

Is it true?

Talks on BIG questions
of
God,
Religion,
Science and Suffering



Is Atheism is more rational than Christianity?

Professor Alister McGrath
Oxford University

A key distinction

Rational *versus* Rationalist

“On the one side, a many-islanded sea of poetry and myth; on the other, a glib and shallow rationalism.”

C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*

Warfare of science and religion?

Historical stereotype of the late nineteenth century

Much more complex picture

Galileo: really struggle about institutional power – about the church, rather than about Christianity as such

Warfare model dominates the “New Atheism”

Faith and Proof: W. K. Clifford (1845-79)

“It is wrong, everywhere and for everyone, to believe anything on insufficient evidence”.

How reliable are these statements?

$2 + 2 = 4$

The whole is greater than the part

The sun is about 93 million miles away
from the earth

Democracy is better than totalitarianism

Leprechauns

Can't see them

Can't hear them

Can't touch them

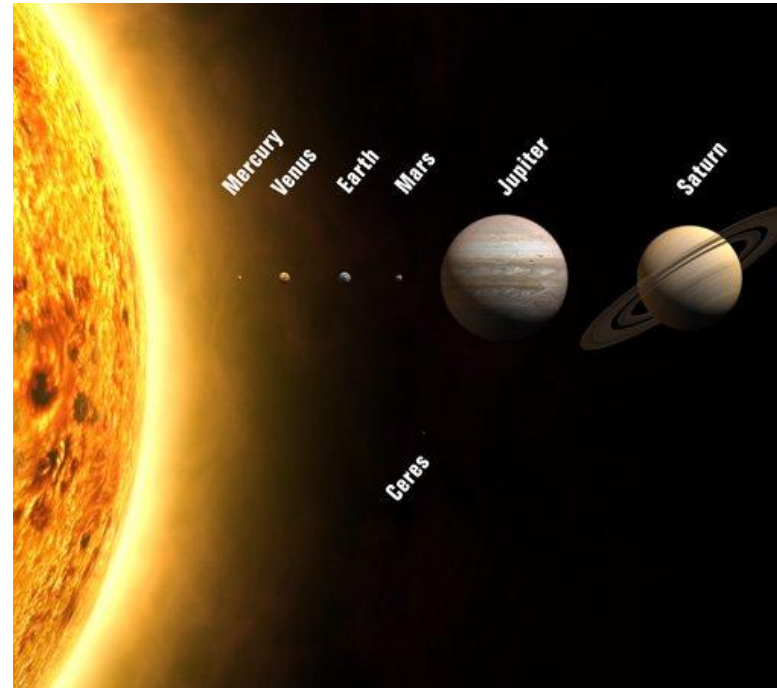
Can't smell them

Can't taste them



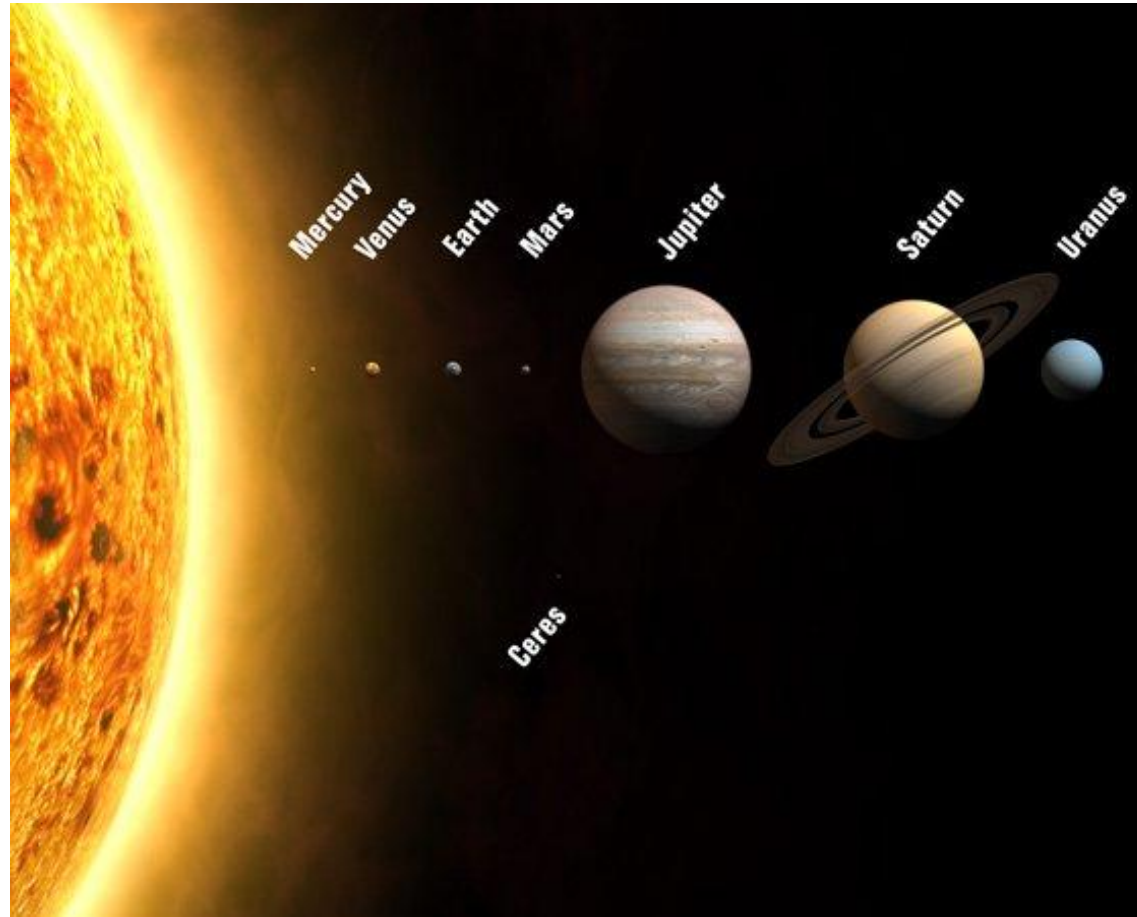
Gravity

Isaac Newton



Gravity

Can't see it
Can't hear it
Can't touch it
Can't smell it
Can't taste it



W. K. Clifford (1845-79)

“It is wrong, everywhere and for everyone, to believe anything on insufficient evidence”.

Richard Dawkins

“[Faith] is a state of mind that leads people to believe something – it doesn’t matter what – in the total absence of supporting evidence. If there were good supporting evidence, then faith would be superfluous, for the evidence would compel us to believe it anyway.”

The Selfish Gene (1976)

Richard Dawkins

Very important attitude

Underlies the “New Atheist” attitude to belief in
God

What you see is what you get

Reality limited to what reason and science can
prove

But is it right?

Richard Dawkins

“If there were good supporting evidence, then faith would be superfluous, for the evidence would compel us to believe it anyway.”

Testing this approach

Dawkins's account of the relation of evidence and belief in the natural sciences fails to make the critical distinction between the "total absence of supporting evidence" and the "absence of totally supporting evidence."



Geheim!

Zur Beachtung!

Beachte die Gebrauchsanleitung für die Chiffriermaschine H. Dv. 9-12

1. Zur Sicherung der Vertraulichkeit alle Wäler möglichst gegenwärtig vor und abhandeln.
2. Zur Sicherung der Vertraulichkeit sämtliche Teile der Einrichtung vor Feinden möglichst geschützt halten.
3. Bei Einstellung der in den Feinden verfahrenen Buchstaben beachten, daß die Wäler richtig gesetzt sind.
4. Die unverschlüsselbaren demontierbaren Buchstaben sind bis zur Anhebung in den Buchstaben einzuführen.
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7. Die unverschlüsselbaren demontierbaren Buchstaben sind bis zur Anhebung in den Buchstaben einzuführen.
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10. Die unverschlüsselbaren demontierbaren Buchstaben sind bis zur Anhebung in den Buchstaben einzuführen.

Zum Überprüfen der Zahlen in Buchstaben oder umgekehrt diese nachstehende Tabelle.

A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z	
Q	P	O	N	M	L	K	J	I	H	G	F	E	D	C	B	A	Z	Y	X	W	V	U	T	S	R	Q

Science as a journey . . .

It hasn't ended yet

We can't assume that any of its pausing points is its final destination

It keeps changing its mind

Radical theory change in science

Paradigm shifts (Thomas Kuhn)

Classic example: The massive shifts in cosmology in the last century

Standard Cosmological Model

Scientists used to think the universe had always been here

But not any more

So-called “big bang”

And now a new debate about the “multiverse”

The 1948 Debate about God

Atheist Bertrand Russell versus Christian
Frederick Coplestone

1998 replay: Christian William Lane Craig versus
(then) atheist Anthony Flew

Universe or Multiverse

Two very different understandings of the universe!

Both have support from leading scientists

But they can't both be right

You can say: "We can't decide"

Or you can say: "We *believe* this one is right"

(meaning: we have good reason to think this is right, but we can't prove it is right).

Not blind faith!

Faith is just a fact of life

Terry Eagleton: “We hold many beliefs that have no unimpeachably rational justification, but are nonetheless reasonable to entertain.”

Julia Kristeva: “Whether I belong to a religion, whether I be agnostic or atheist, when I say ‘I believe’, I mean ‘I hold as true’.”

Faith and reason

Faith is not irrational. It just goes beyond the limits of reason.

Difference between proof and justification

Proof is limited to mathematics and logic

Justification is about having good reason for believing that something is true, even though you can't actually prove it

The idea of “empirical fit”

What worldview makes most sense of what we observe in the world?

What "big picture" offers the best account of what we experience?

Which explanation is the most satisfying?

The idea of “empirical fit”

Richard Dawkins:

"The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but blind pitiless indifference."

River out of Eden, 133.

The idea of “empirical fit”

C. S. Lewis:

“I believe in Christianity as I believe that the Sun has risen – not only because I see it, but because by it, I see everything else.”

C.S. Lewis, "Is theology poetry?", in *Essay Collection and Other Short Pieces*.
London: HarperCollins, 2000, 10-21; 21.

Types of explanation

1. Paul Humphreys' model of causal explanation;
2. Peter Lipton's account of the nature of explanatory loveliness, set within the framework of "inference to the best explanation"; and
3. The account of explanatory unification offered by Michael Friedman and Paul Kitcher.

Examples of Unificatory Explanation

Newton on falling apples and revolving planets
Phenomena which had previously been seen as unrelated are shown to be the result of a common set of mechanisms or causal relationships.

It's about finding a big picture which makes sense of the snapshots

Stephen Jay Gould

America's foremost evolutionary biologist
Died 2002, aged 60, from lung cancer



Stephen Jay Gould

To say it for all my colleagues and for the umpteenth millionth time (from college bull sessions to learned treatises): science simply cannot (by its legitimate methods) adjudicate the issue of God's possible superintendence of nature. We neither affirm nor deny it; we simply can't comment on it as scientists.

Different perspectives

Mary Midgley

Invites us to think about looking at something really complicated, like a great building.

We see it from different angles

Each perspective builds up to give a total view

Or think of looking into an aquarium . . .

Mary Midgley

We cannot see it as a whole from above, so we peer in at it through a number of small windows ... We can eventually make quite a lot of sense of this habitat if we patiently put together the data from different angles. But if we insist that our own window is the only one worth looking through, we shall not get very far.

Mary Midgley, *The Myths We Live By*. London: Routledge, 2004, 26-8.

Different Levels of explanation

Very important aspect of any critical realist account of reality!

Reality is complex and stratified – lots of layers

Different levels of explanation

An example: boiling a kettle (Frank Rhodes)



Frank H. T. Rhodes

Now these are different answers . . . But both are true, both are complementary and not competitive. One answer is appropriate within a particular frame of reference, the other within another frame of reference. There is a sense in which each is incomplete without the other.

The limits of science

Dawkins argues that science proves things with certainty

Anything worth knowing can be proved by science

Everything else – especially belief in God! – is just delusion, wishful thinking, or madness

The limits of science

Yet Dawkins is clear about limits in one very important field:

“Science has no methods for deciding what is ethical.”

- *A Devil's Chaplain*, 34.

Yet for most of us, ethics matters profoundly.

Science and Knowledge: One Viewpoint

“Whatever knowledge is attainable, must be attained by scientific methods; and what science cannot discover, mankind cannot know.”

Bertrand Russell

Science and Knowledge: Another Viewpoint

“The existence of a limit to science is, however, made clear by its inability to answer childlike elementary questions having to do with first and last things – questions such as ‘How did everything begin?’; ‘What are we all here for?’; ‘What is the point of living?’”

Sir Peter Medawar, winner of the 1960 Nobel prize for medicine.

John Polkinghorne

Theoretical physicist

Science can “throw up questions that point beyond itself and transcend its power to answer.”



Sir Isaiah Berlin (1909-97)

Three kinds of beliefs:

1. Those that can be established by empirical observation;
2. Those that can be established by logical deduction;
3. Those that cannot be proved in either of these ways.

Sir Jonathan Sacks

Chief Rabbi

Book: *The Great Partnership: God, Science and the Search for Meaning.*



Sir Jonathan Sacks

“We cannot prove that life is meaningful and that God exists.”

“But neither can we prove that love is better than hate, altruism than selfishness, forgiveness than the desire for revenge.”

“Almost none of the truths by which we live are provable.”

End