

Why I Am Not An Agnostic

IMPORTANT: This lesson is the third part of an ongoing “chapter” on why I am not an agnostic. The earlier lessons are available in written, video, or podcast form at www.Biblical-Literacy.com. Those earlier lessons contain important information on different kinds of evidence, different kinds of arguments, as well as the paradigm used for analyzing the issues. That information is not repeated here, so those who are new to this series may want to go back and consider those lessons when evaluating my thoughts.

INTRODUCTION

In the benzene trial I discussed in part one of this lesson, one of the issues involved the blow-out that occurred in the oil and gas well that was under pressure. The blow-out came from casing that was severed 500 feet underground. The blowout was severe, and leaked a substantial amount of hydrocarbons before it was fixed.

In the trial, the expert for the defendant testified about the blowout, but wanted to minimize it to the jury. As he testified, he kept calling it a “leak.” I wanted the jury to understand, this was no simple leak. It was a massive and destructive blow-out.

After court, as I prepared to cross-examine the expert the next day, I tried to think of ways to illustrate my point. I sent two of my guys to Walmart and told them to get me some balloons like you use to form and tie animals. They brought them back and I started experimenting.

After figuring it out, I filled two with water (they looked like long snakes!), put them in a box with a few other tools, and brought them with me to court the next day. When the witness was re-called to the stand by the judge, it was my turn to begin questioning.

I said to the witness, “Sir, yesterday you testified 28 times that the pipe or casing “leaked,” true?” He said, “Probably, but I didn’t count.” I then said, “Sir, in truth, the casing didn’t ‘leak,’ it was severed in two!” He said, “Tomato, tomahto!” I said, “No, no, no!” Those are quite different. A leak seems minor, but this pipe was under pressure, and it completely separated from itself a full six inches. That is no leak, it is a massive discharge, agreed?”

He stood resolute that there was no difference. So I pulled out my box with my snake-like, three-foot long water balloon. I had to drape it around my neck to even hold it. I said, to him, “Sir, did you ever play with water balloons as a kid?” He said, “Yes.” I explained that I was holding a water balloon, that it was shaped much like casing, and that it, like the casing, was under pressure. He agreed with each point. I then pulled out a safety pin.

Standing over the trash can, with the judge and jury being very watchful, I then inserted the safety pin into the balloon causing a small stream of water to flow from the balloon into the trash can. “Look!” I said, “I’ve sprung a leak!” He had no choice but to agree.

I then reached into the box and pulled out a pair of scissors. I held them open, blades extended around the water balloon, hand cocked, ready to squeeze the scissors and cut the balloon in half as I asked the next question, “Sir, I can cut this balloon, sever the casing, as it were, and not have a leak, but a blow-out, can’t I?” While he was mumbling something, I squeezed the scissors.

The balloon exploded. There is no other word for it. It soaked me, my suit, my hair, my shirt, my tie, the judges floor; it went everywhere! The court broke up in laughter as I stood there soaked and said, “Sir, that was no simple leak, was it?”

Words matter, because words express ideas. With them, we can convey ideas of truth, or ideas that have a shade of truth, and a germ of deceit. The discussions we are having over “words” like “good” and “bad” (part one of this lesson) or “dignity,” “honor,” “significance,” “value,” and “meaning,” in this lesson, matter. These words are sounds we use to express ideas that exist, either in reality or in our imagination.

We need to probe these words, compare them to the reality we know, understand and use them correctly, so we can best portray life as it is.

5. Why is there a basis for dignity and honor?

In 1971, a thin little book entitled *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* took the bestseller list by storm. Authored by Harvard behaviorist B.F. Skinner (1904-1990), the book set out a view of humanity that removed the concepts of “dignity” and “honor” from rational discussion. Skinner believed that people are sacks of chemicals, and no more. For Skinner, the chemicals are first determined by DNA, and then altered by the environment. Those alterations are set by nature’s laws, and no one has any real choice in who they are or what they become.

Here is a simplified illustration of Skinner’s position. Imagine that I have a jar of vinegar. The chemical make-up of my jar is water (H_2O), acetic acid (CH_3COOH), and likely a few other trace chemicals including flavorings. Next, imagine that I pour into that jar of vinegar a tablespoon of baking soda ($NaHCO_3$). The vinegar is going to receive the baking soda and react. You don’t need to understand the ion transfer of chemistry ($NaHCO_3 + CH_3COOH$ becomes $CH_3COONa + H_2O + CO_2(g)$ or “water,” “sodium acetate,” and “carbon dioxide”) to see and know there is a reaction. From a visual perspective, we will see foaming in the jar. This isn’t magic, it’s simply the natural laws of chemistry. The vinegar didn’t make a choice about foaming. The baking soda didn’t decide to foam. It happens because of chemistry. Period.

We can take that illustration and make it exponentially more complicated by making the chemical soup we call our “brains.” We can then bring other items to interact with our brain. The items might be chemicals like we eat or breathe, that find their way into our bloodstream and then into the brain to interact with the chemicals already there. The items might be visual stimuli that enter into the brain after being “seen” by our eyes and then transmitted into electrical properties that impress the stimuli onto the chemicals in our brains. There might be sound waves that enter the brain after being sensed by our eardrums. Skinner would say that these encounters simply react by the laws of nature with our sacks of chemicals to alter our chemical make-up. But according to Skinner, all of it is determined solely by laws of nature. There is no real choice for you or me.

For Skinner, “choice” is a nice sounding word with no real meaning. Choice is an illusion. It is what we think we are exercising, but in reality we are chemicals reacting to stimuli, no more, no less.

Skinner’s position is a logical one for the worldview of “There is no God.” After all, if we are only a sack of chemicals, it takes some mental gymnastics to deduce that we somehow have become so developed that we are a sack of chemicals that “make choices.” That is not to say that there aren’t philosophers and scientists that haven’t suggested ways that people can make choices without there being a God, but those arguments are constantly evolving because no argument is sustainable through science. The studies trying to show that people truly exercise choices are not consistent in their findings and do not produce any clarity on this issue.

Skinner was selected as the most eminent psychologist of the 20th century (beating out Sigmund Freud, who placed third). But he ran into a buzz saw over his plainly written book. The problem was that Skinner’s position is consistent with his worldview that there is no God, but Skinner’s position was not borne out of science. There simply is no science to substantiate his views, and there is a lot of personal experience that weighs against it.

From an early time, the problems with Skinner’s view were pointed out by M.I.T.’s Noam Chomsky. Chomsky decried the speculative nature of Skinner’s argument pointing out its lack of a scientific base.

Since his William James lectures of 1947, Skinner has been sparring with these and related problems. The results are nil... No scientific hypotheses with supporting evidence have been produced to substantiate the extravagant claims to which he is addicted... At the moment we have virtually no scientific evidence and not even the germs of an interesting hypothesis about how human behavior is determined.¹

¹ Chomsky, Noam, “The Case Against B. F. Skinner,” The New York Review of Books, (Dec. 30, 1971).

Skinner was not deterred by his lack of science. Skinner believed that science just needed to catch up to his conclusions.

So for Skinner, and others of his perspective, there is no “dignity” in any human person or action. The soldier who gives up her or his life for cause or country isn’t doing anything worthy of praise or honor. That soldier is a sack of chemicals reacting by laws of nature. The soldier didn’t really have a “choice.” Similarly, there is nothing that is noble. Sacrifice isn’t noble, it is what a chemical grouping does when the chemicals and stimuli are just right.

Humans have come up with words and ideas like “responsibility,” “credit,” “respect,” “honor,” and “dishonor,” but those are labels without real meaning. No one is more worthy of respect than anyone else. Just because nature made one jar of vinegar larger than another, such that it reacts more prolifically to the baking soda doesn’t give the jar a right to boast.

If Skinner’s presuppositions are correct, if Skinner rightly interprets reality that there is no God and humanity is a bag of chemicals, then his conclusions are consistent. It goes hand in hand with the earlier discussion on morality. Everything and everyone are just stardust residue put into self-contained chemical bags that react by the laws of nature, just as vinegar with soda.

Juxtaposed to Skinner’s idea is the existence of a real God. The Judeo-Christian view of God we are setting out in this chapter for comparative purposes, paints a much different view.

The Judeo-Christian God set out a world of cause and effect. The world of nature has cause and effect. If you drop a plate, gravity dictates it will fall. If it is sufficiently fragile, and a great enough force is exerted, it will break. This is cause and effect. This allows us to see elements of truth in the cause-and-effect ideas of Skinner. Because we live in such a world, some people will have DNA that sets out their brain’s chemical composition to be much different than that of others. This will cause different effects in how they act. But it is not the only source of actions.

In addition to DNA and laws of nature, the Judeo-Christian view of reality sets out the ability of people to make choices that are truly choices. This is no illusion. Everything is not predetermined. There is an ability to choose to eat the tuna sandwich or the pastrami on rye. We can decide what to watch on television, or decide instead to read a book. The soldier has a choice about whether to fall on a grenade and save others. God has given humanity the ability to make these choices.

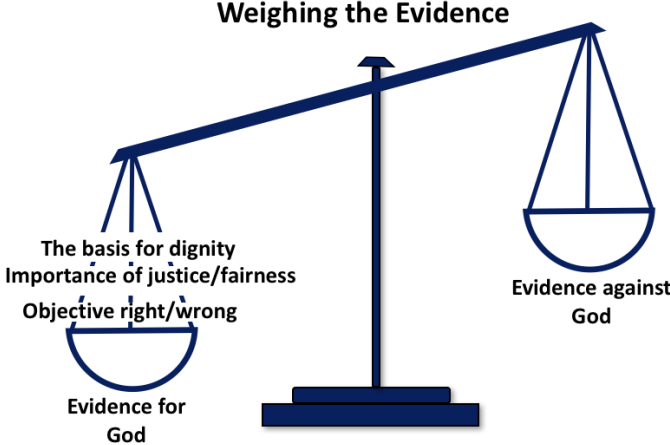
We see this concept of cause and effect in the earliest pages of Hebrew/Christian Scriptures. In the story of the Garden of Eden, we read that God tells Adam and Eve not to eat the fruit from one certain tree, “the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.” They are told that if they choose to eat of that tree, then they will die. Here we see that Adam and Eve have a choice. They can choose whether or not to eat from that tree. Yet we also see in that story that if they eat, there will be consequences over which they have no choice. There is cause and effect from their actions, even though their actions are self-generated, and not simply cause and effect from chemistry.

This view sets people apart from the rest of nature. We are not simply pre-determined chemical robots. We aren’t programmed by cause and effect. We are *able to cause effects* by real choices and actions.

This is another aspect of the Judeo-Christian teaching that people are made in God’s image. God is the ultimate “cause,” ascribed as the one who set the laws of nature into motion. God is the one who caused all things to exist. We can trace all of nature’s cause and effects back to God as the first cause. Humanity, while not going back to a status as “first cause,” are still made in God’s image and are able to set up or create new causes and effects. If I choose to drive while sleepy, and fatigue causes a lapse in judgment and a car crash that kills an innocent bystander, I can set off “effects” that reverberate throughout time.

This aspect of life infuses dignity into actions (as well as indignity). It gives meaning to noble deeds. It inspires pride and appreciation for jobs well-done. It finds values in altruistic behavior. It explains why dignity and honor are not hollow illusions, but real values. It means people carry responsibility for their deeds. It makes sense of me, the people around me, and the world. It tells me that we are not living deluded in Illusionville, but are truly experiencing real life. It is a further piece of evidence for me that weighs in on the side of scales that there is a God.

Weighing the Evidence



Evidence to be considered and weighed:

- ❖ Perceptions of reality
- 1. Why is there objective right/wrong?
- 2. Why is there “beauty”?
- 3. Why is “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?

6. Why do we uniquely value humanity?

I don't know any cannibals. We might think of cannibals as those among certain small tribes in the Amazon or some other unexposed pocket of the globe. Or maybe we think of Hannibal Lecter in *The Silence of the Lambs*. Or even Jeffrey Dahmer, the deranged mass murderer. All of those, however, are considered the outskirts of society or the deranged among us. We don't expect to find cannibals among us, sitting in the PTA meeting or at the block party.

Yet we will find many among us who do not believe in the existence of God. Upon close examination, I find this doesn't make sense. The worldview that says there is no God should not have issues with consuming human chemicals for nourishment. It is a logical thing to do. To a thoughtful person who considers the implications of worldviews, those who believe there is no God should align closely with those advocating consumption of human flesh.

I was once debating an atheist on British radio, both on and off the air! The atheist had a high view of human value, which I alleged was not based on his belief system, but was based on mine. I explained that his belief system gave no special value to humanity beyond being a pretty sophisticated bag of chemicals, something he was hard-pressed to deny as an intellectual proposition. I then pressed, telling him that his high view of human value was a vestige from his days as a believer in God. He didn't like that. He pointed out to me that there are those who have a high view of human value that never believed in God, something I was wanting to hear from him.

At this point it allowed me to take the discussion down a specific road. I told him that under the view of reality given by the Judeo-Christian Scriptures, humanity *does have value*. Whether we recognize it or not, people are made in God's image and are stamped with great intrinsic worth and value. It sets humanity apart from the rest of the animal kingdom. It makes us different. If the Judeo-Christian view is right, then most of us, even those who don't believe in God, are going to be stamped with the awareness of the unique value of humanity.

As he challenged my conclusion, I asked him whether he, or any of his atheist friends and colleagues were cannibals. He was taken back a bit as he answered, "Of course not!" I asked, "Why not?" He said he wasn't going to kill another person and eat them. I then asked if he was a vegetarian, sparing all life from death or whether this was just something he didn't do for people. He said that he didn't eat those who had "higher consciousness."

Rather than debate the merits of what is high consciousness versus low consciousness, I pushed him on a glaring weakness in his argument. I said, "What about your grandmother.

If she was lying in a hospital, and she was brain-dead. The doctors told you she had no consciousness and would never recover any. You are being told to pull the plug. Then would you do something with all the protein and vitamins in your grandmother's body, or would you let it go to waste? With all the people starving, would you donate her body as a food source?"

At this point, he made some comment about health issues associated with people eating people. I sidestepped that medical debate and instead pointed out he could feed his grandmother's corpse to a pig, and then the pig could be food for people.

He would have nothing to do with it, but as much as I pressed him, he could never give me a logical reason why not. He couldn't tell me why; he just knew it wasn't right!

There is a unique value we place on humans. It doesn't make any sense to me under a worldview where there is no God. Yes, we can say that people with a higher consciousness might be worthy of some greater deference, but that doesn't explain why we value those of lesser state. Yet, value them we do. If we go back to the creatures closely associated with humans, for example the Neanderthals, there is good evidence that cannibalism was common. Of course in the animal world, cannibalism is common. In the wild, monkeys account for 80% of a chimpanzee's kills for food.² Pigs will eat pigs. Lots of animals will eat their young. But modern humans see and understand a value in other modern humans that precludes such behavior.

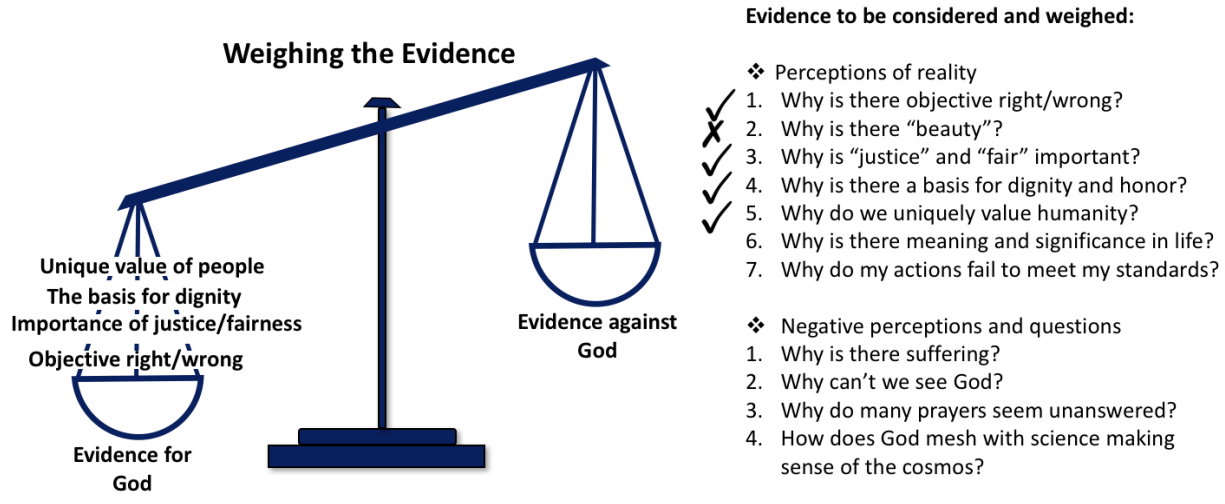
Why? From a Biblical perspective we see that somewhere in the midst of all animals, a special human man and woman were endowed with the unique imprint of God's image. It was so unique, that the man (Adam) was unable to find a mate among all the other animals (including Neanderthals, if they were around!). Adam needed someone like him, someone in the image of God, able to relate, carrying God's moral thumbprint, able to create, and more. So Adam is provided Eve, and modern humanity is birthed.

This is a compelling way that I see most everyone's life as consistent with the Judeo-Christian view of humanity, rather than that of humanity being only a patchwork of chemicals from cosmic stardust.

This has important implications for where we find that value in people. There have been civilizations that are not based on Judeo-Christian principles that do think it appropriate to extinguish the life of those who are not as fit, not as smart, not similar in appearance, etc. Yet the Judeo-Christian faith asserts that this is a distortion of humanity's true value and worth. Even though the exceptions exist beyond the Judeo-Christian sphere of influence,

² This is based on the chimpanzees studied at Gombe National Park in Tanzania, site of Dr. Jane Goodall's groundbreaking work dispelling the myth that chimpanzees were vegetarians. See, Stanford, C.B., *Chimpanzee and Red Colobus: The Ecology of Predator and Prey*, (Harvard University Press 1998).

those civilizations and cultures still acknowledge the inherent unique value of humanity, but they just classify some as “sub-human.” This, again, is evidence to me for the existence of God, as understood in Judeo-Christian Scripture.



7. Why is there meaning and significance in life?

Something fundamental drives human thought and life. We are seekers by nature. We seek to know things. We seek to figure things out. We seek to love and we seek to be loved. We seek companionship. We seek meaning and purpose.

As we ask, “Why?” we are confronted again by the two worldviews represented on the two sides of the scales. Is this drive to uncover meaning and significance in life one we would expect to find in a world where there is no God or in one where there is a God?

To me, the answer lies in large part in whether the questions are real or fake. Of course, if there is no God, the cosmic significance of understanding life is zero. That the chemicals in my brain understand that the hydrogen molecules collected into a mass a few million miles away from the hydrogen atoms in my body are experiencing molecular fusion is really of no note. Those molecules will fuse whether or not I am aware of it. In other words, the sun doesn’t quit shining just because I can’t figure out what it is.

Yet we can talk to most anyone of intellectual accomplishment and we can find them getting some measure of satisfaction in what they have learned or figured out. One can’t read the writings of even the atheists like Dawkins without seeing their innate pleasure and satisfaction over figuring things out and being “in the know.”

I think that this drive for meaning and significance is best understood, not by the cosmic-space-dust/sack-of-chemicals view of life, but by that of the Judeo-Christian God.

If we try to isolate the quest for meaning to the cosmic-dust view of humanity, then we are left with trying to figure out how the illusion of significance and purpose came to be, by all accounts, uniquely in humans. The device of natural selection might seem sensible here. It makes some sense that creatures who believe, even mistakenly, in purpose and who strive for significance will be most fit for the environment and most likely to propagate and live. Yet before we even get to natural selection, we are forced to confront the idea that somewhere DNA started registering the conscious thought of significance and purpose.

How and when DNA did this, science can't tell us. Maybe one day, it will unfold a "significance gene," but that gene has not yet been found. Of course, we can determine what regions of the brain are involved in the drive for significance and meaning, but that is not the same thing. I must also note, that should science find a "significance gene," such would not force a view of "no God." Certainly the Judeo-Christian God works through DNA, and there are unanswered questions of where and how God instills purpose and meaning in people. He might well do it through DNA.

But regardless of how science finds the genesis of significance and meaning, the question that I think can be answered today is this: Do we believe that there really is significance and meaning? In other words, is it a semantic trick our minds are playing? Are we thinking about things that are illusory? If we are, why doesn't the realization of it solve the puzzle? Why do we still have the drive after realizing the drive is fake? Why do we still search for meaning if we know it is meaningless? This doesn't make sense to me. I'm not saying it's not possible to be so deluded, but it defies common sense.

The Judeo-Christian alternative, however, fits experience like a solution to a puzzle. The Judeo-Christian view teaches that people were made to be in a relationship with God. In the earliest Scriptures, we read the story of the Garden of Eden, where God walked with Adam and Eve, speaking with them in a real relationship. This was made possible in unique ways because God made people in his image, able to relate.

The Christian addition to the Hebrew Scriptures adds the concept that God himself is capable of relationship within "God." This is the Christian idea of God being three, even as he is one (the "Trinity").

So from a Judeo-Christian perspective, we see that people were made in the image of God to be in relationship with God. They had purpose; they had meaning; they had significance. Yet the story in the Garden says that Adam and Eve violated the relationship with God in a way that marred the relationship. "Sin" came into the picture. By "sin," the idea is that people chose to do things that were inconsistent with God's morality. In common parlance we might say, "They went somewhere God wouldn't go!" That resulted in the Biblical metaphor of humanity "falling" from God.

In the Judeo-Christian teaching, that leaves people searching for something they don't have. We were made to be in a relationship we have lost. We were made for a significance we don't enjoy. It drives us to find it. It is the explanation for the deep-seated realization of people that, "There's got to be more to life than this."

The Christian thinker Augustine (354-430) wrote,

You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it finds rest in you.³

The Christian rabbi Paul told the people of Athens mid-way through the first century that

The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us (Acts 17:24-27).

The French polymath Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) was a mathematician, physicist, inventor, writer, and philosopher. In writing his thoughts on the Christian faith, he probed ideas on why people strive so hard to find happiness. He explained,

What is it then that this desire and this inability proclaim to us, but that there was once in man a true happiness of which there now remain to him only the mark and empty trace, which he in vain tries to fill from all his surroundings, seeking from things absent the help he does not obtain in things present? But these are all inadequate, because the infinite abyss can only be filled by an infinite and immutable object, that is to say, only by God Himself.

He only is our true good, and since we have forsaken Him, it is a strange thing that there is nothing in nature which has not been serviceable in taking His place; the stars, the heavens, earth, the elements, plants, cabbages, leeks, animals, insects, calves, serpents, fever, pestilence, war, famine, vices, adultery, incest. And since man has lost the true good, everything can appear equally good to him, even his own destruction, though so opposed to God, to reason, and to the whole course of nature.

Some seek good in authority, others in scientific research, others in pleasure.⁴

³ Augustine, *Confessions* at 1.1 Henry Chadwick translation, (Oxford 1991).

⁴ Blaise Pascal, W. F. Trotter (Translator), *Pensees* ("Thoughts") Sec. VII, at 425.

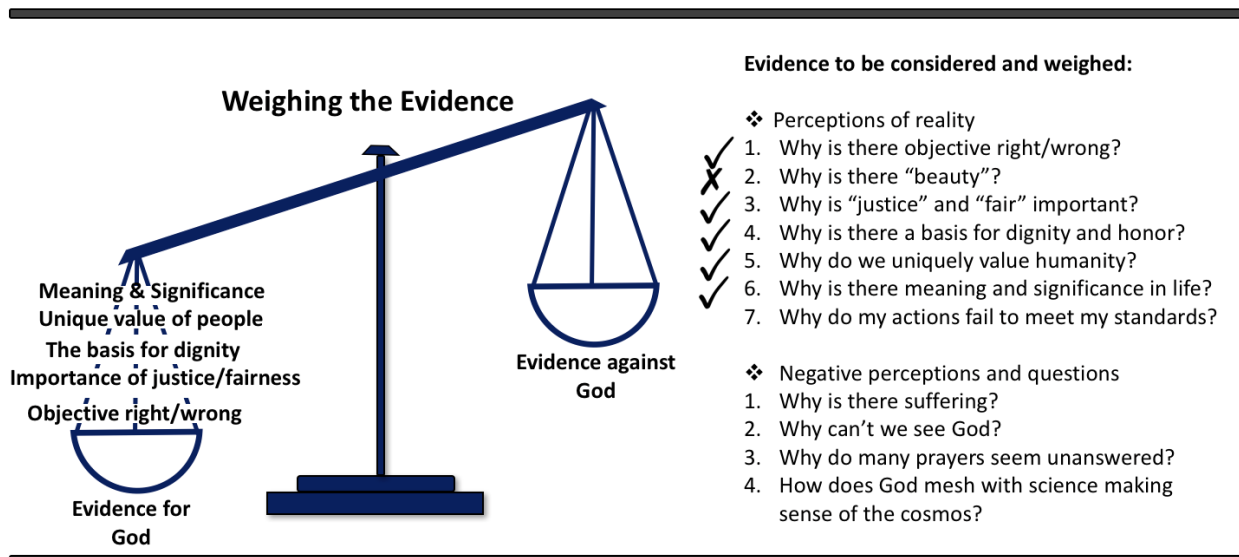
We see here a ready explanation for the drive to meaning, but we must ask, what if this is illusion? What if this is simply the drive discussed in the star dust model as natural selection happening upon it accidentally, and seizing it as a trait worth propagating?

My response is somewhat personal, but no less real. My response is that I, and many like me, who have found in their faith a restoration of the relationship with “God” have found the peace of satisfaction in significance and meaning. It is as if the hunger that drove me to find “something that is missing” has been satisfied. I know meaning. I know significance. I know purpose.

I work to learn and to love, not because I am driven blindly, but because I know what role it takes and where it fits. I learn because God has a world that is at my disposal, and I am told to try to use that world’s laws to make it a better place. I am told to fight disease, misfortune, pain, and more by creatively using the resources of nature. If I can find a cure to cancer, I am doing a good thing. If I can mend a broken heart, I am doing a good thing. These are jobs of meaning and significance because they are part of my relationship with God, whose will and kingdom I desire.

It is a framework that explains my own significance and the drive for significance and purpose of others. It makes more sense to me than being cosmic space dust in a form left with chemical imprints of significance from other space dust.

The Judeo-Christian worldview makes more sense to me on this issue, so I place it in the scales on the side of “God.”



To be continued!

POINTS FOR HOME

1. *“...and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free”* (Jn. 8:33).

The charge of Christ is to know truth, not to run from it. Jesus taught that he himself was the embodiment of truth. “I am the way, and the truth, and the life” (Jn. 14:6). Jesus was God Incarnate. He tells us that any search for truth will find God, or an expression of God, at the conclusion. The truth we see in science, is truth that points to God. The truth we see in humanity, is truth that points to God. All truth finds its end in God. To take truth, and stop short of God, is to take only part of the truth. I want to go for it all!

2. *“Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image”* (Gen. 9:6).

Most everyone knows about Adam and Eve’s two sons, Cain and Abel. Cain killed Abel. It was not a case of a chimpanzee killing a monkey, it was the death of one who was made in God’s image. This was significant in a whole new way.

The fact that humans are in God’s image gives true dignity and worth to each life. It doesn’t matter how old or young, how rich or poor, how genetically marvelous, or not. People have value.

I want to show the value of people by how I treat others.

3. *“God has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man’s heart”* (Eccl. 3:11).

Paul said the evidence of God is around us and also in us. The writer of Ecclesiastes expressed much the same thing. God has made us for something more than simply breathing and eating. There is a purpose and significance to life. We will find that and the satisfaction that flows from that, only from being in a relationship with God. Without it, our pride and accomplishments are nothing more than hollow claims from sacks of chemicals.