

Why I Am Not An Agnostic
Cont'd – Part 2

IMPORTANT: This lesson is the second part of an ongoing “chapter” in why I am not an agnostic. The earlier lesson is available in written, video, or podcast form at www.Biblical-Literacy.com. That earlier lesson contains important information on different kinds of evidence, different kinds of arguments, as well as the paradigm used for analyzing the issues. That information is not repeated here, so those new to this series may want to go back and consider that lesson when evaluating my thoughts.

INTRODUCTION

Dr. Bob works at my right hand when I try cases. He has done so for 23 years now. Dr. Bob is a lawyer, but he is also a PhD. psychologist, hence he is “Dr. Bob.”

One of Bob’s most important responsibilities when try a case is helping me understand how the jury likely thinks about certain issues. There are a number of tools at our disposal for learning this, and I can’t underscore its importance. It is similar to making sure you are speaking English to an English jury or German to a German jury. You need to know and understand the way the jurors listen and think to best present your case.

A lot of the work is done before the actual trial. Sometimes Bob will run a focus group where we get panels of people who spend a day listening to the issues and giving us feedback. Other times he runs a mock or summary jury trial. This is a one to two-day adversarial presentation before a panel that is a reduced version of what we expect in a jury trial. It enables us to watch the mock jury’s thought process as they identify issues and deliberate over what they hear. Bob has also run community attitude surveys where we use the telephone or Internet to learn important attitudes about important issues.

The goals behind this jury research include helping us identify those issues important to people. We also learn the information necessary to frame our case to best effect, prioritizing the right items that need emphasis.

At the end of the day, what we want in a jury, and what the American system is built upon, is a fair jury that is able to set aside preconceived notions and let the evidence drive them to the common sense and truest decision. This requires that the jurors set aside bias, sympathy, or prejudice and listen fairly to the evidence. A true assessment of the evidence must be blind to bias or prejudice. This may sound easy, but it’s not.

Courts recognize, and common sense dictates, that everyone has some degree of bias or prejudice on one issue or another. It is a question of who holds those so deeply that they

cannot set those preconceived notions aside and fairly listen to the evidence, making their decision after considering the evidence fully and fairly.

In considering evidence for or against God, this is no less important, nor is it less easy. There are some who are going to disbelieve in God regardless of what the evidence says. Perhaps they have too much pride, and think that they are too smart for such things. I've met some that are nursing a grudge against the concept of God. These think that if he exists, he's failed them in some major way, so they just decide he must not be there. For some it's just easier to decide not to believe. If these folks are not able to set aside their bias or preconceived beliefs and listen fairly to the evidence, they are not "fair jurors" and would never get to sit on a jury. Of course, the same can be said about some who believe in God. Some believe, and will continue to believe, in spite of any amount of evidence stacked in the scales of justice.

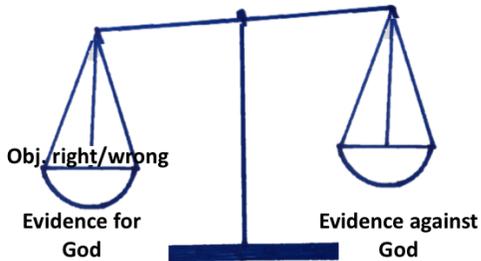
That doesn't mean that the adamant, bias, and unwilling to listen fairly to the evidence jurors are right or wrong. Logically we know one camp must be right and one wrong, i.e., there either is or isn't a God, it just means that they are not suitable for a jury trial on the issue. Their mind is already made up.

Neither of these groups are going to be considered "fair and impartial" jurors, and neither will be persuaded by what I or anyone else writes. My goal here is not to persuade or dissuade either of those groups. I know futility. Instead, my goal is to truly work through the evidence, trying to set aside my own biases and prejudices and just go with the evidence. That is the goal of a trial lawyer and the juror. In this case, I am both. I am setting out the issues in this book as a lawyer, but I am also the juror who must make this decision personally. Is there a God or not? Can we know the answer with some measure of confidence?

In the first section of this lesson, I set out the different kinds of evidence and began the process of looking at the circumstantial evidence for and against God. I made a list of arguments most often used to prove the existence of God as well as those used to disprove his existence. On that list of evidence, my presentation has made it through the first issue: objective right and wrong.

For me, the evidence for an objective right and wrong, and the evidence explaining how that could come to be, placed that piece of evidence in the scales on the side of, or in favor of the Judeo-Christian God, as opposed to evidence that there is no God at all. I illustrate that in the following chart.

Weighing the Evidence



Evidence to be considered and weighed:

- ❖ Perceptions of reality
 - ✓ 1. Why is there objective right/wrong?
 - 2. Why is there "beauty"?
 - 3. Why is "justice" and "fair" important?
 - 4. Why is there a basis for dignity and honor?
 - 5. Why do we uniquely value humanity?
 - 6. Why is there meaning and significance in life?
 - 7. Why do my actions fail to meet my standards?
 - ❖ Negative perceptions and questions
 - 1. Why is there suffering?
 - 2. Why can't we see God?
 - 3. Why do many prayers seem unanswered?
 - 4. How does God mesh with science making sense of the cosmos?
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We now turn our attention to the second and third pieces of evidence.

2. Why is there "beauty"?

A number of people who believe in God cite "beauty" as one of the reasons for belief. Some say that beauty would not predominate in nature, absent a beautiful Creator, because the randomness of evolution would produce ugliness. Some use other arguments related to beauty, but I don't go into too much detail on those because these ideas of proof for God all seem to center on the belief that beauty is "objective" rather than, or in addition to being "subjective." So our efforts at analyzing this piece of evidence center on that question.

If we want to see the "beauty is objective and therefore there must be a God argument, it is well-presented by Augustine (354-430AD). He is often quoted for his comments about physical beauty being measured against an objective standard.

Physical beauty . . . can be appreciated only by the mind. This would be impossible, if this 'idea' of beauty were not found in the mind in a more perfect form . . . But even here, if this 'idea' of beauty were not subject to change, one person would not be a better judge of sensible beauty than another . . . This consideration has readily persuaded men of ability and learning . . . that the original 'idea' is not to be found in this sphere, where it is shown to be subject to change . . . And so they saw that there must be some being in which the original form [of beauty] resides, unchangeable, and therefore incomparable. And they rightly believed that it is there that the origin of things is to be found, in the uncreated, which is the source of all creation.¹

¹ St Augustine, City of God (London: Penguin Classics, 1984), p. 308.

Some say that the idea of objective beauty is an additional proof for the reality of God and the Judeo-Christian worldview. Because this argument is frequently used by those arguing for the existence of God, I consider the evidence pro and con, weighing it for or against the existence of God. When I do so, I fairly admit that I do not find the evidence persuasive either way. I find it can be consistent with a world view of a Judeo-Christian God as well as a worldview without God. So for me, this is not determinative evidence. Consider the evidence and see if you agree with my conclusion.

Many are surprised to learn that the ideas of “beauty” have been an intense area of study by philosophers throughout history as they consider human nature and the cosmos. What is beauty? How and why does it exist?

There are a few things about beauty that are consistent among the people I’ve met either directly or through their writings. I know no one who finds beauty in an enclosed grey cinderblock jail cell. People readily proclaim certain things in nature as “beautiful”. Sunrises and sunsets, blue skies and rainbows, an infant’s smile, and the ocean’s deep blue are “beautiful” by most everyone’s reckoning. Many human creations also merit the label “beautiful,” including paintings like Da Vinci’s Mona Lisa or Dali’s Persistence of Memory. Bach’s Toccata in d Minor is a beautiful work of art/music. People can experience performances of beauty, like the ballet of Swan Lake. The human body itself can be considered “beautiful.”

These various examples of beauty may not be to everyone’s tastes, but we still see them and designate them as beautiful. I am drawing a distinction here between “beauty” and “taste.”

Most know the saying that “beauty is in the eye of the beholder,” making all beauty subjective. It is conceivable that some might see the grey cinderblock cell beautiful, while others would better find an idyllic scene of nature beautiful. But historically, there has been an argument made that, regardless of the “eye of the beholder” adage, beauty is not subjective, but rather objective. This argument might change the famous adage to “taste, not beauty, is in the eye of the beholder.”

The history of debating whether beauty is objective or subjective goes back thousands of years in Western thought. It is one of the most debated questions of philosophical writing on beauty. Among the ancient Greek philosophers, it is a bit difficult to trace the arguments on whether “beauty” was objective or subjective because the Greek word translated “beauty” (*kalon*), has a semantic range including “noble” or “admirable.” Still, most will accord that a number of prominent Greek philosophers taught that beauty was a “form,” something that had an existence outside of people and hence was “objective.”

As noted earlier, Augustine believed in objective beauty and based an argument on that premise. The Greeks would write of “beauty” as a virtue, including beauty in a person, beauty in relationships like certain shared loves, as well as beauty in artistic creations. The debate was often not whether beauty was objective or subjective, but “What made up the form of ‘beauty’?”

By the time of the philosopher David Hume (1711-1776), philosophy turned on “beauty” as an objective form, with Hume famously quoted,

Beauty is no quality in things themselves: It exists merely in the mind which contemplates them; and each mind perceives a different beauty. One person may even perceive deformity, where another is sensible of beauty; and every individual ought to acquiesce in his own sentiment, without pretending to regulate those of others.²

From Hume on, most well-known philosophers considered beauty as a subjective reality, not objective.

At some point, this almost breaks down into a semantic argument over what we mean by “beauty” as opposed to what is beauty. Do Hume and others of his persuasion mean “taste” as we use the word in the 21st century? Surely taste is subjective. The word itself derives from one of the five senses. I find Bob Dylan’s Tangled Up in Blues beautiful, but I don’t have much appreciation for certain operatic pieces that others might deem beautiful. More likely, these are not questions of beauty, but of taste.

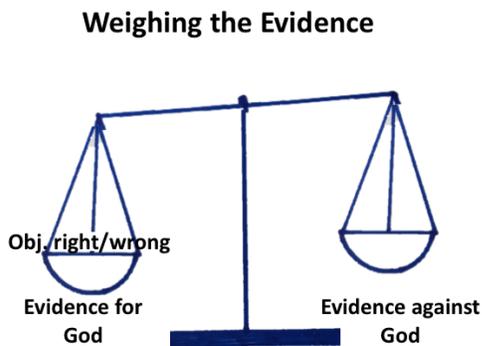
Setting aside questions of taste, some good arguments exist that there is an element of “beauty” that must be objective, otherwise the word itself is has no real meaning beyond a personal attitude of approval. So, for example, we can argue about whether something is beautiful. That seems to denote some aspect of the idea that is objective. Most people all agree on certain things possessing a degree of beauty (for example, a sunset over the ocean, or autumn leaves in New England). But even this is a bit dicey as an argument, since we may have been bred into similar tastes as part of natural selection.

I weigh these ideas of beauty being objective, subjective, or a mixture, and it makes a measure of sense to me under either the “God” or “No God” models. With the Judeo-Christian God, we certainly understand both objective and subjective beauty being a reality. God’s creation reflects beauty and the creations of people, who made in God’s image can also create, can both see beauty and create beauty. Furthermore, as creatures with independent thoughts, people can easily have differing tastes about what they find beautiful versus what they don’t.

² Hume, David, “Of the Standard of Taste” (1757).

If there is no God, then all beauty would necessarily be subjective. “Beauty” becomes synonymous with “taste.” We might all view certain things similarly “beautiful,” but that might be a result of natural selection. For example, if a female peacock picks her mate by the extreme colors and fullness of his tail feather fan, then it might make sense that over time, the successive generations of peafowl will be those who find similar tail feathers “beautiful.”

On whether beauty is objective or subjective, on whether it makes more sense under the “God” or “No God” model, I deem it indeterminate. I can find a place for it under either model, so for me, the evidence is not determinative one way or the other. I remove it from the scales.



Evidence to be considered and weighed:

- ❖ Perceptions of reality
 - ✓ 1. Why is there objective right/wrong?
 - X 2. Why is there “beauty”?
 3. Why is “justice” and “fair” important?
 4. Why is there a basis for dignity and honor?
 5. Why do we uniquely value humanity?
 6. Why is there meaning and significance in life?
 7. Why do my actions fail to meet my standards?
- ❖ Negative perceptions and questions
 1. Why is there suffering?
 2. Why can’t we see God?
 3. Why do many prayers seem unanswered?
 4. How does God mesh with science making sense of the cosmos?

3. Why is “justice” and “fair” important?

Outspoken atheist and entertainer Stephen Fry was interviewed and asked how he might react if after death, he was to come face-to-face with God. Fry, a Cambridge educated man, replied,

I’d say, “Bone cancer in children? What’s that about? How dare you? How dare you create a world to which there is such misery that is not our fault? It’s not right, it’s utterly, utterly evil. Why should I respect a capricious, mean-minded, stupid God who creates a world which is so full of injustice and pain?” That’s what I would say.”

Fry was then asked if he thought that exchange might secure him entrance into heaven and he replied,

No, but I wouldn't want to. I wouldn't want to get in on his terms. They are wrong."³

This is a typical argument raised by many who do not believe in God. The argument is a favorite, I suspect, because it indicts the Judeo-Christian God as unjust and uncaring, while at the same time bolstering the unbeliever as one who is caring.

I believe it proper to ask the hard questions like, "Why bone cancer in children?" It is one we will have to consider later in this chapter on why I am not an agnostic, because I believe only the Judeo-Christian explanation for such tragedies makes sense. But at this point, I want to look carefully at feelings like Fry expressed, because by doing so, we will see a strong piece of evidence for the existence of the Judeo-Christian God.

Fry spoke of his refusal to respect a God who creates a world full of injustice. One must wonder if Fry has given thought to his own statements. Notice that the idea of "justice" is important to Fry. Ditto for the idea of fairness, as we read him speaking of misery that "is not our fault." Where does that come from? I think it is actually key evidence to the existence of the Judeo-Christian God.

I would suggest that inherent in humanity is a concept of fairness and justice. Like morality, it appears to be hard-wired into our minds and psyches. Considering where this comes from, are we to believe that we have developed a keen sense of justice and fairness through natural selection? That somehow we individuals benefit from fair treatment, and that we found it comes only if we ensure fairness to society? Perhaps, but that's a stretch of "post hoc" analysis. The facts seem to belie such a theory.

In truth, most people don't really want fairness. People want what is best for them, whether it is fair or not. Take someone who is born into a nice middle-class family in the United States or somewhere else in Western civilization. This birthright was not "fair," especially when compared to the children born in a starving community in a lesser developed country. Or we can isolate the United States, someone born to a single mom, diseased by the AIDS virus, strung out on drugs, prostituting herself to get money for her habit. Compare that innocent infant to one who is born into common, everyday parents who maintain a job, have a home, car, and hopes for the future. There is no fairness or justice for that child. So how do people respond? Generally, "out-of-sight, out-of-mind."

Very, VERY few people put the teaching of Jesus into practice and "love their neighbors as themselves." We don't have a society where there is a redistribution of wealth or

³ See interview, "Outspoken Atheist Asked What He's Say to God After Death, Discovering 'It's All True.' His Answer Throws the Interviewer for a Loop," The Blaze, Feb. 1, 2015. <http://www.theblaze.com/stories/2015/02/01/outspoken-atheist-asked-what-hed-say-to-god-after-death-discovering-its-all-true-his-answer-throws-the-interviewer-for-a-loop/>

resources from the heartlands of America to sub-Saharan Africa to tend to impoverished children. We do not have national health care in the United States to provide for the needs of infants and children. Everyone will readily admit that health care in the United States, as well as in most countries, is somewhat income dependent. The more money you have, the higher level of health care accessible.

The observations about “fairness” extend to “justice.” We like to say, at least in America, that we believe in “justice.” Of course, many will trace this prioritizing justice as a trait of the Judeo-Christian heritage of the United States. That isn’t really the issue here. The issue is that while we proclaim the virtues of justice, it isn’t an inherent part of our practice. A simple look at prison populations shows that “justice” favors the rich majority at the expense of the poorer minority.

Some might want to say that “fairness” and “justice” are evolved traits, but the world, historically or currently, doesn’t support that well. Yet, there is still a voice within all of us that cries out that “justice” and “fairness” are not only virtues, but should be the norm. It comes early in life as children learn to proclaim to an early bedtime, “But that’s not fair!” It stays on through life as the Stephen Fry’s of the world proclaim, “God’s not fair!” or, “The injustice of it all!”

It is as hard for people to get away from a sense of the impropriety of injustice and unfairness as it is for objective morality. If there is no real value in justice or fairness, then why would Fry even care if God was or wasn’t just or fair? Fry could just say, “There is no God, but if he is, then he is” without railing on the issue of “then why isn’t he FAIR?”

Fry thinks that a good God would run the world like a good kindergarten teacher who fixes when one person takes another’s snack, who tends to skinned knees, and makes sure Johnny doesn’t hit Bobby.” For Fry those concepts are so important that without them, God is not God. Or at least not a good one.

So where do the concepts come from? If there is a Judeo-Christian God, the answer is easy. If there isn’t, we are hard-pressed to find a source beyond the fascinating electrical synapses of human sacks of chemicals.

From a Judeo-Christian explanation, we would expect justice and fairness to be hard-wired into our beings. Jewish Scripture and Christian alike teach that people are made in the image of God (Gen. 1:26-27). God is also portrayed as a “just” God, over and over in Scripture. God even instructed his people to be just, using fair weights, balances, and not cheating others in their transactions (Lev. 19:36).

The prophet Ezekiel took issue with those who challenged the justness of God while holding out themselves as the “judge” of what is “just.”

Yet the house of Israel says, 'The way of the Lord is not just.' O house of Israel, are my ways not just? Is it not your ways that are not just? (Ezek. 18:29).

It raises the question of why people rail against God for the children with cancer, yet do so without being in the cancer ward, offering solace, help, and more for those who are hurting.

With God as a just God, and that God making people in his image, we can see justice being an important concept for people. The issue then becomes, "Why do bad things happen in a world over which God has a measure of control?" That will be considered in more detail when we reach the arguments against God. For now, however, the mere importance of fairness and the affront of injustice denotes to me that somewhere beyond simple chemical sacks of refined stardust, we have ingrained notions of fairness and justice as important standards.

Without God, the notions of "fair" and "just" really are just semantic terms associated with a cosmic karma. It is as if there must be a moral equivalent of the physical law that "every action has an equal and opposite reaction." But that is not right. Moral laws are not physical laws of inanimate objects. They are from the realm of thoughts and ideas. Without God, those are electro-chemical reactions in the brain. Cosmic karma, without a God-driver to the karma, is really a silly idea. Why would inanimate stardust set up the standard that animated stardust (chemical sacks having certain electric reactions) requires karma?

I find that explanation defying common sense and a stretch. To me, I add the ideas of "justice" and "fairness" as important virtues and goals to evidence in favor of a just and fair God as claimed in Judeo-Christian Scriptures.



Evidence to be considered and weighed:

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[To be continued next week as we work through additional evidence]

POINTS FOR HOME

1. *“Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?”* (Gen. 18:25).

Abraham was negotiating with God. God was about to rain down destruction on Sodom and Gomorrah, hotbeds of violent and sexual sin and moral degradation. Abraham had a nephew there with his family. Abraham wanted to know if God would spare the city if Abraham found enough righteous people in it. God agreed, but Abraham’s search failed to find the folks.

This story is told in a way that sets apart two aspects of justice. First, Abraham was concerned with justice. Abraham used justice as a negotiating point with God. Justice was a value to Abraham and he assumed to God as well. Second, the negotiating was actually fruitful. God did relent on his judgment if Abraham was able to find the requisite number to tilt the scales of destruction.

God is a just God. It is inherent in who he is. He made us in his image. We also care about such things. Justice is one of God’s requirements in his followers (Micah 6:8). Jesus told us to care for those around us as much as we care for ourselves. We have much work to do, and need to take God seriously rather than dismiss him.

One thing have I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD to inquire in his temple.

2. *“One thing have I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD to inquire in his temple”* (Ps. 27:4).

I put in the text that I don’t find the argument for “beauty” as one that is compelling evidence for the existence of God. That is not because “beauty” doesn’t make sense with our understanding of God. It makes perfect sense. I just don’t see it as evidence of God as opposed to something that might be explained by someone without regard to God.

So the Jew and Christian are right in affirming God as the source of beauty, even if we do not use it as an argument to prove the existence of God. The Lord *is* beautiful.

It is a worthy pursuit to look for that beauty and behold the glory of the Lord. It will change our hearts and lives, as we pursue his beauty.

3. *“In your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect”* (1 Pet. 3:15).

The understanding of God as a rational pursuit is an important one. Believers need not shun the truth of God, nor should they fear examining that evidence. We need to consider things in humility and with prayer. We should make it a point to enlist the help and aid of others who have insight. Within that framework, we are about answering some fundamental questions about God, humanity, and life in general. This is a worthy goal.