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Science and Religion 2002: A Response to *Skeptical Inquirer*

GOD AND RESPONSIBLE SCIENCE: A RESPONSE TO MATT YOUNG¹

by Douglas Geivett

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When published on glossy paper in two-column format and distributed on the pages of a widely circulated magazine, a stinker of an argument can be transmogrified into a seemingly shining example of keen insight. With Matt Young's article, "Science and Religion in an Impersonal Universe," we have a specimen of this sort. What might have been an open-minded inquiry into the nature and grounds of religious belief was, from the start, a campaign of atheological apologetics.

YOUNG'S METHOD OF INVESTIGATION

Young's investigation into the grounds of religious belief assumes that "the only way to get at [objective] truth...is through empirical observation"; thus, "it is appropriate to examine the claims of religion empirically." Let us call this unrestricted demand for empirical support of all things rational "the Principle of Scientific Imperialism," or PSI.

A debilitating defect plagues PSI: it is self-referentially defeating — that is, if the principle is correct, it itself is something that no one can ever know. No set of empirical observations can tell us that all knowledge must be grounded in empirical observation. Furthermore, "empirical observation" is a complicated matter. Scientists routinely infer from empirically observable states the existence of objects or states that are not, strictly speaking, observable. Electrons, quarks, the possibility of extraterrestrial intelligence, garden variety quantum events — these are just a few examples of unobservables whose existence credible scientists affirm.

I wouldn't want a handyman working on my house if he didn't understand the limitations of a hammer. It's likewise a bad idea to turn science education over to people who don't understand the limitations of science. Commitment to PSI, thankfully, is not essential to good scientific practice.

It is incumbent upon all intellectuals to search out the best evidence supporting any position they intend to refute and to be fair in their representation and assessment of that evidence. As adjunct professor at the Colorado School of Mines, Young should have drilled for the mother lode of Christian scholarship. The paltry nuggets of fool's gold that he proudly displays for facile refutation unfortunately suggest either that he overlooked important veins of evidence or he confused what is of value for dross.

YOUNG'S CONCLUSIONS

Young's treatment of specific evidence for religious belief is set out in two parts. In the first part we encounter the odd objection to the literalness of the book of Jonah and the status of the Book of Job as a theodicy, a complaint about specious appeal to "Bible Codes" as evidence of divine authorship of the Bible, and the assertion that there is a "myriad of errors and inconsistencies in the Hebrew Bible and in the Gospels."

Speaking for myself, so-called Bible codes contribute nothing to my belief in the divine authority of Scripture. Hand-wringing about the “obvious fiction” of Jonah is a red herring. The book of Job, moreover, is not intended to set forth a justification for God’s permission of evils in the world. It is, rather, a reminder that our failure to understand God’s permission of evils has no bearing on God’s justification for permitting them. Young’s silence on the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus is curious in light of his generalized complaint that “most presumed miracles can be explained or accounted for without invoking divine intervention.” The Resurrection is a good test case for this thesis, but Young does not run the test. I wonder why?²

With the tone of a rant well established, Young turns next to arguments for the existence of God. Six specific arguments are treated with the sensitivity of a meat grinder. I comment on a few of these.³

TWO VERSIONS OF THE COSMOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

Cosmological arguments all deal in some way with the truly fundamental question: Why is there something rather than nothing?

The Argument from First Cause. This is an argument, says Young, that “assumes that the universe cannot be infinitely old” and infers that “there must have been a first cause.” With uncharacteristic good judgment, Young acknowledges that the universe had a beginning and that this is evidence that the universe “probably had an ultimate cause.”⁴ This concession is more momentous than Young realizes. His only complaint is that the ultimate cause of the beginning of the universe might be something other than God since “there is...no evidence that the ultimate cause was purposeful.”

On the contrary, the evidence that the cause was purposeful, and therefore personal, is actually quite strong. After all, we are familiar with only two sorts of causes: events and agents or persons. Since an event cannot be the cause of the *first* event in the history of the universe (i.e., the beginning of the universe), it is most reasonable to infer a personal cause for this event. Furthermore, the beginning of the universe marks the beginning of time itself, so the cause of the beginning of the universe must be timeless. A free decision on the part of a personal being makes the best sense for the origin of time.

The Argument from Contingency. Young gives no indication that he understands what it means for an object (e.g., the universe or a part of the universe) to exist contingently. An object need not have a beginning in order to be contingent. It must simply be possible for it not to have existed. If it is possible for some object not to have existed, that object is contingent and needs a cause, but there cannot be an infinite regress of contingent objects causing the existence of contingent objects. There must, therefore, be a necessary being that is the ultimate cause of the existence of any contingent thing.

THE ARGUMENT FROM DESIGN

Young considers two versions of the argument from design. He first looks at “the argument from evolution,” which holds that the evolution of increasingly complex organisms implies the existence of God, who designed the evolutionary process for this purpose. Young argues that the evolutionary process is “too haphazard” for this explanation to count as good evidence. “Periodic mass extinctions” supposedly indicate the haphazardness of the evolutionary process.

Young may be alluding to the problem of explaining the “irreducible” or “specified” complexity of living organisms and their parts.⁵ Observed irreducible complexity is the output of a process constituted by a chain of causal antecedents. The problem for an antisupernaturalist is that nothing in the causal chain itself can explain the apparent goal-directedness of a process resulting in irreducible complexity. At a stage in the development of an organism, it may have components that are vestigial, serving no purpose. As the organism continues to develop, the otherwise vestigial components may be integrated in such a way as to play a more fundamental role in the function of the organism. It’s difficult to see how “periodic mass extinctions” have any bearing on this issue.

The second version of the design argument appeals to the anthropic principle. Anthropic design refers to the existence of a design plan for the production of an environment suitable for the existence of living organisms. It is common knowledge that the biosphere of the earth is a particularly fit habitat for humanity. What is astonishing is that the physical requirements for the existence of this habitat prove to be incredibly fine-tuned. If crucial physical conditions in the universe were altered ever so slightly, living organisms would have no place to live and flourish. Relevant conditions include the rate of expansion of the universe, the nuclear force holding the particles of atoms together, the gravitational force, the efficiency of star formation, the entropy level and mass of the universe, and so on. This argument, says Young, is “completely circular and impossible to take seriously,” but he does not explain how he comes to this conclusion.

THE ARGUMENT FROM RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

Young objects to appeals to religious experience. First, “there is not one shred of evidence...that mystical or religious experiences are objectively real and not hallucinations or other well understood mental phenomena.” We are, however, far from understanding mental phenomena so completely that we can conveniently reduce all apparent awareness of God to, for example, the operations of mechanisms in the parietal lobe of the brain.⁶ Young needs to present evidence that religious experiences are mere hallucinations or mental phenomena of some other kind.

Second, Young complains that there is no way to test whether a religious experience is veridical (coinciding with reality). A belief grounded in experience, however, may be judged to be veridical as long as there is no special reason to deny that the object that seems to be presented in the experience actually is presented in the experience. Young demands a positive test for veridicality when a negative test will serve the purposes of rational belief-formation.

Young is troubled by the lack of empirical evidence for the existence of God. He is like the Russian cosmonaut who went into outer space to see for himself whether God exists and came back to report that since he did not see God, there must not be a God. As with the Russian cosmonaut, Young’s commitment to PSI blinds him to the many evidences that do support belief in God. To appreciate the value of these evidences, one must be clear about the proper standards of appraisal and about the way these evidences contribute to the overall case for theism. This is not the time or place to develop this point. My more limited goal has been to salvage from the wreckage of Matt Young’s mangled exposition and facile refutation a few of the more standard arguments for God’s existence.

NOTES

1. Matt Young, “Science and Religion in an Impersonal Universe,” *Skeptical Inquirer*, September–October 2001, 57–60.
2. See R. Douglas Geivett and Gary R. Habermas, eds., *In Defense of Miracles* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997).
3. For a fuller discussion of Matt Young’s article, see the version published at the following Web site:
http://www.talbot.edu/core/maph/resources/geivett_idopt.pdf
4. My own development of the evidence for this can be found in my book, *Evil and the Evidence for God* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1983).
5. See Michael J. Behe, *Darwin’s Black Box: The Biochemical Challenge to Evolution* (New York: The Free Press, 1996); William A. Dembski, *The Design Inference* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1998); and William A. Dembski, *Intelligent Design: The Bridge between Science and Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999).
6. See the following two recent books on this general topic: Pascal Boyer, *Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 2001) and Andrew Newberg and Eugene d’Aquili, *Why God Won’t Go Away: Brain Science and the Biology of Belief* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2001).