

Carl Sagan – The Portable Atheist

If we are to discuss the idea of God and be restricted to rational arguments, then it is probably useful to know what we are talking about when we say “God.” This turns out not to be easy. The Romans called the Christians atheists. Why? Well, the Christians had a god of sorts, but it wasn’t a real god. They didn’t believe in the divinity of apotheosized emperors or Olympian gods. They had a peculiar, different kind of god. So it was very easy to call people who believed in a different kind of god atheists. And that general sense that an atheist is anybody who doesn’t believe exactly as I do prevails in our own time.

Contrast this with a quite different vision of God, one proposed by Baruch Spinoza and by Albert Einstein. And this second kind of god they called God in a very straightforward way. Einstein was constantly interpreting the world in terms of what God would or wouldn’t do. But by God they meant something not very different from the sum total of the physical laws of the universe; that is, gravitation plus quantum mechanics plus grand unified field theories plus a few other things equaled God. And by that all they meant was that here were a set of exquisitely powerful physical principles that seemed to explain a great deal that was otherwise inexplicable about the universe. Laws of nature, as I have said earlier, that apply not just locally, not just in Glasgow, but far beyond: Edinburgh, Moscow, Peking, Mars, Alpha Centauri, the center of the Milky Way, and out by the most distant quasars known. That the same laws of physics apply everywhere is quite remarkable. Certainly that represents a power greater than any of us. It represents an unexpected regularity to the universe. It need not have been. It could have been that every province of the cosmos had its own laws of nature. It’s not apparent from the start that the same laws have to apply everywhere.

Certainly if we are restricted to natural theology, it is insufficient to say, “I believe in that sort of god, because that’s what I was told when I was young,” because other people are told different things about quite different religions that contradict those of my parents. So they can’t all be right. And in fact they all may be wrong. It is certainly true that many different religions are mutually inconsistent. It’s not that they just aren’t perfect simulacrum of each other but rather that they grossly contradict each other.

There are two conflicting hypotheses here, two alternative hypotheses. One is that the universe was always here, and the other is that God was always here. Why is it immediately obvious that one of these is more likely than the other? Or, put another way, if we say that God made the universe, it is reasonable to then ask, “And who made God?”

Altruism, incest taboos, compassion for the young, you find in all sorts of animals. Nile crocodiles carry their eggs in their mouths for enormous distances to protect the young. They could make an omelet out of it, but they choose not to do so. Why not? Because those crocodiles who enjoy eating the eggs of their young leave no offspring. And after a while all you have is crocodiles who know how to take care of the young. It’s very easy to see. And yet we have a sense of thinking of that as being somehow ethical behavior. I’m not against taking care of children; I’m strongly for it. All I’m saying is, it does not follow if we are powerfully motivated to take care of our young or the young of everybody on the planet, that God made us do it. Natural selection can make us do it, and almost surely has. What’s more, once humans reach the point of awareness of their surroundings, we can figure things out, and we can see what’s good for our own survival as a community or a nation or a species and take steps to ensure our survival. It’s not hopelessly beyond our ability. It’s not clear to me that this requires the existence of God to explain the limited but definite degree of moral and ethical behavior that is apparent in human society.

“About the gods I have no means of knowing either that they exist or that they do not exist or what they are to look at. Many things prevent my knowing. Among others, the fact that they are never seen.”