

Science, Faith, and God: Richard Dawkins vs C. S. Lewis on the Meaning of Life

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Science, Faith, and God

Big question!

Four major themes tonight:

1. The place of reason and evidence in belief;
2. The great shift from modern to postmodern ways of thinking;
3. The scope and limits of the natural sciences;
4. How science and religion engage the question of meaning in life.

Richard Dawkins

Professor of the Public Understanding of Science at Oxford University before his retirement in 2008

Important books include:

The Selfish Gene (1976)

The God Delusion (2006)



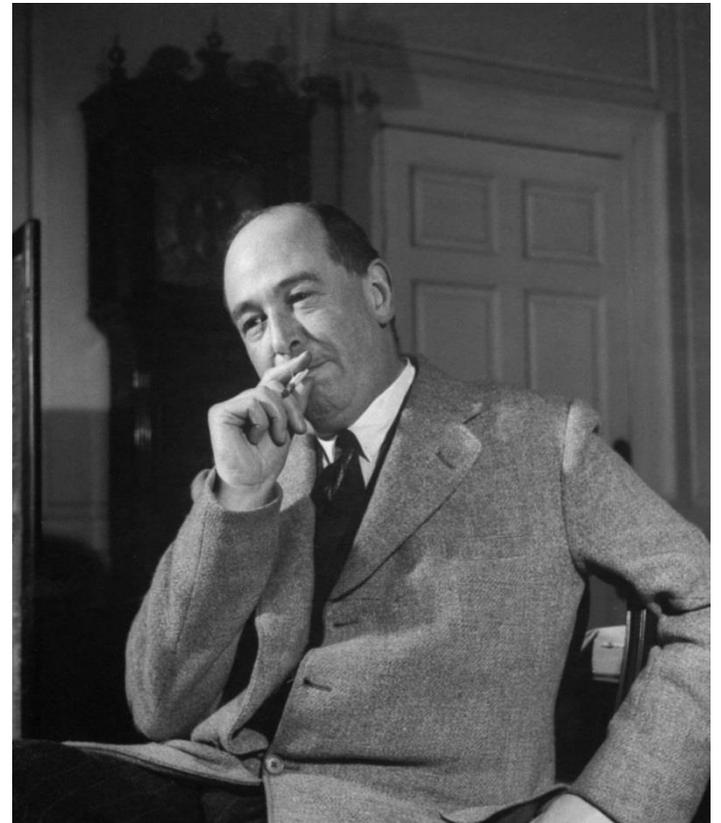
C. S. Lewis

Professor of Medieval and Renaissance English,
Cambridge University

Important books include:

Mere Christianity (1952)

Surprised by Joy (1955)



Life trajectories

Dawkins:

Evolutionary biologist

Moved from Anglicanism to atheism

Lewis:

Classics and English

Moved from Atheism to “Mere Christianity”

1. Is faith reasonable?

Both Dawkins and Lewis emphasise that we need reasons for our beliefs.

So why do we accept some beliefs, and not others?

Dawkins on Faith

Faith “means blind trust, in the absence of evidence, even in the teeth of evidence.”

Faith “is a kind of mental illness”.

The Selfish Gene, 198; 330.

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

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.”

Very modern!

Richard Dawkins

This 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.”

Richard Dawkins

Many cases where the evidence is supportive of several outcomes

Proof really limited to mathematics and logic

Single universe versus multiverse

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

C. S. Lewis

Described himself as an “empirical theist” who came to faith through “induction”

Initially an atheist (c. 1913-1927) Why?

Science and suffering

Experience of the Great War

Growing doubts about the existential adequacy of atheism

C. S. Lewis

“On the one side, a many-islanded sea of poetry and myth; on the other, a glib and shallow rationalism. Nearly all that I loved I believed to be imaginary; nearly all that I believed to be real I thought grim and meaningless.”

Something deep within him told him there had to be more to life than what a “shallow rationalism” disclosed

C. S. Lewis

Lewis saw Christianity as a “big picture”, which had to be evaluated by its ability to fit in what he observed and experienced:

“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.”

John Polkinghorne

“Neither science nor religion can entertain the hope of establishing logically coercive proof of the kind that only a fool could deny. No one can avoid some degree of intellectual precariousness, and there is a consequent need for a degree of cautious daring in the quest for truth.”

2. Philosophical Shifts

Modernity:

Modernity begins, philosophically speaking, with the publication of Descartes' *Discours de la méthode* (1637) and Spinoza's *Ethica* (1677).

Modern philosophy seeks foundations that allow it certitude without God.

Examples of such foundations: necessary truths; and luminously self-evident propositions

Philosophical Shifts

Postmodernity:

Postmodern philosophy is generally agreed to begin with the publication of Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* (1927), Wittgenstein's *Philosophische Untersuchungen* (1953), and Gadamer's *Wahrheit und Methode* (1960).

Philosophical Shifts

The essential characteristic of postmodern philosophy is that it rejects the need for foundations by accepting that philosophy and all discursive activities, including philosophy, are *fiduciary* in the sense that they rest upon commitments whose truth they are obliged to assume and which they cannot demonstrate.

This is not to be seen as a *problem* but a reflection of the realities of human thinking.

Sir Isaiah Berlin

One of Oxford's most respected philosophers and historian of ideas

Human beliefs fall into three categories:

1. Those you can prove by reason or logic;
2. Those you can prove empirically;
3. Those you can't prove in either of these ways.

His point? Beliefs that really matter – political, social, religious, anti-religious – lie beyond proof.

3. The Scope and Limits of Science

Dawkins:

Science makes God unnecessary and incredible.

Scientific explanations always win out.

The progress of science always entails the retreat of faith

Science proves its assertions; religion just asserts them

What about Lewis?

Lewis's main points:

1. Science is provisional; it's on a journey, and hasn't reached its end.
2. The process of induction simply doesn't deliver the certainty that many seem to crave
3. Christianity is able to provide an intellectual framework that makes sense of the scientific enterprise and its successes

William Ralph Inge

“Rationalism tries to find a place for God in its picture of the world. But God . . . cannot be fitted into a diagram. He is rather the canvas on which the picture is painted, or the frame in which it is set.”

William Ralph Inge, *Faith and Its Psychology*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1910, 197.

Shifts in cosmology



Svante August Arrhenius (1859-1927)

Worlds in the Making (1906)

“The Universe in its essence has always been what it is now. Matter, energy, and life have only varied as to shape and position in space.”

Svante Arrhenius, *Worlds in the Making: The Evolution of the Universe*. New York: Harper, 1908, xiv.

Changing Views

Edwin Hubble (1883-1953)

There are other star systems beyond our own galaxy

The behaviour of these external galaxies indicated that the universe was expanding.

Standard Cosmological Model

So-called “big bang”

In a period of rapid inflation, the universe grew by a factor of 10^{35} in 10^{-32} seconds, from being smaller than a subatomic particle to roughly the size of a grapefruit.

Atheist hostility towards “Big Bang”

Fred Hoyle: sounded “too religious”

Steven Weinberg in 1967:

“The steady state theory is philosophically the most attractive theory because it least resembles the account given in Genesis.” He then added:

“It is a pity that the steady state theory is contradicted by experiment.”

The 1948 Debate about God

Atheist Bertrand Russell versus Christian
Frederick Coplestone

1998 replay: Christian William Lane Craig versus
atheist Anthony Flew

Levels of explanation

Dawkins believes that a scientific explanation trumps everything

But what if it's just part of the picture?

Frank Rhodes on boiling a kettle . . .

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.”

F.H.T. Rhodes, “Christianity in a Mechanistic Universe.” In *Christianity in a Mechanistic Universe and Other Essays*, edited by D. M. MacKay, 11-48. London: InterVarsity Fellowship, 1965; quote at p. 42.

Mary Midgley



“For most important questions in human life, a number of different conceptual tool-boxes always have to be used together.”

4. What's the point of life?

Very easy to adopt reductionist approaches to humanity

We're just atoms and molecules

Our sole purpose is to reproduce our genes
(Dawkins)

Reducing human significance to the level of our components

What about existential issues?

Sir Peter Medawar

“Only humans find their way by a light that illuminates more than the patch of ground they stand on”.

Peter B. Medawar and Jean Medawar. *The Life Science: Current Ideas of Biology*. London: Wildwood House, 1977, 171.

Richard Dawkins

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

C. S. Lewis

In the *Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, one of the children shows off his scientific knowledge of astronomy to Ramandu, an old man who lived on a Narnian island. 'In our world,' said Eustace, 'a star is a huge ball of flaming gas.'

The old man was not impressed. 'Even in your world, my son, that is not what a star is, but only what it is made of.'

Importance of Stories

[We] are animals who must fundamentally understand what reality is, who we are, and how we ought to live by locating ourselves within the larger narratives and metanarratives that we hear and tell, and that constitute what is for us real and significant.

Christian Smith, *Moral, Believing Animals: Human Personhood and Culture*.
Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, 64.

Lewis on stories

For Lewis, Christianity primarily takes the form of a narrative, which subsequently and secondarily gives rise to creedal and doctrinal formulations, a vision of morality, and a sense of meaning.

Lewis on stories

Narnia

Which story can we trust?

Our culture offers us multiple stories

They can't all be right!

Becoming part of a bigger story

Sir Peter Medawar

Science has its limits.

We need to acknowledge that there are “questions that science cannot answer and that no conceivable advance of science would empower it to answer”.

Questions like the meaning of life.

Peter Medawar, *The Limits of Science*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987, 66.

The Question of Meaning

Not empirical

You can't "read" meaning off from nature

It's about the interpretation of reality

It's a judgement – not something that can be proved

A matter of faith

Alex Rosenberg, *The Atheist's Guide to Reality* (2011)

Is there a God? No.

What is the nature of reality? What physics says it is.

What is the purpose of the universe? There is none.

What is the meaning of life? Ditto.

What is the difference between right and wrong, good and bad? There is no moral difference between them.

José Ortega y Gasset (1883-1955)

“Scientific truth is characterized by its precision and the certainty of its predictions. But science achieves these admirable qualities at the cost of remaining on the level of secondary concerns, leaving ultimate and decisive questions untouched.”

José Ortega y Gasset, “El origen deportivo del estado.”
Citius, Altius, Fortius 9, no. 1-4 (1967): 259-76.

José Ortega y Gasset (1883-1955)

“We are given no escape from ultimate questions. In one way or another they are in us, whether we like it or not. Scientific truth is exact, but it is incomplete.”

End