

TEN TOUGH QUESTIONS: ARE SCIENCE AND FAITH COMPATIBLE?

By Andrew Wilson
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Psalm 33: 1, 4-9, 20-21
John 20: 24-29

Are science and faith compatible? Of the ten questions we're asking this fall, this one, in a sense, is the easiest. The answer is yes – unequivocally yes. Not only are science and Christian faith compatible, they're mutually complimentary. Science and faith take us down very different paths, but they both help us to discover the truth. They both lead us to dimensions of reality that are hidden from plain sight. Clearheaded thinkers on both the theological side and the scientific side agree on that point. That was true at the beginning of the modern era, when science was in its infancy. And it remains true today.

You might ask: If there's this happy state of agreement among so many scientists and Christians, what's the problem? Why are we talking about this question? We're talking about it because a great many people in our world today don't agree with anything that I just said. Some of them proudly call themselves atheists while others say they're agnostic or that they believe in an impersonal force or higher power that governs the universe. But what they all have in common is a worldview that has been shaped by scientific atheism. They've been influenced by scientists and journalists and bloggers who insist that science and faith are at odds. They've been taught at school that religion is dangerous and that God is dead. They're heard it so many times, from so many smart people, they assume it must be true. It must be true that science has produced irrefutable evidence against God's existence. Why else would so many smart people be atheists? It must be true that Christians are delusional. Why else would so many of our cultural leaders be so antagonistic towards the church?

There are many problems with scientific atheism. The core problem is that it prevents people from engaging in rational conversation. It convinces them that the whole idea of God is so irrational and illogical that it's idiotic to even discuss it. More to the point, it causes them to reject any evidence in favor of God's existence on the grounds that God doesn't make sense.

Thankfully, there aren't a lot of people who fully embrace the ideology of scientific atheism. Many more people have adopted the skeptical attitude of the true believers, but are still open to God. They're full of doubts, but they want to believe. They're eager to hear from people who believe in God. They're interested in any evidence pointing to God that they might produce.

Think about that story we just read from John. The Risen Lord has already appeared to most of the disciples several times. Thomas is the only one who hasn't seen him and he doesn't believe his friends' wild stories. The only thing that would convince him that Jesus is alive, Thomas tells them, would be if Jesus allowed him to put his finger inside the nail holes in his hands and in the spear hole in his side.

A week later all the disciples are together in a locked room and Jesus appears to them. The Lord knows that Thomas still doesn't believe. He invites him to touch his wounds, and as Thomas does so his doubts melt away.

That story has a lot to teach us about what it means to be an ambassador for Christ. Our world is filled with doubting Thomases – people who think the stories about Jesus are just too good to be true – people who say the evidence for God is too weak or too lacking. So often we assume they're just being impudent and we write them off. But not all skeptics are closed to the truth. Many are just like Thomas. They're hungry for God and ready to believe. They just need someone to show them the same kind of love and compassion that Jesus showed to Thomas. They just need someone like you to address their doubts and point to the evidence of God's living presence in creation.

My goal today is to inspire you to talk to those people. And if you're wondering what to say to them, I have some ideas for you. You should of course talk about your own journey with the Lord. People want to hear your personal story of salvation. But people who have been trained to be skeptical need more than that. They need evidence. They need reasons to believe that are compatible with a scientific worldview. So today we're going to talk about science. We're going to look at 4 different kinds of evidence pointing to intelligent design in nature. And as we do so I want you to think about how you might make use of them, and how they might help a person who is caught in the quicksand of scientific atheism.

So then, what evidence is there for intelligent design? First let's look at the evidence that relates to what we call scientific laws.

We all have a basic understanding of scientific laws, but just to be clear, let's look at two examples.

- According to Newton's first law of motion, an object at rest will remain at rest until acted upon by an external and unbalanced force. An object in motion will remain in motion unless acted upon by an external and unbalanced force.
- According to the law of the conservation of energy, the total amount of energy in an isolated system remains constant.

Those and other scientific laws suggest tell us something tremendously important about the universe. They tell us that the universe is rational. They tell us that nature operates in ways that are harmonious and predictable. The laws of science work in the same way in the city of La Crescenta as they do on a planet located 973 billion light years away.

These discoveries about the universe have led scientists to ask a simple but immensely important question: Why does nature come packaged in this way?

Many of the world's greatest scientists have decided the answer must be: Intelligent design. The world exhibits that kind of rationality because it was created by a vastly intelligent being – the being that the philosophers and theologians call God.

One such scientist was Albert Einstein. Einstein is often falsely represented to us as an atheist. In fact, Einstein stated quite plainly, on many occasions, that he believed in God. He explained that his belief in God was rooted in what he had learned about the universe through science. He wrote:

Everyone who is seriously engaged in the pursuit of science becomes convinced that the laws of nature manifest the existence of a spirit vastly superior to that of men, and one in the face of which we with our modest powers must feel humble.

- Max Jammer, *Einstein and Religion* (Princeton University Press, 1999), page 93

I love the way the celebrated physicist Paul Davies makes the point. Davies wrote this in his mind-blowing book, *God and the New Physics*:

People take it for granted that the physical world is both ordered and intelligible. The underlying order in nature - the laws of physics - are simply accepted as given, as brute facts. Nobody asks where they came from; at least not in polite company. However, even the most atheistic scientist accepts as an act of faith that the universe is not absurd, that there is a rational basis to physical existence... So science can proceed only if the scientist adopts an essentially theological worldview.

To sum up, then: Scientists work under the assumption that the universe operates according to fixed, universal laws. Every scientific breakthrough confirms the wisdom of that approach. The rationality of the universe seems to point beyond itself to a massively powerful and intelligent creator. How else do we explain the coherence and consistency that we find everywhere we go?

The second kind of evidence that points to intelligent design is one that builds on the first. It relates to the mysterious forces that govern the universe.

In the 1950s, 60s and 70s physicists gained lots of new big-picture insights. They discovered, for example, that the universe is expanding. They worked out the values of some of the mysterious forces that govern atoms and molecules – values that hold constant, and that shape the universe as we know it. Examples include gravity, the difference in mass between a proton and a neutron, and the so-called ‘strong force’ that binds the components of an atomic nucleus.

In those exciting days, physicists started to think about why the universe turned out as it did. To explore that question they asked how it would have turned out if some of the fundamental values had been different. Their calculations turned up some mind-blowing results. What they found is that when you make even the tiniest changes in any one of six fundamental forces, you end up with a universe that is radically altered.

For example, if you tweak the force of gravity just a hair so that it’s slightly stronger in relation to electromagnetism, you end up with stars that are billions of times less massive, and that burn

themselves out a million times faster. It is inconceivable that any kind of life might emerge under this scenario because all the stars will be too hot.

Or if you tweak the 'strong force' so that it's just 5 percent weaker, you end up with a universe without any stars at all. What you get instead is a cold, empty universe with no oxygen, no water – nothing but gas.

These calculations captured the imagination of an astrophysicist from Cambridge named Brandon Carter. What they indicate, Carter suggested, is that we live in a Goldilocks sort of universe, where all of the fundamental values are just right. It's as though the universe had been designed for the express purpose of nurturing life on planets just like ours.

In 1973 Carter coined the term "the anthropic principle" to express this idea. *Anthropos* is Greek for man. The anthropic principle really amounted to the observation that physical laws governing the universe were fine-tuned from the very start to make it possible for human life to emerge. It suggests that the universe was brought into being by a stupendously powerful, unimaginably intelligent being for the express purpose of sustaining life.

The physicist Freeman Dyson has a pithy way of making the point. He writes:

The more I examine the universe and study the details of its architecture, the more evidence I find that the universe in some sense knew we were coming.

The philosopher Anthony Flew uses a simple story to illustrate the idea. I'm going to tweak it a bit to bring it closer to home. Let's say Lee Cook goes off to Palm Desert for a short vacation. When he arrives at his hotel he's amazed to find everything to his liking. The CD player is blasting out his favorite song by White Snake. His terry cloth bathrobe is embroidered with the logo of the New Orleans Saints. When he turns on the flat screen, the movie is his favorite: *Weekend At Bernie's*. When he opens the drawer to his nightstand, instead of a Gideon's Bible he finds a Greek New Testament. When he turns down the covers, he's delighted to discover Hogwarts bedsheets.

And suddenly it occurs to Lee: "Whoa, this isn't a series of coincidences. Somebody knew I was coming!"

The point, again, is this: When we look closely at the design and structure of the universe, it's hard to avoid the conclusion that God was getting ready for us. He created the universe so that it would sustain creatures like us.

Some of you may be thinking: "Well what's so amazing about that? It stands to reason that God would create a universe that's hospitable towards life." The reason it's amazing is because, for most of modern history, skeptics have assumed science would never turn up any evidence for the existence of God. But there it is. It's as though God has left his fingerprints in star in the sky, and in every molecule in our bodies.

Another kind of evidence of intelligent design comes from the smoking gun known as the Big Bang.

Most of us are probably familiar with the basic idea. Cosmologists tell us that the universe came into being approximately 13.7 billion years ago through a gargantuan explosion. All energy and matter were squeezed into an infinitesimally small dot or point called a singularity. And the sudden expansion of that singularity resulted in an expanding universe. It didn't happen in a particular place. Space itself was created at the Big Bang, along with all energy and matter. Nor did it happen in a moment of time. Time also was create in that single, blinding pulse.

All of that of course is strange and wonderful, but here's the part that's truly bizarre: all of the laws governing energy and matter were brought into existence at the Big Bang. Before there was matter, for example, there was no such thing as Newton's law of motion. Before there was energy there was no law of the conservation of energy.

How do we know about the Big Bang? One clue is that the universe is still expanding. When we extrapolate backwards in time from what we see all around us, we reach a point about 14 billion years ago when instead of time and the universe you had that singularity.

Another clue comes in the form of cosmic microwaves. As early as the 1940s astronomers detected a sort of low-level buzz that seemed to be coming from all directions. Most scientists now believe that buzz is actually cosmic background radiation left over from the Big Bang. Having traveled 90 billion trillion miles over 14 billion years, those waves of light have now degraded into microwaves.

The Big Bang doesn't prove that God created universe out of nothing, but it validates the idea in a big way. The quantum chemist Henry Schaefer was nominated five times for the Nobel Prize. His simple testimony about the Big Bang and his personal faith reflects the views of many hundreds of scientists today. Schaefer says:

A Creator must exist. The Big Bang ripples and subsequent scientific findings are clearly pointing to an ex nihilo creation consistent with the first few verses of the book of Genesis.

Cosmology is leading us away from atheism and towards faith in God. It's helping us to see that the story of creation found in the Bible is actually in sync with what science reveals to us about the universe and its origins. The heavens and the earth have not always been in existence as Hinduism teaches and many atheists believe. They were created by God. The universe is not devoid of meaning. God had a plan and a purpose in mind when he created it.

The fourth and last kind of evidence for intelligent design that we'll look at relates to life itself.

For most of my adult life I was comfortable in calling myself a Christian evolutionist. In the simplest possible language, I believed that all life forms on the planet came about over millions and billions of

years through the evolutionary processes described by the neo-Darwinians. I knew that evolutionists were working on lots of unsolved problems. For example, I knew that the fossil record is notoriously incomplete, and that doesn't seem to support the idea that life forms morph and change gradually over time. But I believe in the foundational ideas of evolution. I believed that the main drivers of the process were rare genetic mutations and the competition among all species leading to the survival of the fittest.

I recognized that evolution posed a challenge to the Christian worldview. Evolutionists maintain that there's no special force, or power, or higher plan governing macro-evolution – that it unfolds according to mindless natural forces. But I believed nevertheless – as many of you do – that evolution was and is God's idea. I believed that God invented the process and wove it into his grand plan for creation. That enabled me to say – again, as many of you do – that God is *responsible* for evolution and for everything that comes of it. Evolution, I believed, is God's leisurely and wonderfully mysterious way of creating life and populating the earth.

A couple of years ago I realized I was falling behind in my reading so I took a look at the current research. What I learned blew me away. I learned, first of all, that the problems for evolutionists have proliferated. I assumed that a decade's worth of progress in the fields of genetics, cellular biology, paleontology and computing had helped the evolutionists. In other words, I assumed we had made at least some progress in shoring up the theory that species evolve gradually over time.

Man was I wrong. Generally speaking, the recent science has magnified the problems that have plagued evolutionary thinking. Worse than that, as science has progressed, new and greater problems have been created. And some of the new problems seem insurmountable. They're so massive that they're causing some neo-Darwinians to wonder if it isn't time to find a new theory.

As I got caught up on the research I learned something even more surprising. I learned that, from the point of view of science, the case for intelligent design has actually gained a lot of ground over the last few years. In fact, as I reviewed the research, I slowly experienced a change of heart and mind with regard to the question of the origins of life.

From my perspective, evolutionary thinking now seems antiquated. It seems like a tattered old theory – one that people cling to not because it's been proven true, but because it confirms their materialistic, atheistic world-view. In the light of recent breakthroughs in various fields of science, I've come to believe that God is directly and immediately involved in bringing about the vast array of plants and animals that populate the earth. He doesn't rely on the mindless processes of mutation and competition. Instead, he intervenes as an intelligent agent. He designs life forms in roughly the same way that a human might design a car or a house. And he introduces his marvelous designs in ways that, in the end, can only be described as miraculous.

The bottom line is that the neo-Darwinians are struggling. Darwin assured us that his ideas about the origins of life would become more and more plausible as fossils were unearthed. The earliest geneticists assured us that evolution is confirmed in the genetic record. But now almost every aspect of

evolutionary thinking is being questioned, and not just by religious people. More and more hardcore biologists are coming to the conclusion that the complexity we see in living things could not have come about through the random, mindless process known as evolution. Some of them are saying that the natural theologians were right – life came about because of intelligent design.

The main point I want to leave you with is that science is once again proving to be a friend to faith. There was a time when the whole scientific establishment seemed to endorse Darwinism, and by implication, the atheism that's still embraced by the majority of our cultural and intellectual leaders. But those days are beginning to fade. The majority of scientists still regard themselves as neo-Darwinians, but there's a growing awareness that their theories are in crisis. Meanwhile, the evidence in support of intelligent design continues to mount.

Let me be clear: I'm not saying that Christian faith and evolutionary thinking are incompatible. Of course you can be a Christian and believe, as I once did, that God uses evolutionary processes to accomplish his creative purposes. I mainly want to challenge you to look closely at the science. Because I tend to believe, with Lord Kelvin, that "if you study science deep enough and long enough, it will force you to believe in God." (Lord Kelvin: one of the greatest scientists who ever lived.)

Atheism is giving way to a new openness to spirituality. Many people who aren't Christians are listening once again to the messages spoken to us by the stars above. They're taking seriously the idea that the universe is governed by a Higher Power.

What will we do as a church, what will we do as the Lord's ambassadors to help these people? Will we reach out and share with them the life-giving message of the Gospel? Will we trust the Holy Spirit to pierce their hearts and draw them to Christ?

A new era has begun. And a new opportunity for has opened up for the Church. In humility, and with the wisdom that only God can give, let's share our faith with those who have grown tired of the empty promises of atheism. Let's reach out to the doubting Thomases in our lives and help them find new reasons to believe.