

Refutation of William Lane Craig's argument for the existence of God:

A response to Prof. Craig's debate with Prof. Stephen Law on 2011 October 17

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The debate is posted at www.premier.org.uk/unbelievable.

I wish to thank host Justin Brierley for establishing a tone of mutual respect.

Please note that I do not identify with any school of thought or intellectual movement. I personally have no cause to advance except to determine, to the best of my ability, what is true, and it is in this spirit that I submit this refutation of Prof. Craig's argument for the existence of God.

Please also note that I make this presentation in the context that I believe that I have developed the only rational proof of God's existence or non-existence. However, the details of the proof must be specified in formal logic — a task that I'm not qualified to complete — and only then will we know whether the proof implies that God exists or does not exist. Just the same, I have shown that the results of the proof will be of minor interest theoretically and of no interest practically. I achieve this in my book *Why Human Life Makes Sense* (2011), which presents highlights of my book *Why? In Pursuit of the Ultimate Answer: Abridged* (2008), where I present the argument in great detail. For info about the latter, please visit www.philipbitar.com.

I wish to commend Prof. Craig for a well-designed argument in terms of the logical progression of the steps and for a superb presentation in every respect. He is clearly a gifted and articulate speaker, and he is a pleasure to listen to. Nevertheless, according to my analysis, Prof. Craig's rationale for the respective steps in his argument is not valid, as I will now show.

Note that while Prof. Craig presents three main steps, I divide his first step into three subordinate steps. For each step, I will state the step followed by an indication as to whether I consider it to be true or false, along with a brief commentary. I will then assume that the step is true in order to proceed to the next step and its analysis. For the convenience of the reader, for each step, I indicate the starting location of the step in the online audio recording of the debate.

1a. The past history of the universe cannot consist of an infinitely long sequence of events. (07:15)

True

Prof. Craig proves that the idea of realizing an infinite sequence of events is irrational because it generates contradictions.

Assuming that step 1a is true...

1b. The universe must have a transcendent cause — an uncaused, changeless, timeless, immaterial cause. (14:04)

False

Based on step 1a, Prof. Craig conceives of tracking a causal sequence of events backward in time to a first event and then asking what caused the first event. Prof. Craig argues that either *nothing* caused the first event or else a *transcendent cause* caused the first event.

Prof. Craig asserts that *nothing* cannot cause something, thereby implying that a *transcendent cause* caused the first event. By *transcendent*, Prof. Craig means a cause that is not another event in the causal sequence, thereby implying that the transcendent cause is **an uncaused, changeless, timeless, immaterial something**, which Prof. Craig refers to as a *being*. (Note: The something can't be material because it created matter and, hence, space. It must be changeless because otherwise it will entail a sequence of events, and we'll be back where we started. Since it is changeless, it is also timeless — change implies time, and time implies that something is changing.)

Now let's ask, what is a something that is changeless? I submit that a something that is changeless is another name for *nothing*. After all, the something can do nothing otherwise it will change. Plato would counter that a form is a

changeless something, but we can discard this unnecessary complexity of Plato. In a simpler model of reality, a form is nothing more than a concept conceived by a mind, having no independent existence, and any concept conceived by a mind is subject to change. So in a simpler model of reality, a something that is changeless is another name for *nothing*.

Note that, under my theory of knowledge, step 1a does not imply that there must be a first event, but this is a technical aside that need not distract us here. The interested reader will find this idea in *Why Human Life Makes Sense*, technical note "Nature of reality: energy, atoms, big bang", p. 124-126.

Assuming that step 1b is true...

1c. The transcendent cause is an unembodied mind. (15:56)

False

If the transcendent cause is ***an uncaused, changeless, timeless, immaterial something***, the question arises as to what kinds of things satisfy this set of criteria. Prof. Craig says that two kinds of things satisfy the criteria: an abstract object, like a number, and an unembodied mind.

It is clear that Prof. Craig conceives of abstract objects as platonic forms, having an existence independent of minds that conceive them. In the prior step, I eliminated such things from consideration, and in this step, Prof. Craig eliminates them from consideration because, he says, they have no casual capability.

For Prof. Craig, this leaves an unembodied mind as the only kind of thing that can be a transcendent cause. Prof. Craig is correct that he's got to get a mind into the argument somehow because without a mind we don't have a God. However, Prof. Craig doesn't explain why an unembodied mind satisfies the set of criteria, and we will now see that it doesn't.

What is a mind? A mind is something that engages in the activity of thinking, and thinking entails change. Thus, a mind is not a candidate for the transcendent cause.

Where are we now?

Prof. Craig has conceived of the following: ***an uncaused, changeless, timeless, immaterial mind***. But this thing can't be a mind since thinking entails change. More generally, this thing does absolutely nothing because doing something entails change. So what is this thing — this uncaused, changeless, timeless, immaterial something? It is another name for *nothing*.

Note: Transcendent cause — two phases of existence. In step 1b, Prof. Craig slips in a statement that the transcendent cause is timeless/changeless "at least without the universe." (15:43) This suggests that Prof. Craig recognizes that after creating the universe, the transcendent cause can't be timeless/changeless, not only because it must continuously maintain the existence and operation of the universe, but also because even if it could get by with simply observing the universe, it must still keep track of where the universe is in time, and keeping track entails change and time. In this scenario, the transcendent cause has two phases of existence: before creating the universe, when it is timeless/changeless, and after creating the universe, when it is in time and is changing. So what can we say about the transcendent cause in the timeless/changeless phase? It is just another name for *nothing*, thereby making the concept of transcendent cause in phase 2 superfluous.

Assuming that step 1c is true...

2. The existence of objective moral values implies that the transcendent cause is moral and, hence, constitutes the modern monotheist idea of God. (16:35)

False

The idea of an objective moral value is that a moral value is true whether or not people believe it to be true, and Prof. Craig argues that this implies the existence of God, i.e., that is, the existence of a moral God.

But this is false. We can readily see that murder is harmful to the structure of society and to the lives of people in general even if we could find some people who don't believe that it is, and the objective nature of this harm depends only on the effects to society, not on the existence of God. This establishes that objectivity in moral values does not require the existence of God any more than the existence of God is needed to establish that poison harms the body. Thus, we recognize the objectivity of the harm caused by murder in the same way that we recognize the objectivity of the harm caused by poison.

Prof. Craig's mistake is that he's thinking like Plato, namely, that conceptual ideals must have an independent existence — in this case, an existence created by God. But this introduces unnecessary complexity. In a simpler model, a conceptual ideal is nothing more than a concept conceived by a mind, having no independent existence.

I wish to add that my theory of knowledge implies the most fundamental ethical principle without any reference to God. It's a fascinating result because it's so abstract. The principle is *symmetry*, and this is the principle that underlies the golden rule of Jesus and the equality clause of the American declaration of independence. For more info on this result, please see the ethical theory presented in my books.

Assuming that step 2 is true...

3. The best explanation of the data is that the resurrection of Jesus occurred and, thus, that Jesus is who he claimed to be — “the absolute revelation of God and the way to eternal life” (1:22:17) — and, thus, that the God revealed by Jesus exists. (20:57)

False

Let's assume that the resurrection occurred.

We are now faced with developing the most plausible theory as to what the resurrection has to do with the existence of God and with the doctrines of Christianity. In the years, decades, and centuries following the death of Jesus, the traditional doctrines of Christianity evolved amidst acrimonious debate. Finally, under Constantine and based on the Council of Nicaea, authoritarian suppression by the government was used to attempt to smother dissenting views. This provides good evidence that the resurrection does not imply the traditional doctrines of Christianity. But, of course, we can apply our own minds to the task of developing the most plausible model.

In my book, I prove that the idea of heaven vs. hell is irrational such that God could not rationally implement it. Assuming that this proof is correct, it follows that the central message of Christianity — of obtaining salvation from going to hell — is moot. From this insight, in turn, it follows that Jesus did not die in order to save us from going to hell per a divine plan, so the significance of Jesus' death and resurrection is reduced to that of guidance and inspiration. This guidance and inspiration have transformed civilization — largely for the better, I believe — but if we don't need to be saved from going to hell, the death and resurrection do not substantiate the doctrine of salvation.

By “absolute revelation of God”, I understand Prof. Craig to refer to divine incarnation. So what about divine incarnation? According to my analysis, the traditional idea of divine incarnation is irrational, and when we view the idea in historical context, we can see that it is a result of the ancient way of thinking about the relation between divinity and humanity. The idea of divine incarnation has been a glorious concept of Christianity because the inspiring example of Jesus is understood to be the example of God himself, and we can appreciate the profound benefit that this idea has engendered in civilization. But if the idea of divine incarnation is irrational, the death and resurrection do not substantiate the doctrine of incarnation.

Note: The teaching of Jesus about himself. Prof. Craig states that Jesus claimed to be “the absolute revelation of God and the way to eternal life.” (1:22:17) In my reading of the gospels, I do not find this to be true.

Regarding the relation of Jesus to God, what I find is that in Mark, Matthew, and Luke, Jesus is not God incarnate but a son of God, and the phrase *son of God*, in ancient Mediterranean culture, was similar in meaning to our modern term *genius*. The phrase *son of God* was the second highest attribution that ancient Mediterranean people ascribed to a person who was held in great esteem. It was commonly applied to rulers, but it was also applied to anyone of exceptional ability, and the attribution was applied without regard to moral character since polytheist gods were not necessarily of exemplary moral character. The word *genius* literally refers to ability conferred by a genie, so in its original meaning it was similar to *son of God*, namely, ascribing a person's ability to supernatural endowment.

In light of the Dead Sea Scrolls, we know that the term *son of God* had been adopted as a messianic title by Jews prior to the time of Christ, so by the time of Christ it had a specialized Jewish meaning as a messianic title, as well as the meaning from the Mediterranean region at large. In this context, we can understand the response of the Roman centurion at the death of Jesus: “Truly this man was a son of God!” [Mark 15:39, NRSV, see footnote]

[Israel Knohl, *The Messiah Before Jesus: The Suffering Servant of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, 2000, p. 6-7, 53-55, 66-68, 87-101]

Even today, when a person of exceptional ability and achievement dies, we find that some admirers refer to them as greater than mere mortals. After Steve Jobs recently died on October 5, some people referred to him in this way. Why? In their heartfelt admiration of Jobs, they wanted to express how great they felt that he was, and this is how they achieved it. Today, such an attribution is not taken literally, but in antiquity it was taken literally. In short, the attribution

son of God, in ancient Mediterranean culture, is similar to the attribution *genius* today: taken literally it ascribes a person's ability to supernatural endowment. And by the time of Christ, the Jews had adopted the term and imbued it with messianic meaning.

In the gospel of John and in letters nominally ascribed to Paul, we find that the attribution of Jesus is elevated from mere son of God to divinity itself, which was the highest attribution that ancient Mediterranean people ascribed to a person. This form of attribution was not as common among the Mediterranean cultures, though it was an integral feature of Egyptian culture to attribute divinity to their rulers. With the emergence of this new vocabulary for Jesus, it became problematic for intellectual Christians to synthesize the two: on the one hand, Jesus is a son of God and, hence, is human, while on the other hand, Jesus is God incarnate and, hence, is divine. This difference led to acrimonious conflict among Christians during the 100s and 200s. Finally, after Constantine took control of the Roman empire in the early 300s, he insisted that this conflict be resolved, and the result was the Council of Nicaea in 325. Constantine didn't care which way the conflict was resolved, so he placed the authority of the Roman government behind the majority viewpoint, empowering the Roman church to suppress dissenters.

Regarding salvation, this presents another salient difference between the message of Mark, Matthew, and Luke, on the one hand, and the message of John and Paul, on the other hand. In the former, salvation is by works, as exemplified in the parable of the compassionate Samaritan, while in the latter, salvation is by grace through faith.

In view of these salient differences between the message of Mark, Matthew, and Luke, on the one hand, and the message of John and Paul, on the other hand, I draw the conclusion that Mark, Matthew, and Luke were written early and, hence, are relatively highly reliable in their portrayal of the teaching of Jesus and of what people thought about him in the immediate years after this death. Complementing this, I infer that John and the writings attributed to Paul must have been written later, exhibiting marked evolution in ideas about the relation between Jesus and God and about how to obtain salvation. Paul was an exponent of the later message, and this teaching led to the development of Christianity as a religion separate from Judaism.

In closing this note, since Prof. Craig likes to refer to other scholars, I wish to mention that most biblical scholars recognize the salient difference between the overall message of Mark, Matthew, and Luke, on the one hand, and the message of John, on the other hand, as to portraying what Jesus did and taught. And most scholars find the former relatively credible as compared to the latter, which is considered highly dubious. But, as far as I know, I may be unique in inferring from this difference the conclusion that the former must have been written early — before Paul's teaching in the 50s took hold — thereby conferring on the former greater reliability than conventional scholarship teaches. I discuss this topic in detail in section 3.2 of *Why? In Pursuit of the Ultimate Answer: Abridged* (2008).

I also wish to mention that Mark, Matthew, and Luke each has a few anomalous passages or statements that go against the overwhelming message of the gospel and, hence, are out of context in the respective gospel. A careful analysis reveals that they may be considered later insertions made for the purpose of revisionist history — making the earlier message sound more like the later message. The reader unfamiliar with the presence of such revisions may wish to check the most obvious one, namely, the ending of Mark — Mark 16.8b-20 — which most Bibles have marked as not part of the original version of Mark. Aside from such revisions, once a reader is aware of the earlier and later messages, the reader can avoid reading into instances of the earlier message the meaning of the later message.

Note: The meaning of human life. In the context of arguing for the benefit of suffering, Prof. Craig indicates that, in the Christian view, the ultimate purpose of human life is to know God and to thereby obtain eternal life — that is, to go to heaven instead of hell when you die. Prof. Craig argues that suffering is beneficial to the extent that it promotes this purpose. (1:08:52)

I wish to note that Prof. Craig's idea about the purpose of human life — to know God and to thereby obtain salvation — exemplifies the irrationality of traditional western religion: Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. If this idea about the purpose of human life doesn't impress the reader as absurd, I invite the reader to see my short book *Why Human Life Makes Sense* in order to understand why human life does, in fact, make sense and why it can't be improved upon in its fundamental features. For a person who wishes to believe in God, this insight is exhilarating because it means that, if God exists, human life, as we know it, is what God designed it to be in its fundamental features. It means that human life as we know it makes complete sense and can't be improved upon in its design.

Conclusion

Prof. Craig states that the atheist debate opponent must refute all three of Prof. Craig's points and then go on to prove that God does not exist. (23:59) Actually, it's necessary to refute only one of Prof. Craig's points in order to refute his overall argument, but I have refuted all three points as he requested, and, as I said at the outset, I believe that I have developed the only rational proof of God's existence or non-existence but that the details of the proof remain to be specified in formal logic.