

Is God an Atheist? Intelligent Design and the Problem of God

By
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If you haven't seen Ben Stein's documentary, *Expelled: No Intelligence Allowed*, don't bother! Because of its title, and not knowing much about Ben Stein, I was expecting a scathing exposé on the decline of public education under the No Child Left Behind Act, but instead got 97 minutes of ludicrous propaganda suggesting that scientists and college professors in the U.S. are being singled out and fired from their jobs because they believe in intelligent design. Ben Stein, a comedian and conservative political commentator (as if there's a difference), portrays himself heroically in the film by intercutting a speech he gave on a college campus with footage of Ronald Reagan's famous Berlin speech, during which he asked Mikhail Gorbachev to "tear down this wall." Throughout the documentary Stein compares the Berlin wall to the wall intelligent design proponents are up against. He even goes so far as to blame the Holocaust on Darwinism, and tricks Richard Dawkins, perhaps the world's most prominent living atheist, into an interview that was, no doubt, edited to Stein's advantage.

It begins with Dawkins reading a few lines from his bestselling book, *The God Delusion*, "The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully." Stein then asks why he wants to spoil the fun for everyone who believes in a loving benevolent God. "I believe it is a liberating thing to free yourself from primitive superstition," Dawkins responds, "...I think a lot of people, when they give up God, feel a great sense of release and freedom."

"Who did create the heavens and the Earth?" Stein then asks, to which Dawkins rebukes, "Why do you use the word 'who?' You see you immediately beg the question by using the word 'who.'"

"Well then how did it get created?"

"Well, by a very slow process."

"Well how did it start?"

"Nobody knows how it got started. We know the kind of event it must have been. We know the sort of event that must have happened for the origin of life."

"What was that?"

"It was the origin of the first self-replicating molecule."

“Right, and how did that happen?”

“I told you, we don’t know.”

“So you have no idea how it started?”

“No, nor has anyone else.”

By responding in this way, “nor has anyone else,” Dawkins is obviously attempting to divert the conversation away from the logical fallacies Stein is heading toward, the suggestion that if we don’t know the answer, any answer is possible. Although this might be true, our suggestions are not logical unless they are also probable. We could say, “God created the first self-replicating molecule,” or, “The flying Spaghetti monster did,” or, “It was the Hindu god, Vishnu,” but none of these can be considered reasonable suggestions unless they can be proven to be probable, meaning they must have a better chance of being true than not. In short, just because Dawkins admits he doesn’t know how the first self-replicating molecule emerged, doesn’t mean, “God must have done it.”

The same can be true of intelligent design in general. Simply admitting there might be some evidence of design in the universe doesn’t mean we’re suggesting that God made it, let alone the despotic God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob described so succinctly by Dawkins. As he told Stein, “You immediately beg the question by using the word ‘who.’” Just because we don’t know an answer to a question, doesn’t mean any answer will do! Otherwise we’d have all gotten through school as straight “A” students!

Yet this seems to be precisely the point of those who are attempting to sneak Creationism, the literal interpretation of the Biblical creation story, into our public schools and science labs. They are not arguing for intelligent design because they hope to discover the actual designer, even if it happens to be the Flying Spaghetti Monster, but because they want us all to make the leap from intelligent designer to the specific God they happen to believe in—the God of Christianity. Such an argument comes from a place of rationalism not reason; from trying to prove what we already believe is true, rather than truly discovering something new.

Nevertheless, it would also be a mistake for any of us to avoid a particular question simply because we don’t like the potential answer. In other words, it is not rational to dismiss the possibility that the universe might have been designed by some intelligence just because we don’t believe in God, at least not in Abraham’s God. Just because we might not believe in God doesn’t mean the universe was created by mere chance or accident. It might have been. But it might also not have been. Again, as Richard Dawkins told Ben Stein, “We don’t know.”

Yet it is odd that Stein attributes the Holocaust to Darwin in order to eventually suggest the existence of God, when it is actually the Holocaust that has given rise to what in Theology has come to be called, "The Problem of God." Although this term was first coined in 1929, as many thinkers questioned how a loving benevolent God could allow evil and suffering to occur, it became magnified by the horrors perpetrated against humanity by Nazi Germany. If there is any proof that God does not exist, it is such tremendous suffering and evil. As the philosopher David Hume once asked, "Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then is he impotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then is he malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil?"¹ How could a loving, all-powerful God step back and allow the Holocaust to happen? Or, as we saw this week, allow a 28-year-old Sunday School teacher to murder a little girl, stuff her body in a suitcase, then discard it in a nearby irrigation ditch? How could such a God let diseases like cancer, Alzheimer's, and AIDS exist? How could such a being stand by while our species destroys this beautiful planet, the home to so many magnificent creatures that are themselves becoming extinct to the tune of 150 species each day? If Christ saved the world 2000 years ago, why is it still such a mess today? As Robert Rubenstein wrote in his book, *After Auschwitz*, "To see any purpose in the death camps, the traditional believer is forced to regard the most demonic, antihuman explosion in all history as a meaningful expression of God's purpose."² He went on to say, "A God who tolerates the suffering of even one innocent child is either infinitely cruel or hopelessly indifferent."³ The evidence is in, the logic is sound; probably an all-powerful, all-loving God does not exist!

Yet how, then, do we account for this "self-organizing" principle in the universe? Not only regarding the first self-replicating molecule that Dawkins points out, but that everything in the Universe, the elements, the stars, the planets, along with life, continue to self-organize and self-replicate in ever increasing complexity? It does seem that the Universe is following a script, and, if so, it is reasonable to ask, *who wrote the script?* This is precisely what Ben Stein was getting in asking Richard Dawkins, "What do you think is the possibility that intelligent design might turn out to be the answer to some issues in genetics or in evolution?"

You will, no doubt, be surprised by Dawkins' response, "It could come about in the following way," he said, "It could be that some earlier time somewhere in the Universe a civilization evolved, by probably some kind of Darwinian means, to a very very high level of technology, and designed a form of life that they seeded perhaps on this planet. Now that is a possibility, and an intriguing possibility, and I suppose it's possible that you might find evidence for that if you look at the details

¹ Hume, David, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, (1779), Norman Kemp Smith, ed., Bobbs-Merrill Co., Inc., New York, NY, 1947, p. 198.

² Rubenstein, Robert L., *After Auschwitz*, Bobbs-Merrill, Indianapolis, IN, 1968, p. 153.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 86-87.

of biochemistry and molecular biology; you might find a signature of some sort of designer... and that designer could well be a higher intelligence from elsewhere in the universe, but that higher intelligence would itself have had to come about by some explicable process. It couldn't have just jumped into existence spontaneously— that's the point!"

Startling, isn't it, that Richard Dawkins would suggest the possibility that life on Earth might have been designed by intelligent beings from outer space? But he's not the first prominent scientist to do so. Indeed, Francis Crick, one of the Nobel Prize winning discoverers of DNA, the program of life, promoted the hypothesis of *directed panspermia*, in his book, *Life Itself: It's Origin and Nature*. He did not believe that the first cell emerged accidentally in a primordial soup because such a cell would have first required the existence of DNA, and DNA doesn't evolve, and hasn't, as far as we know, since it's first appearance on Earth 3.5 billion years ago. For Crick, this indicated the greater likelihood that the Earth was impregnated suddenly with DNA from outer space, perhaps on spaceships or frozen on meteors, and this program began the process of evolution on our planet. Since then, DNA, with its simple four letter alphabet (A, G, C, and T) has remain unchanged, yet has been responsible for writing the code of life in its ever changing multifarious forms.

But even if this is true, that Aliens created the program of life and have seeded it throughout the universe, only to leave it to fail or flourish on its own, the same way a farmer sows seeds then lets nature take its course; it is little different than the 18th century theologian, William Paley's notion of the *Watchmaker God*, in which God created the universe, wound it up, then went on vacation to let it run itself based upon the established laws of nature. In both cases, evidence of design leads us to conclude the existence of a probable designer. Some call the designer God. Others consider it extraterrestrial. Some attribute it to chance. And still others are content just to say, "I don't know."

But let us say, for argument's sake, that it was God who created the Universe rather than incredibly advanced aliens, or some other intelligence; what does it really matter? Whether it was God, or aliens, or chance, or something else entirely, the outcome is the same, we have been left all alone in the universe. We are cosmic orphans left to fend for ourselves.

How we got here is an intriguing question, and I'm glad modern science is giving us a more precise answer every day. Perhaps better understanding the process of our origins will help us better understand the direction we're heading and how we ought to best proceed from here. But the real question is not, "do we believe in God," but, "does God believe in us?" Our first concern ought not to be "how did we get here," but to recognize that we are here! Even if Christ were to return someday, the world has only gotten worse since he left 2000 years ago, and it's up to us, not him, to do something about it. Even if God is the Creator of the Universe, he seems content to abandon us to our own devises, so it's up to us, not him, to make a difference. Or even if it was an extraterrestrial race of beings that evolved in their

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own way then seeded the Universe with the program of life, it makes no difference to us. For we are here on this planet without the benefit of their wisdom or knowledge, and so it is up to us to confront the life that is ours with all its challenges, because neither God, nor Jesus, nor My Favorite Martian seem to be around to help us out.