of benzene. I took it with me to court the next morning.

After the jury entered and sat down, the judge told me to begin my cross-examination. I started by pointing out the large sums of money the oil company paid the witness in return for his testimony. Once that was established, I leaned in toward the witness and spoke in a private tone, as if my question and his answer would be just between him and me, even though everyone in court could clearly hear us. I said, “You don’t really believe that stuff you said yesterday about this level of benzene being safe, do you?” My “do you?” was not as if I might wonder what his answer was. I spoke it as a statement, as if, “You and I know you didn’t believe any of that, you were just paid to say it, so you said it.”

The witness was still playing his part as a hired gun, so he said, “Yes, I meant every word of it!” I played the moment a bit longer and said, “Come on; you and I both know you are saying it because they paid you to, but you don’t *really* believe it. Right?” He disagreed again, exclaiming, “Of course I believe it.”

At that point I pulled out my jar of water with benzene at the full 10,000 times the legal limit at issue in our case. I showed it to him, showed the certificate of contents, showed it was sealed by the chemist, and then I asked the real question. I said, “Sir, if you *really* believe what you are saying, then I am sure you will have no problem drinking this jar of benzene-contaminated water in front of the jury right now.”

The witness was stunned. He didn’t see it coming. The lawyers for the oil company were also stunned. They wanted to object, but knew that the jury would see through such efforts. The witness sat uncomfortably, and everyone could see him shuffling in the witness seat. This witness should never be a poker player, because he wore his thoughts plainly on his face. You could see as he sat there that he was thinking, “If I drink this, we will likely win the case. Of course, I may get horribly sick from it because it clearly isn’t safe.”

Then as the silence in the courtroom mounted with me holding the jar in front of him, everyone could read his continued thoughts, “Of course, if I don’t drink it, we may lose the case... But then I will still be safe.... And they pay me whether we win or not.”

Then it occurred to him he might be able to bluff me, and that would be the best way out. So he leaned forward and started to reach out toward the jar. His bluff was obvious. I could see the panic underlying his movement and I had no hesitancy walking forward and thrusting the jar to him. Realizing his bluff was called, he leaned back in his chair and pulled his hand away. He meekly offered, “I’m not going to drink it. The chemist may have gotten the proportions wrong!”

The jury, the judge, and everyone in the courtroom could immediately tell the truth. That man might be testifying that the water was safe, but when pressed into whether he would put his life on the line, he wouldn’t. His actions did not match what he claimed to believe.

There is something about our actions that betray truth. We may say one thing or another, but our actions show what is real. We may even believe one thing or another, but our actions still betray reality. Many of us just might not want to see it or admit it.

A need for consistency between who I am, what I see, and how I live is the main reason I am not an agnostic. I have yet to find an agnostic whose life lines up with the view that there is no God. Like the atheists I meet, the agnostics with whom I have interactions say one thing with respect to the idea that there is no God, but they live consistent with the idea that there is. If everyone’s life is consistent with the existence of God, I find it difficult to embrace an idea (there is no God) that is contrary to what we see and live.

Competing Views of Reality and the World



A worldview where
there is no God

1. Humans are sacks of chemicals – remnants of cosmic stardust.
2. Parts of our sacks of chemicals have electrical interactions we call "thoughts."
3. The electrical interactions in "human" chemical sacks differ from the electrical interactions of other chemical sacks.

DEDUCTIONS:

4. There is nothing that exists that objectively sets "right" and "wrong." Nothing in the universe dictates that some chemical/electrical interactions are inherently "evil." Moral terms like "evil," "good," "bad," etc., are labels that stem from electrical interactions ("conscious thought"), but are not based on anything beyond the ingrained electrical impulses and interactions of the chemical sacks.
5. Each sack of chemicals may have electrical interactions that make them "think" they are of more cosmic importance than another, but space dust is space dust.



A worldview where there
is a Judeo/Christian God

1. Outside of the universe is an infinite, personal, and moral "God" or being that is responsible for the universe's existence.
2. Humans are unique among living beings because we bear God's image. We are finite, rather than infinite, but, like God, we are personal and moral.
3. Humans exist to be in a personal relationship with God.
4. The lives of humans do not measure up to God's morality, making a truly harmonious relationship impossible by itself.
5. God provides the mechanism to restore a personal relationship, all the while maintaining and not compromising God's just and moral character.

The above models help illustrate some of the possibilities of reality, vis-à-vis comparing the world with no God to the world with God. If there is no God, then reality is described on the left. This is where we live, and whether we know it or not, the implications of that worldview are reality.

If, however, the Judeo/Christian worldview is correct, then reality is described on the right (assuming we have accurately annotated the basics of the Judeo/Christian worldview.) That means everyone is living by the views on the right, even if they "believe" the views on the left. Even the one who believes there is NO God, lives in the reality of views on the right. Their lives, if the worldview on the right is correct, just do not live in harmony with their worldview on the left.

It is like people who have the flu, but refuse to admit it. They say they are fine, but they shiver from a high fever, have aches, runny nose, and more. The words "I am not sick" are betrayed by the reality of the life. They might really believe they are fine, but the evidence indicates the truth.

So one immediate way to test the two competing worldviews above, is the benzene test! Who will live a life consistent with their worldview? If people live consistent with the view on the right, even when they intellectually try to assert the left view as correct, their actions betray the truth. We can see reality evidenced by how people live.

This is key as I examine the evidence for God and weigh it against the evidence there is no God. When I do, I come down on the side that there is a God.

Types of Evidence and Proof

Weighing different worldviews against reality may not seem like evidence to some people. Some might recognize it as evidence, but think it soft evidence at best. Is it fair to consider what we experience and see how well it aligns with the ideas of reality to which we ascribe? Of course it is!

There are different types of evidence for different things we want to prove or disprove. One type of evidence is the scientific method. This is where one forms a hypothesis, develops testable predictions (“If this, then that...”), tests the predictions, gathers data, and sets that data against the hypothesis for analysis. Often the testing can tell us an answer about, for example, whether a liquid is an acid or a base (using the litmus test).

So in the benzene case, for example, one of the things I needed to prove is that benzene can cause the type of leukemia the young man had. There are studies that utilize the scientific method, albeit in a slightly altered form, that are based in “epidemiology.” This means that groups of those exposed to benzene in excessive amounts are compared to groups that have only background levels of exposure (those levels people are exposed to in modern life – pumping gasoline, etc.). Through statistics, scientists are able to prove to a 95% certainty that the benzene indeed is associated with an increase in certain leukemia types. (It gets complicated, but “Bradford Hill factors” are then used to establish whether or not the association might arise to “causation.”)

The scientific method works for certain areas of science, but it has limitations. Much like a ruler works for measuring some things but not others. I can use a ruler to measure distance, but it is useless to measure temperature. So the scientific method is useful for determining the temperature at which a liquid freezes, but would be useless at determining the existence of one person’s love for another.

Many scientists operate with the scientific method, and they try to use that method with issues of faith. This stems from one of the strengths and weaknesses of the modern world and its education system – the need for specialization. There is a saying, “To a person whose only tool is a hammer, every problem looks like a nail.” Because we tend to use the tools we have, when someone spends their academic training learning the scientific method as the reliable testing method for determining truth, they have an inadequate tool box for measuring truth outside the realm of natural science. The tendency is naturally for these scientists to use that method.

Of course we can intellectually agree that the scientific method does not work for proving truth in a number of arenas. Consider again the benzene case. One of the things I had to

“prove” was that the oil company was malicious and intentional in its actions. You can’t prove motives of the heart, malice or intent, with the scientific method. Or, did the young boy suffer mental anguish from the leukemia experience? If so, how much anguish? You can’t measure mental anguish with the scientific method.

Even in murder cases, (Did Johnny murder Donna with a knife?) the evidence is not always direct. If there is no eyewitness (and sometimes even if there is!) this will require the circumstantial evidence discussed in the first chapter. There is no scientific method that will prove this.

Consider the questions many juries are asked to determine if the death penalty is appropriate. For the death penalty to be imposed in Texas, for example, the jury must find proof on three different questions:

1. Is there a probability that in the future the defendant would commit criminal acts of violence that would constitute a continuing threat to society?
2. In a capital murder case, did the defendant in taking the life of the deceased, intend to kill the deceased, or anticipate that a human life would be taken?

Only if there is a unanimous answer of YES to both of the above questions does the third question get asked:

3. Taking into consideration all of the evidence and circumstances, the defendant's character and background, and the personal moral culpability of the defendant, are there sufficient mitigating circumstances to warrant that a sentence of life in prison without parole be imposed, rather than a death sentence?

While many people recoil at the death penalty, the rightness or wrongness of corporal punishment is not the point here. My point is that everything necessary to “prove” the elements of the death penalty, an ultimate decision on life and death, is not subject to the scientific method. Moral culpability can’t be measured by a ruler. No lab test can determine if mitigating circumstances are sufficient to warrant parole.

Does that mean there is no evidence on these issues? Of course not! There is solid evidence on which one can base a verdict. There is evidence that is adequate to “prove” the elements of these cases. Here is where our thinking of “proof” as a scientific endeavor is naively narrow.

Science works for science. The existence of God is not a science. You don’t use the tools of nature to prove something that is not a part of nature. If we are thinking we do not

believe in God because there is no scientific proof of him, we have wrongly limited our field of inquiry.

Whether we realize it or not, we all live in a broader world of proof than a laboratory. I bring this broader tool box of proof to the question of agnosticism and I walk away seeing the “evidence” for God as greater than the “evidence” against God.

My evidence is formulated from my life and that of others. There are core questions I need answered to make sense of who I am and who others are. In thinking about these questions, I analyze them as I did the drinking of the benzene water. I am looking for answers that are consistent with life.

The Big Questions

There are things that I know are real, things that I experience, things in my life. I see these same things in others. These things form natural questions built around, “Why?” These are questions where we see whether our lives form a consistent expression of one worldview or another.

1. Is there objective right and wrong, and if so, why?

By “objective” I mean something that exists totally apart from perception. In other words, it doesn’t matter how one person or another, one culture or another, feels about a matter. It simply is, whether we realize it or not. In this sense, “objective” is the opposite of “subjective.” Something is subjective if it arises from our own thoughts. Something is objective if it already existed and our thoughts discover it, as opposed to create it.

A few people believe there is no objective right and wrong, but I have yet to see anyone live consistent with such a view. If pressed, most will admit that rape is wrong, regardless of whether the rapist thinks it is or not. Similarly, no one I’ve met truly defends the actions of Hitler and the Third Reich as a valid moral choice.

Most readily admit, and their lives betray, that there is something that we can call “right” and something we can call “wrong,” whether we like it or not. It is as if it is hard-wired into our bodies that some things are wrong, regardless of how we or others may feel about them. For example, most people will agree that for me to callously take someone’s life, simply because I feel like it, is wrong. Most people agree that rape or sexual assault is wrong. I know no sane person who believes that rape is morally okay.

The key question is what makes “wrong” wrong? There must be some reason why these things are wrong, and this question needs answering. Then, importantly, our academic understanding needs to align with the way we live.

2. Why is there “beauty”?

Compare a view from a prison cell, with grey cinder blocks in each direction you look, with a view of snow-capped Rocky Mountains, with the aspen trees flocked on the sides reflecting light in shimmers. I have heard many people exclaim about the Rocky Mountains, “That is *beautiful!*” I have never heard anyone say that of the grey cinder-blocked cell. What is it about people that we have this concept of “pretty”? I’m pretty sure (pun intended) my dog doesn’t have it. Is it simply a more developed brain that finds different views having a different chemical effect on our brains? Maybe, but even that begs the question, “Why?” Is beauty objective, subjective, or both? Are our lives lived consistently with our beliefs in this area?

3. What makes “justice” fair and important?

I know many people who don’t like certain ideas of “God.” One that is constantly repeated in different forms is, “If there is a God, why do bad things happen to good people? Why do evil people prosper? If there is a God, at least if he or she is a good God, then such wouldn’t happen!” These are good questions worthy of attention, but first, look what is inherent in the question!

There is an underlying premise that everyone has. It is that “justice” and “fairness” are attributes we expect in someone that is good. We bristle at injustice. No one likes to be treated unfairly. Why is that? What is there about us that seems hard-wired for justice and fairness? Which worldview offers an explanation that is consistent with our lives?

4. Why is there any basis for dignity?

Most every parent has had the opportunity to say to their children, “I am proud of you!” There are things that people do that are admirable. I admire the soldiers who give their lives for their country and loved ones. I admire the first responders who place their lives on the line to protect and serve the communities where they live. We watch some people respond to the highs and lows of life, and sometimes we wince while at other times we pause in respect and appreciation.

There is honor and dignity, and these are not hollow concepts to most. This compels we answer the question: Are these concepts hollow labels? Is there

really such a thing as being rightfully proud of what someone else does? Can we say that some people have dignity and honor? What do we show in life and what would our worldview predict?

5. Why do we uniquely value humanity?

Related to the previous question, what is it about people that sets them apart from other collections of atoms? Why do we value humanity in ways we don't value other animals? Who really will eat deceased people or use them as animal feed? Most people will eat other animals, or at least swat the nuisance mosquito. But we don't so quickly extinguish human life. Why are humans set apart from other animals? Is it because there is some objective value to being able to plan? To talk? To laugh? To contemplate death? Do we draw lines at some point as to which layer of conscious life is more worthy of equal treatment than others? Do we live consistent with our worldview on this?

6. Why is there meaning and significance in life?

Most everyone lives with the recognition that there must be more to life than simply eating, breathing, and eventually dying. We try to find "value" and "meaning" in work, in relationships, in leisure time, and even in dying. Why is that? What is it that tells us, "There must be more to life"? Why do we pursue and, to some measure, find meaning? Why do we despair if we are unable to find meaning? Why does "meaning" mean anything to us? What do our worldview models predict and what do our lives demonstrate?

7. Why do I do things I don't really want to do?

Why do I fail to measure up to even my meager goals and plans? Why can't I simply make up my mind to diet and do it? Why, if I decide to exercise daily, do I quit before reaching my goals? Why do I find it hard to forgive others who have wronged me? Why do I dislike people I want to like? Why do I do things I have decided not to do and fail to do things I have decided to do? Many, if not most, of these things are things that are good for me, yet I am unable to achieve them! Has evolution just turned me into someone who is incompetent at things that are very important? Have people evolved into things that have a self-destruct button? Which worldview model more closely aligns with how we live?

These questions demand something from our view of reality. Why are these things so? What kind of worldview explains these things? How do we construct a view of people and the natural world where these things make sense?

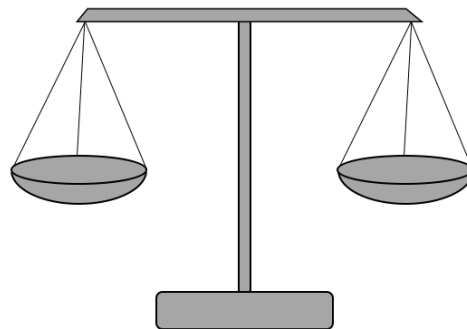
I will work through these questions below, but for now note that the answers to these questions, and in some cases simply having the questions, compel me to the conclusion there is a God.

Agnosticism: God or no God?

I think it best to think of weighing evidence using the picture of balancing scales, like we see lady justice holding in many courts around America.

Balancing Scales

By putting all the evidence for God on one side and all the evidence against God on the other, we are able to make a constructive proof based upon the available evidence:
God, or no God!



Aligning up evidence *against* God, we have those ideas set out in the previous chapter. The most prominent and most often cited are the problem of suffering, God's invisibility, unanswered prayer, and natural explanations for nature and the wonders of the universe.

Aligning up evidence for God includes considering the seven questions set forward earlier and measuring them to the models of belief and behavior we exhibit (as well, perhaps, as some fundamental natural questions not fully answered by current knowledge of science).

One of the things that I have learned over decades of trial work, sorting through evidence on both sides of the scales, is this. It is not always as simple as one set of evidence outweighing the other. The real truth includes all evidence. So as we examine the evidence against God, we need to see if the idea of God's existence provides any answers to the evidence against that existence. What we should see is that one worldview model or the other should make sense of all the evidence, and not merely part of it.

Are there legitimate explanations of suffering, God's invisibility, unanswered prayer, and the natural explanations of the world's order that align with the existence of God? Similarly, are there legitimate explanations for the seven questions set out earlier, in a world in which there is no God?

This is a common sense exercise, something for which we need no training. We look at the evidence for and against, we weigh it against the experiences of life, and we determine which truth best fits the evidence. Here we can decide whether the existence of God is something that we can affirm or whether we are left saying, “I can’t reach a conclusion” (agnosticism).

Here is the set of evidence we need to consider and place into the scales:



Evidence to be considered and weighed:

- ❖ Perceptions of reality
 1. Why is there objective right/wrong?
 2. Why is there “beauty”?
 3. Why are the concepts of “justice” and “fair” important?
 4. Why is there a basis for dignity and honor?
 5. Why do we uniquely value humanity?
 6. Why is there meaning and significance in life?
 7. Why do my actions fail to meet my standards?
- ❖ Negative perceptions and questions
 1. Why is there suffering?
 2. Why can’t we see God?
 3. Why do many prayers seem unanswered?
 4. How does God mesh with science making sense of the cosmos?

Let’s analyze each of these pieces of evidence.

Perceptions of reality

Somewhere each of us has to account for what is real and what is not. Are we a computer program, as Nick Bostrom theorized, and Elon Musk popularized? Are we a butterfly dreaming to be a human or humans who dream of butterflies, as Zhuangzi asked in the 4th century BC? Are we real because “we think,” as Descartes premised?

Many may not care to ask what is real, but if we want to know what is going on in this world, and in our lives, we should. Reality must be a fundamental question. The odds are great that if you are reading these pages, you have already decided, like me, that this life we are experiencing is real. I am a real person. I feel and sense real things. I experience a real life.

That means that there are aspects of who I am, of who you are, of what this life is like, that should be subject to rational analysis and logical deduction. We could also call it “common sense.” We should be able to use common sense to figure out some answers to some basic questions, including the seven I have asked at the start of this chapter.

1. Why is there objective right and wrong?

This is a very compelling question. It is interesting to look at the history of philosophers debating this point. We know of these discussions taking place as far back as Socrates (c.470-399BC) in Greek thought, with his famous dialogue with Euthyphro. Ideas on the subject go back much further than that in Judaic thought.

We can ask the question in our minds like this: If we believe there are some objective rights and wrongs, where do these come from? As referenced earlier in the comment to the question, by “objective” right or wrong, we are contrasting it to right or wrong being “subjective.” For example, “objective” means that it is wrong, regardless of how anyone feels or thinks about it, for Hitler to seek to annihilate a race because he thinks the race inferior. If this is objectively wrong, it doesn’t matter how you and I might feel about it. It doesn’t matter if Hitler had the support of the German people. This is not a “right or wrong” issue determined by the intellectual elite, by the powerful, by the majority vote of society, or by designated representatives. It is wrong. Period.

Now some people may say there is no objective wrong, and for those there is a whole host of questions, starting with our benzene example at the start of this chapter. I.e., does anyone live consistent with the view that there is no objective wrong, but that each person gets to decide what is right and what is wrong? Would these people not get upset if I steal their computer, after all, there is nothing really wrong with that, if I don’t think it wrong. For that matter, is it fair to sexually assault someone just because “it feels right,” regardless of how the victim feels about it? Of course not! No one will live that way.

Deep in our core, we know rape is wrong. We know murder is wrong. We know there are some things that are wrong in and of themselves.

So where does this wrong come from? Some will say it is a part of nature. The world is simply built that way. Of course, common sense points out the problems with this answer. First, under the “no God” worldview model, all we are is a sack of chemicals with active electrical pulses creating something we call “life” and “consciousness.” We, and the rest of the universe, are a collection of atoms and subatomic particles. Where, in this grand universe, are the atoms that have accumulated in such a way as to make “objective” morality? It doesn’t seem to exist on a molecular level!

Furthermore, the idea that nature contains inherently an objective morality doesn’t seem borne out by the world around us. It certainly doesn’t seem to be true in the ocean! I have yet to hear of many sharks who think twice about gulping down their neighbor. The sharks do not have a great reputation for passing up a hurt or injured fish as opposed to killing it and using it for the sharks own purposes (read that, “food”).

So some say that sharks might not have developed this “conscious awareness of right and

wrong,” but that other higher conscious animals have. The idea is that “right and wrong” are ingrained in our evolved subconscious. This again involves quite a gymnastic leap of common sense to me. At what point in the history of our little planet in our out-of-the-way part of the solar system in this far-flung region of the universe, did conscious thought evolve to such an extent that what the day before was “fine” suddenly became “wrong”? Not “wrong” because someone says so, but truly wrong in an objective sense?

If we want to carefully consider the options on this issue, we can do so with the ethics of rape. Is rape wrong? I think most everyone will answer “YES.” The follow-up question is then the key: Why?

We have some choices on the “No God” model and worldview:

A. Because most people in society say so.

This choice doesn’t strike me as right. Hitler was elected by popular vote. He had societal support for his programs. That didn’t make them right. If we find ourselves in a tribal culture where society believes it is okay for a victorious tribe to rape the women and children of a defeated tribe, surely we are not saying rape in that circumstance is good.

B. Because those in positions of power say so.

Again, this choice doesn’t strike me as right. If we were to live in a world where the king was allowed any sexual conquest of his choice, without regard to the wishes of the female, we would not suddenly think that the king’s rape of anyone was now “right” and moral.

C. Because might makes right.

This is another loser in the sense that power has an intoxicating effect that justifies all sorts of things that would otherwise be wrong. Just because a man is strong enough to force rape onto a woman, does that make the rape right? Of course not.

D. Because the intellectual elite say so.

This is not only a poor explanation for me, but it is a scary one. The idea that a select few are empowered to dictate right and wrong for the rest of the world does not provide a sensible reason that rape would be wrong. If those intellectuals were to change their collective minds tomorrow, would that suddenly make rape okay?

- E. Because it is ingrained into the fabric of the universe that animals of higher consciousness should honor the sexual choices of the individual.

Now this makes sense to one intuitively (“in one’s gut”), but where does this make sense from a logic perspective. Consider it this way. If there is no God, no higher being, nothing beyond humanity in terms of authority, then all anyone is, in reality, is a sack of chemicals having chemical and electrical reactions. We have come into existence purely by time and chance. By “existence,” all we mean is that the stardust that eventually became planet earth sorted itself into locations where the chemical soup produced some chemicals that started evolving into more complicated sacks of chemicals, eventually producing the sack of chemicals that is you and me. Now I ask you, how is there a “morality” or “right and wrong” for a sack of chemicals that has no meaning, no purpose, no direction, nothing except a brief existence as a sack that can “think” or realize what it really is. That is no basis for an “objective” right and wrong.

If those were all the choices, I would be stuck. I might retreat away from the thought there is objective right and wrong. I might think the smart thing to do would be to live however I wanted to, as long as I could get away with it.

But there is another choice. It is the choice that involves God and the other worldview model.

- F. Because “God” is a moral being and has made humanity to share in that morality.

So we inherently know what is “right” and wrong.” It is inscribed into our DNA as humans. It is part of what allows us to live successfully, breed prolifically, and promote civil society. It “works.”

Here there is an idea that a being exists outside of our world order. This being we call “God” has a moral structure to him or her (there is no need to determine gender of this “God” for this explanation). This morality is one that God wove into the fabric of the universe, so we sense it there as well. It is a morality engrained into humans in a different way than other animals because we humans are hard-wired with God’s morality. To borrow a Jewish term, humans are “made in God’s image”¹

This choice actually makes common sense to me. It helps me understand why I am so acutely aware of “right” and “wrong.” It makes sense of the way people live. It passes the “benzene test.”

¹ Genesis 1:26.

It belies the argument made by the philosopher Walter Sinnott-Armstrong who spends a good bit of his writing trying to justify his belief that an atheist can be moral.² Yes, an atheist can be moral, because that atheist is hard-wired for morality by God. If the worldview of God existing is right, we would expect many atheists to believe in and display morality. After all, even though they don't ascribe to that worldview, they still live in that world!

Sinnott-Armstrong's writings on the subject betray his failing the "benzene test." He never spends time explaining what "moral" means, because he can trade on the fact that everyone inherently knows. This is what it means for it to be hard-wired into us. I suggest Sinnott-Armstrong misses the problem. The problem is not "can an atheist be moral"? The problem is, "what is the intellectual reason *why* the atheist would be moral?"

Sinnott-Armstrong will say that morality exists because it tracks with what "harms" people. So rape is wrong because it "harms" the victim. Again, though, this is a bit of circular reasoning. To say that something is immoral because it harms another is to say that harming another is immoral. Why is that so? Why can we tell Josef Stalin that he is being immoral because he is harming hundreds of thousands? What is our basis for saying "harm" equals "immoral"?

For one who believes that God sets a moral standard, it is easy. We look to that moral standard and if harming another is immoral then it is immoral. But if we are sacks of chemicals, why is it "immoral" for one sack of chemicals to alter another sack of chemicals in a way that makes the altered sack have different chemical reactions? Sinnott-Armstrong has just altered his morality question, shifting it from "Why is immoral immoral?" to "Why is harm immoral?" What makes it inherently wrong to cause a certain kind of chemical reaction that Sinnott-Armstrong believes is "harm."

Here is again where the idea of God existing gives more structure to the words being used as well as the concept behind the words. If a God exists, and if that God was moral, and made humanity (we can read that as "caused to evolve" – creation versus evolution is a red herring at this point) in such a way that we know that "harm" is not a good thing, then "harm" isn't simply a ranking of different chemical reactions among different chemical sacks or containers. It is something that is real and significant. Harm should be avoided, as a general rule.

This answer also helps me better understand where Richard Dawkins gets it right, and where he misses the boat as he tries to discuss morality in his landmark book, *The Selfish Gene*. Dawkins argues that people behave "altruistically" "for the good of the genes." He posits that (1) people have a genetic structure that is "ruthlessly selfish"; (2) in special circumstances, that selfish gene can best achieve its selfish goals by being altruistic (This

² See, for example, his book *Morality Without God* (Oxford 2009).

means that sometimes being unselfish is the most selfish thing a gene can do.); (3) people feed and protect others who share the same genes; and, therefore, (4) humanity has perpetuated this genetic predisposition toward morality or altruism.

Dawkins is certain that there must be something genetically selfish underlying our ideas of universal love, and the welfare of other people. To think otherwise throws a kink in the godless evolution that Dawkins preaches. He affirms,

“If you look at the way natural selection works, it seems to follow that anything that has evolved by natural selection should be selfish. Therefore we must expect that when we go and look at the behaviour of baboons, humans, and all other living creatures, we shall find it to be selfish. If we find that our expectation is wrong, if we observe that human behaviour is truly altruistic, then we shall be faced with something puzzling, something that needs explaining.”³

Dawkins is trying to bootstrap his experience and perception of reality onto his science, without providing for the existence of a deity. It leaves him trying to explain why a race that should be focused only on selfish ends, somehow cares about unselfish matters, even finding it a virtue.

If, however, humanity was made with DNA dictating the development of bodies, with a drive toward being fruitful and multiplying, with a drive toward not only individual success, but community success, and with an inherent understanding of the value of moral achievement, then the selfish gene is explained, the altruism is explained, the tension between the two is explained, and Dawkins has a much different book to write!

There is a real predicament for those who do not believe that something outside of humanity has defined morality. These people are at a loss to explain the moral language they can't escape using. A case in point is the prominent atheist Michael Ruse. In *The Guardian*, Ruse wrote an opinion piece entitled, “God is dead. Long live morality.”⁴ He begins the piece asserting, “God is dead, so why should I be good? The answer is that there are no grounds whatsoever for being good... Morality is flimflam.”

Notice what Ruse has done? In legal terminology, we would stand up and say, “Objection, your honor, assumes facts not in evidence.” The assumption Ruse has made is that there is meaning behind the word “good.” This sums up the whole issue I have with this vis-à-vis agnosticism or atheism. An atheist or agnostic needs to define “good” without just assuming everyone knows what it means. These people use the word in a way that assumes

³ Dawkins, Richard, *The Selfish Gene*, 40th anniv. ed. (Oxford 2016), electronic edition at 52.

⁴ Ruse, Michael, “God is Dead. Long Live Morality,” *The Guardian*, Mar. 15, 2010.

morality; it doesn't prove it. They are evidencing that they are hard-wired to know what good is. Where did that hard-wiring come from? If it came from nowhere, then not only is morality "flimflam," but the person advocating that people can still be "good," as Ruse does, needs to quit using the word "good." Instead use a non-value word like "ping."

We could say that "ping" means some arbitrary behavior that one or more sack of chemicals have agreed to being "ping." Now there is no value here. We are not saying that ping is any better or worse than any other choice. After all there is no "better" or "worse" when we strip our actions from valuation. So we simply have ping. Now we read Ruse or others who advocate morality without sourcing the morality and we simply have someone saying "We can do ping if we want to, regardless of whether there is a God." Yes, we can. But what is the value of doing ping versus pong or something else? It is no longer "objective right or wrong." We can no longer say rape is wrong, if rape is just "ping."

I am left considering the evidence on objective right and wrong and I find no one effectively lives a life consistent with any view other than the idea that there is a real right and wrong, that we are hard-wired to it, and that it is more than a chemical reaction in a sack of chemicals. I put this in the scales on the side that there must be someone or something beyond humanity that has given definition to right and wrong, and that we are hard-wired into that definition. This is real evidence for God.

To be continued!

POINTS FOR HOME

1. *"The heavens proclaim his righteousness, and all the peoples see his glory"* (Ps. 97:6).

Sometimes things are so obvious, they don't register to us. We know the old saying, "He can't see the forest for the trees." This idea that some people can't find a forest because all the trees in front of their eyes seem to get in the way is not novel. It happens more often than we think. I think it especially common with the hand and work of the Lord.

Lord, open our eyes and soften our hearts, that we might see you, watch you move in our lives, and, give you the glory and honor due your name.

2. *"I will ponder the way that is blameless"* (Ps. 101:2).

There is something about right and wrong. It is worthy of our attention on multiple levels. It is not simply something that helps us live our lives right, but it is also

something so deeply ingrained that it calls us to make sense of it in this world in which we live.

3. *“There is none like you among the gods, O Lord”* (Ps. 86:8).

There are lots of faiths, and lots of “gods.” I include the “no god” position to be a faith of sorts as well. Each viewpoint does not exist in isolation. What we believe, and what we think true should be a North Star that guides us in life. If we are failing to live consistent with our “gods” or worldview, perhaps that should tell us something about the God who speaks to a clearer reality!