

Can We Believe In God In An Age Of Science?

[9:00 - 12:30 CEST]

What is 'science' anyway? How does 'science' relate to people's beliefs about God? Discover the theological basis for modern science and learn how a series of scientific discoveries in cosmology and biology since the 1950s have provided grounds for belief in a Divine Creator, as philosopher Peter S. Williams guides you through material from his new NLA University course module on 'Science and Christian Apologetics in Worldview Perspective'.

Peter S. Williams (www.peterswilliams.com) studied philosophy at Cardiff University (BA), Sheffield University (MA), and the University of East Anglia in Norwich (MPhil). Peter lives in England and is Assistant Professor in Communication and Worldviews at Gimlekollen College, NLA University, Norway. His publications include: *Apologetics in 3D: Essays on Apologetics and Spirituality* (Wipf & Stock, 2021); *Outgrowing God? A Beginner's Guide to Richard Dawkins and the God Debate* (Wipf & Stock, 2020); *Getting at Jesus: A Comprehensive Critique of Neo-Atheist Nonsense About the Jesus of History* (Wipf & Stock, 2019); *A Faithful Guide to Philosophy: A Christian Introduction to the Love of Wisdom* (Wipf & Stock, 2019) and *C.S. Lewis vs. the New Atheists* (Paternoster, 2013).

I. Introduction

- **Thomas Aquinas** pictured theology as '**the queen of the sciences**' who was assisted by '**her handmaiden philosophy**'
- The Latin word '*scientia*' meant 'knowledge'
- The study of nature we now call '**science**' was called '**natural philosophy**' (i.e. philosophy about the natural world)
- A rough definition of **philosophy** is 'the wise pursuit of true answers to significant questions through the practice of good intellectual habits'

A. Natural Science

'A fallible first-order discipline wherein humans seek to understand, explain and/or predict as much as they can about physical reality, especially by paying attention to how empirical experience can confirm or undermine such truth-claims.'

B. Spirituality, Worldview & Culture



- A 'culture' is a corporate spirituality - i.e., a set of shared assumptions, attitudes, and ways of acting – together with its artistic traditions
- The word 'art' comes from the Latin 'ars', meaning 'art, craft, science, skill or technique', and overlaps with the Latin term 'scientia', meaning 'knowledge, skill'
- In Medieval Universities a 'Master of Arts' degree included the study of *astronomy*!
- A culture may thus be, or include, a scientific culture

C. Two Basic Elements of a Worldview

- What is real?
- How do we know anything?



NATURALISM MATERIALISM

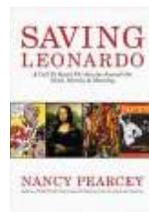
Naturalism

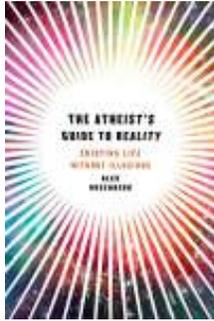
Materialism

scientific



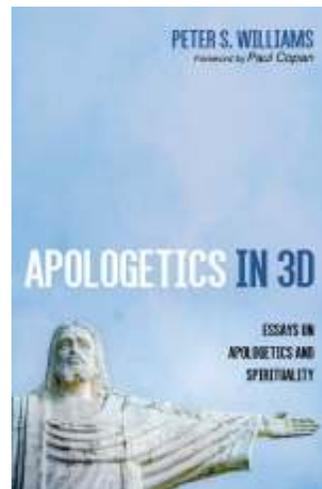
D. Consequences of Scientism & Naturalism





E. Apologetics

the art and science of helping people to be persuaded that a Christ-centred spirituality is a *beautiful, good and reasonable/true* life commitment



To re-contextualize an image from the pagan philosopher **Socrates**, the Christian apologist is a spiritual ‘midwife’, helping people deliver as strong and healthy a spiritual response to Jesus as they can muster

Thinking about ‘**Science**’ offers apologetics both challenges and opportunities:

- **Naturalism/Materialism** restricts people’s understanding of the reality studied by the sciences
- **Scientism** restricts people’s understanding of knowledge to the empirical methods of naturalistic science
- **Science** can support premises in philosophical arguments for (or against) the existence of God

II. Debunking the ‘Conflict Thesis’

The ‘Conflict Thesis’ states that when science and theology have overlapping interests, science is - at least more often than not - in an incompatible conflict with theology, wherein *science is right and theology is wrong*.

A. Historically, Theism *Supported* Science

Vishal Mangalwadi: ‘The scientific perspective flowered in Europe as an outworking of medieval biblical theology nurtured by the Church... the Bible created and underpinned the scientific outlook.’
– *The Book That Made Your World* (Thomas Nelson, 2011), 223-224.

B. Philosophical Assumptions of Science Warranted by Theism

- The natural world exhibits a rational order
- The human mind is, to a fair degree, able to understand the rational order displayed by the natural world
- Human cognitive and sensory faculties are generally reliable
- The rational order displayed by the natural world cannot necessarily be deduced from first principles, so observation and experiment are useful
- There are knowable objective values (truth, goodness, beauty)
- The natural world isn’t an illusion, or divine
- The natural world isn’t governed by multiple competing and/or capricious gods

C. Apparent Conflicts Between Theism and Science Emerge From...

1) Bad Readings of Scripture

St. Augustine: ‘In matters that are so obscure and far beyond our vision, we may find in Holy Scripture passages which can be interpreted in very different ways without prejudice to the faith we have received. In such cases, we should not rush in headlong and so firmly take our stand on one side that, if further progress in the search for truth justly undermines this position, we too fall with it.’ - *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, 408, vol. 1, 41.

2) Bad Philosophies of Science

Four Bad Philosophies of Science:

- Verificationism
- Scientism
- Naturalism
- Methodological Naturalism

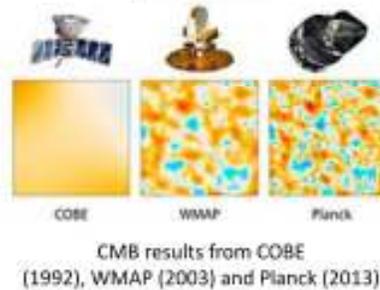
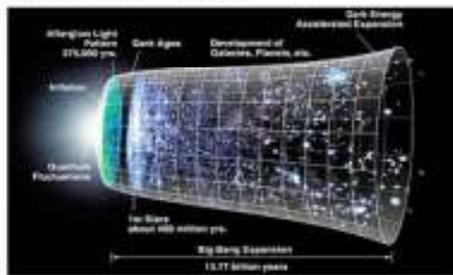
III. Cosmology & God

- Ancient Greek philosophers such as **Aristotle** thought the universe was infinitely old and thus had no beginning
- During late antiquity and the medieval period, many theistic thinkers broke with this tradition on theological and philosophical grounds
- For example, the twelfth-century medieval Muslim philosopher **Al-Ghazali** argued that the idea of actual infinities entailed various absurdities, such that the past must be finite and the universe must therefore have had a beginning

• **Al-Ghazali** made the finitude of the past a premise in an argument for God known today as the **Kalam** cosmological argument, writing that: ‘Every being which begins has a cause for its beginning; now the world is a being which begins; therefore, it possesses a cause for its beginning.’ - Jonathan McLatchie, ‘A Beginner’s Guide to the Kalam Cosmological Argument’ www.solas-cpc.org/a-beginners-guide-to-the-kalam-cosmological-argument/

SCIENTIFIC COSMOLOGY

- In 1927 Belgian cosmologist (and Catholic priest) **George Lemaitre** combined Einstein’s theory of gravity with the observation of a Doppler shift in the light from distant galaxies to formulate what would come to be known as the ‘big bang’ theory of the origins of the universe
- Big bang cosmology has developed over time, but the basic picture of a universe with a beginning a finite time ago has been the scientific consensus since the 1965 discovery of the cosmic background radiation left over from the ‘big bang’



A. A Kalam Cosmological Argument

Premise 1) There was probably a first physical event

Premise 2) Every physical event has at least one cause outside of itself

Premise 3) Therefore, there was probably a first physical event with at least one cause outside of itself

Premise 4) Any first physical event must have a non-physical cause

Conclusion) Therefore, *there was probably a first physical event with a non-physical cause*

Dallas Willard: ‘the dependent character of all physical states, together with the completeness of the series of dependencies underlying the existence of any given physical state, logically implies at least one self-existent, and therefore nonphysical, state of being.’

- ‘The Three-Stage Argument for the Existence of God’ in *Contemporary Perspectives on Religious Epistemology* ed. Douglas Geivett & Brendan Sweetman; Oxford University Press, 1992.

B. A ‘Fine Tuning’ Argument

- 1) The ‘fine tuning’ of the universe exhibits ‘specified complexity’
- 2) Things exhibiting ‘specified complexity’ are probably designed
- 3) Therefore, the ‘fine tuning’ of the universe was probably designed

C. Eight Problems With the Multiverse Hypothesis

- 1) Speculative
- 2) Complex
- 3) Empirically unverified/unverifiable
- 4) Ad hoc
- 5) Insufficient to explain away the data
- 6) Question Begging

7) Undermines science

8) Strongly disconfirmed by evidence

Moreover... even if we grant a multiverse, the evidence still favors design!

IV. Design in the Context of Evolution

A. Doctrine Before Models

It's important to keep in mind the distinction between the *doctrine* of creation and different *models* of creation that Christians hold because they have different interpretations of scripture and of the relevant scientific evidence.

Philosopher **Alvin Plantinga** frames the issue like this: 'Starting from [the doctrine of creation] we recognize that there are many ways in which God could have created the living things he has in fact created: how, in fact, did he do it? ... Did it all happen just by way of the working of the laws of physics, or was there further divine activity...? ...we must look at the evidence and consider the probabilities as best we can.' - 'Evolution, Neutrality, and Antecedent Probability: A Reply to Van Till and McMullen', *Christian Scholar's Review* 21:1 (September 1991), 80–109

www.calvin.edu/academic/philosophy/virtual_library/articles/plantinga_alvin/evolution_neutrality_and_antecedent_probability.pdf

B. The Grand Evolutionary Story

Geneticist **Richard Lewontin**: 'It is not that the methods... of science somehow compel us to accept a material explanation of the... world, but, on the contrary, that we are forced by our... adherence to material causes to create... a set of concepts that produce material explanations, no matter how

counterintuitive, no matter how mystifying. Moreover, that materialism is absolute, *for we cannot allow a Divine foot in the door*'. - 'Billions and Billions of Demons', *New York Review of Books*, 9 January 1997, my italics

- *The Ancient Earth Hypothesis*
- *The Progress Thesis*
- *The Common Ancestry Hypothesis*
- *The Universal Common Ancestry Hypothesis*
- *The Neo-Darwinian [i.e. Blind Watchmaker] Hypothesis*
- *The Naturalistic Origins Hypothesis*

Alvin Plantinga: 'There is excellent evidence for an ancient earth... There is less evidence, but still good evidence in the fossil record for the Progress Thesis, the claim that there were bacteria before fish, fish before reptiles, reptiles before mammals, and mice before men... the Naturalistic Origins Thesis... seems to me to be for the most part mere arrogant bluster; given our present state of knowledge, I believe it is vastly less probable, on our present evidence, than is its denial.' - 'When Faith and Reason Clash' www.asa3.org/ASA/dialogues/Faith-reason/CRS9-91Plantinga1.html

C. There is Room for Doubting Our Models of Creation

Philosopher **J.P. Moreland:** 'there are sufficient problems in interpreting Genesis 1 and 2 to warrant caution in dogmatically holding that only one understanding is allowable by the text.' - *Scaling the Secular City* (Baker, 1987), 214

Theologian **David Winter:** 'The phrase "The Bible says..." begs a lot of questions... What *does* the Bible say? To whom is it saying it? What is the context, background and literary form of the passage in question? Is it to be taken literally, or figuratively, or allegorically?' - *But This I Can Believe* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1980), 112

D. There is Room for Doubting Darwinism

Atheist **Thomas Nagel**: ‘the dominant scientific consensus... faces problems of probability that I believe are not taken seriously enough, both with respect to the evolution of life forms through accidental mutation and natural selection and with respect to the formation from dead matter of physical systems capable of such evolution. The more we learn about the intricacy of the genetic code and its control of the chemical processes of life, the harder those problems seem...’ – *Mind & Cosmos*, 9-10

E. Part Two: Intelligent Design Theory

Philosopher **Stephen C. Meyer**: ‘the theory of intelligent design holds that there are tell-tale features of living systems and the universe that are best explained by an intelligent cause. The theory does not challenge the idea of evolution defined as change over time, or even common ancestry, but it does dispute Darwin’s idea that the cause of biological change is wholly blind and undirected.’ – ‘Not by Chance’ *National Post of Canada* (2005)

Three Core Claims of ID:

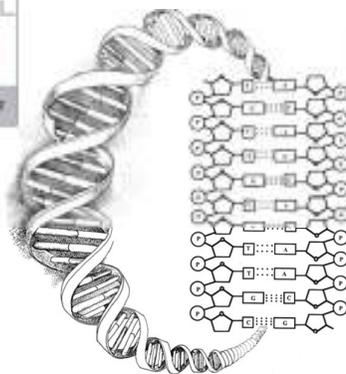
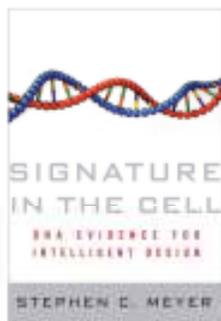
- 1) *Empirical evidence* passes
- 2) *reliable design detection criteria*
- 3) to warrant a *scientific inference* to ‘intelligent design’ as the best explanation of the evidence

- In 1953, **Francis Crick** and **James Watson** announced their discovery of the three-dimensional, double helical structure of DNA
- In 1958, **Crick** theorized that ‘the sequence specificity of amino acids in proteins derives from a prior specificity of arrangement in the nucleotide bases on the DNA molecule’, which ‘functioned just like

alphabetic letters in an English text or binary digits in software or a machine code.’ - Meyer, *Signature in the Cell*, 100 & 101

- Experiments in the 1960s established that the sequential arrangement of amino-acids that determine the folding and thus the function of proteins is indeed encoded within the rungs of the twisting DNA ladder
- Since the 1960s, it has therefore been apparent that, as origin-of-life researcher **Bernd-Olaf Küppers** observed: ‘The problem of the origin of life is clearly basically equivalent to the problem of the origin of information.’ - *Information and the Origin of Life*, 170-172

Starting with Hungarian-British scientist-philosopher **Michael Polanyi’s** 1967 paper ‘Life Transcending Physics and Chemistry’, the scientific recognition that information lies at the root and heart of biology has formed the basis for increasingly sophisticated arguments against reductive explanations of life in terms of chance and/or physical necessity, and for the need to incorporate an appeal to intelligence into any causally adequate explanation of organic life.



STEPHEN C. MEYER:

‘There is simply too much information in the cell to be explained by chance alone. The information in DNA (and RNA) has also been shown to defy explanation by forces of chemical necessity. Saying otherwise would be like saying a headline arose as the result of chemical attraction between ink and paper... DNA functions like a software program. We know from experience that software comes from programmers.’

- ‘Intelligent design is not creationism’, *The Daily Telegraph* (2005)

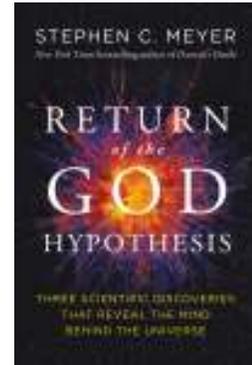
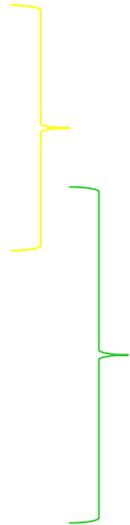
1) Things exhibiting 'specified complexity' are best explained as the product of intelligent design

2) Life exhibits 'specified complexity'

3) Therefore, the best explanation of life includes an appeal to intelligent design

4) The best explanation of premise 3 is theistic (also theistic avoid infinity, reason & compare with other evidence)

5) Therefore, the best explanation of life is theistic



Suggested Resources:

Peter S. Williams

Website: www.peterswilliams.com

Podcast: <http://peterswilliams.podbean.com/?source=pb>

YouTube Channel Playlists: www.youtube.com/user/peterswilliamsvid/playlists?view=1&flow=grid

Academia.edu profile with links to published papers: <https://mediehogskolen.academia.edu/PeterSWilliams>

Twitter: [@Williams_PeterS](https://twitter.com/Williams_PeterS)

Websites

BeThinking: www.bethinking.org

Discovery Institute Centre for Science & Culture: www.discovery.org/id/

Evangelical Philosophical Society: www.epsociety.org/

Faith and Philosophy: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/>

Forum of Christian Leaders: <https://foclonline.org/>

J.P. Moreland: www.jpmoreland.com/

Last Seminary: www.lastseminary.com/

Robin Collins' Fine-Tuning Website: <http://home.messiah.edu/~Collin's/Fine-tuning/FT.HTM>

Stephen C. Meyer: <https://stephencmeyer.org/>

The God Question: www.thegodquestion.tv/

Theofilos: <https://theofilos.no/>

Unbelievable?: www.premierradio.org.uk/shows/saturday/unbelievable.aspx?mod_page=0

William Lane Craig - Reasonable Faith: www.reasonablefaith.org

Watch

YouTube Channel Playlists: www.youtube.com/user/peterswilliamsvid/playlists?view=1&flow=grid

Against the Tide: Finding God in an Age of Science. Pensmore Films, 2021.

The God Question. www.thegodquestion.tv/

Read

Amazon List: “Recommended reading for aspiring apologists”
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