

# Does God Exist?

A Debate Between  
Dr. Randal Rauser  
And  
Justin Schieber

University of Alberta  
Edmonton, Alberta, Canada  
Saturday, March 7, 2015

Transcription of the audio file:

<http://randalrauser.com/2015/04/does-god-exist-the-rauserschieber-debate-mp3/>

Video of Debate  
(different time markings than the audio file):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1ZBDPpoTBLs&feature=youtu.be>

Randal Rauser's introduction to the audio file:

*Time: 00:00*

On March 7th, 2005, Randal Rauser and Justin Schieber met at the University of Alberta to debate the existence of God. This is that debate.

*00:10*

Music: Survivor's "Moment of Truth" from 1984's *The Karate Kid*

Moderator:

*00:21*

Thank you very much for the introduction, again my name is Robbie; I'll be serving as the moderator for this debate. So hopefully, I won't have too difficult of a job; both of these gentlemen

are very happy to be amiable and friendly, which makes my life a lot easier. So I'm here at the University of Alberta Debate Society which is the oldest club on campus. We are here to promote open, constructive discourse and improve people's abilities to do so across campus and across Edmonton whenever we can. So more importantly the two debaters that we have with us tonight are Randal Rauser on the proposition in support of the existence of God and against is Justin Schieber.

00:56

So Randal Rauser received his doctorate from King's College in London and now is a professor of historical theology at Taylor Seminary College here in Edmonton. He is the author many of books, some of which you can find outside and one of which is going to be released in the next two months. If you are interested in the materials he has written you can check out his website, [randalrauser.com](http://randalrauser.com).

01:16

There is also, on the opposition, Justin Schieber, who is the co-host of *Reasonable Doubts Radio Show* and part of the board of the Michigan Center for Inquiry. He supports a friendly and firm skepticism, frequently debates across North America, including being on the same side last year, at the debate that was hosted then.

01:34

So, to give you an idea of where this debate is going to be going, we are first going to have two twenty-minute opening statements, so one from Randal first and the next from Justin. They will then have the opportunity to do a ten-minute rebuttal towards the other's arguments, followed by a fifteen-minute back-and-forth session between the two of them where they can ask and answer questions of one another. And the end there is going to be five minutes of closing statements from both of them, followed by a fifteen minute question and answer period, where members of the audience can ask questions.

02:04

So, hopefully that gives you an idea of where you're going and you're all very excited to see this fantastic debate happen once again. So, I would now like to invite Randal Rauser to begin his opening statements in the defense of the existence of God.

02:18

Music: *Moment of Truth*

Randal Rauser's opening statement:

02:52

Well first I would like to begin by thanking the atheist and agnostics group here at the campus for making this even possible. I'd like to thank Justin my worthy opponent, or as I'd prefer to say "dialog partner". And I'd like to thank all of you for coming out on such a nice Spring-like day; it takes a real desire to know the truth to bring people in when it's this good outside.

03:17

Okay, in October 2005, Jon Stewart host of *The Daily Show* appeared on CNN's *Crossfire*, a debate program that regularly opposed a strident conservative opinion against an equally strident liberal opinion, in a no-holds-barred, no-compromise debate. Stewart proceeded to eviscerate the format of the show, arguing that it encouraged polarization while distorting complicated issues in favor of simplistic sloganeering and partisanship.

03:49

In my view, debates for God's existence are often carried out in the manner of *Crossfire*, with theistic and atheistic apologists each aiming to demonstrate the truth of their position, while

showing their opponents to not only be wrong, but positively irrational. But the reality is that atheism and theism are both intellectually serious, rationally defensible positions, each supplemented with dozens of arguments that have been ably defended by many of history's greatest minds. Thus, whatever our personal opinions on God's existence, my hope is that we can all leave this evening with a deepened sense of the intellectual seriousness and importance of the question and a renewed commitment to adopt a position of charity and humility toward our intellectual opponents.

04:33

While I am here as an apologist for dialogue and charity, I am also here as an apologist for belief in God. So what do I mean when I say "God"? For the purpose of this debate, I will refer to "God" as a necessarily existent, nonphysical agent who is omniscient, omnipotent, and perfectly good. My case for God will proceed in three steps. I'm going to begin by arguing that rational belief in God does not require evidence, though its rationality can be strengthened or weakened by evidence. Next I will defend the legitimacy of appealing to God as a philosophical explanation against a common objection. And finally I will conclude by arguing that God best accounts for the cognitive faculty of moral intuition.

05:20

So let's begin. Belief in God can be rational apart from evidence. For many atheists and skeptics, the first stumbling block to considering belief in God is the assumption that such belief is irrational or unjustified, that it lacks evidence. The objection assumes that one must have evidence to believe rationally that God exists. But is this true? I will argue to the contrary, that one need not have evidence FOR God, to believe rationally THAT God exists.

05:49

Before we get there we first must understand how one forms a rational belief apart from evidence. And that requires us to distinguish between two types of... belief, properly basic and properly non-basic belief. A properly basic belief is a belief which is rational without evidence and if true it can be known apart from evidence. In contrast a properly non-basic belief is one that cannot be rationally held without evidence.

06:19

With those definitions in mind, the objector is claiming that belief in God is always non-basic, such that rational theistic belief always requires evidence. On the contrary, I will argue that belief in God can be produced in conditions which qualify it as properly basic. To be clear, I'm not claiming that belief in God is always properly basic, but only that it CAN be.

06:42

Let's begin with a belief which is widely considered to be properly basic: belief in a world external to the human mind. Ever since philosopher George Berkeley wrote more than two centuries ago, philosophers have recognized that it is possible that that to which we refer as the external world could merely be the product of human consciousness, or as the Wachowskis showed us more recently, we could be brains and/or bodies in a *Matrix*. In short, there may be no physical world corresponding to our mental experience.

07:16

We can call this position "world idealism". In contrast, the common sense belief [that] the external world exists is "world realism". Here's the problem. You cannot argue that world idealism is false based on our conscious experience of an external world, since that data is fully consistent with idealism being true. Despite this fact, virtually all people believe there is an external world, and they are certainly rational to do so, even if they cannot show that idealism is false.

07:48

The reason is because belief in an external world is not based on evidence, it is properly basic. One need not have evidence for or against its idealist rival in order to believe it RATIONALLY.

There are many other types of belief that are properly basic as well, including the deliverances of sense perception, moral intuition - more on which I'll talk in my third argument - aesthetic appreciation, rational intuition, memory, proprioception, and testimony.

08:18

So what is that makes all these beliefs "properly basic"? Well, beliefs are not considered properly basic because they are infallible. After all, idealism could be true: there may be no external world. Likewise, sense perception may deceive: we can hallucinate or otherwise misperceive. Other sources of properly basic belief can also lead us astray. Nor are our beliefs properly basic because they are held by all rational people. After all, there are rational people who are idealists. There are skeptics of sense perception, and so on.

08:53

Instead, a properly basic belief is rooted in the naturalness and immediacy with which these beliefs are formed. As one experiences the sensory flux that one calls "the world", one finds oneself believing that conscious experiences map a world external to one's mind. So can belief about God be properly basic with the kind of naturalness and immediacy which would qualify IT as properly basic in parallel to belief about the external world?

09:23

I think so! As in other cases we can answer this question empirically: are there instances where individuals report belief in God forming with this kind of naturalness and immediacy? Let me give you an example. In 1974 comedian Rock legend Burton Cummings walked into St. Thomas Church in New York. Though he was not a religious man, he was immediately struck by an overwhelming spiritual presence. He wrote about this unsettling experience in his chart-topping 1975 hit *I'm Scared*, which includes the following lyric, that I will now sing.

09:58

SOMETHING in the air was oh-so-rare. I don't know what it was but I know that it is still right there.

10:10

Burton's belief that there was a spiritual presence in the church but Rudolf Otto famously called the "mysterium tremendum", was not an inference from additional data, he didn't reason to it, rather it was a natural and immediate experience, occasioned upon his entry to the church. Just as he immediately sensed the musty smell and the dim lighting, so he sensed the overwhelming spiritual presence. And as a non-religious agnostic, it took Burton completely by surprise.

10:37

Burton is not alone. Millions of people have formed belief about God with the same naturalness and immediacy, the same phenomenology of self-presentation that Burton Cummings experienced. And this parallels the naturalness and immediacy with which we form beliefs about the external world, sense perception, and so on. Thus with the deliverances of these other beliefs can be, PRIMA FACIE properly basic, even when there are alternative explanations of the relevant data, the same applies to belief about God. In short, one can have rational belief in God, apart from evidence.

11:08

Number two. God is a viable philosophical explanation. My first argument may be sufficient to establish the rationality of belief in God for those who have particular experiences. But what about

people who lack experience and are looking for belief based on evidence? Well before we consider one line of evidence, I need to take a detour to address a common objection to the legitimacy of appealing evidentially to God. It is important to address this objection at the outset because there is little benefit in watching arguments for God when people reject ON PRINCIPLE the propriety of appealing to God in the first place.

*11:44*

Today, the theist commonly encounters among self-described skeptics and atheists a widespread incredulity toward the concept of “God”, one that is often symbolized in the Flying Spaghetti Monster. What started out in 2005 as a clever if somewhat overwrought satire on Intelligent Design theory, has morphed into a general cultural Zeitgeist of incredulity toward God and religion. Whatever the satirical value of the Flying Spaghetti Monster, that arbitrary gerrymandered concept bear no relation to the concept of God as deployed in academic philosophy, a concept which has precise and logically integrated definitional boundaries, and which is only invoked when the evidence is seen to require it.

*12:27*

But if popular dismissal of God by comparison to the Plate of Celestial Spaghetti misses the mark, there is a more serious objection lying in the background. This is how atheist philosopher Thomas Nagel presents the objection. He says, “The idea of God serves as a placeholder for an explanation where something seems to demand explanation, and none is available.” In other words, far from being a legitimate explanation, Nagel claims that God is what people say when they LACK an explanation. It would seem that on Nagel’s view, explanatory appeals to deity are ruled out in PRINCIPLE.

*13:04*

But Nagel’s attempt to exclude God categorically as non-explanatory is simply wrong. To see why we need to unpack two aspects of the concept of God, namely transcendence and agent causation. To begin with, God is a transcendent explanation. For our purposes we can define a “transcendent explanation” as an explanation that seeks to account for the spatiotemporal world, or some aspect of the spatiotemporal world, by positing an ontological reality that is independent of this world.

*13:36*

Academic philosophy is REplete with transcendent explanations jostling for supremacy. From abstract objects to objective moral facts, to David Lewis’ nominalist theory of possible worlds. So Nagel can hardly object on principle to appeals to transcendent concepts, since that would bring him perilously close to rejecting philosophy altogether. One suspects that the real ground to Nagel’s objection relates to the second part: agency. In other words, Nagel is ok with transcendent concepts, just so long as they are not personal.

*14:12*

But why think that transcendent agent causes are non-explanatory? After all, a non-transcendent agent cause can provide an excellent explanation. For example, you are sitting at home, watching TV, when the light goes on in the next room. There are many possible explanations for this event, but surely among the more likely is that a person turned on the light. If we readily the explanatory value of non-transcendent agent causes, what basis is there to deny in principle the explanatory value of TRANSCENDENT agent causes?

*14:45*

Frankly, it seems to me that Nagel’s attempt to exclude explanatory termination in transcendent agents is nothing more than a philosophical prejudice, an attempt to exclude a particular type of

metaphysical explanation A PRIORI. In conclusion, God is a philosophical serious and legitimate explanatory concept.

*15:07*

With that in mind, we can now consider our one test case, to demonstrate how God can be proposed for belief, based on some feature of the world. Our example will focus on moral intuition. The nineteenth century Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy recalls the one time he witnessed a public beheading. He writes, "When I saw the head divided from the body, and heard the sound with which it fell separately into the box, I understood, not with my reason, but with my whole being, that no theory of the wisdom of all established things, nor progress, could justify such an act. And that if all the men in the world from the day of creation by whatever theory had found this thing necessary, it was not so. It was a bad thing. Therefore I must judge of what is right and necessary, not by what MEN said and did, not by PROGRESS, but what I felt to be true in my heart."

*16:05*

Note that Tolstoy did not reason discursively from a series of premises to the conclusion that public executions are immoral. Rather, witnessing the execution provided the occasion for him to form the properly basic belief, in his heart as he says, that public executions are wrong. Tolstoy's experience points us to the existence of a moral cognitive faculty, one that is commonly called "moral intuition", sometimes called "conscience". Which produces beliefs of the moral dimensions of persons, acts, and states of affairs, including good and evil, rightness and wrongness, as surely as sense perception produces beliefs about the physical dimensions and sense qualities of physical things.

*16:52*

In the same way that a radio has the ability to tune into FM radio waves, so properly functioning human beings are equipped with a sort of "moral radio", by which we can tune into basic moral properties about persons, acts, and states of affairs. This moral perception enables us to perceive in a non-discursive way - that is, apart from reasoning - moral goods and evils, rights and wrongs.

*17:18*

But where did we get this moral radio? What process equipped us with such an extraordinary faculty? An insight into a non-physical, moral realm. The great atheist Bertrand Russell recognized the problem when he wrote, "A strange mystery it is that nature, omnipotent but blind in the revolutions of her secular hurrying through the abysses of space, has brought forth at last a child, subject still to her power, but gifted with sight, with knowledge of good and evil, with the capacity of judging all the works of its unthinking mother."

*17:57*

In a similar manner, Richard Rorty points out how the existence of truth-directed cognitive faculties and moral intuition in particular, contradict a purely survival-driven pressure that is proposed by an atheistic form of Darwinian evolution. He writes, "The idea that one species of organism is, unlike all the others, oriented not just towards its own increased prosperity but towards Truth, is as un-Darwinian as the idea that every human being has a built-in moral compass - a conscience - that swings free of both social history and individual luck."

*18:36*

Well this is indeed a problem for atheism. So how might an atheist attempt to explain the origin and nature of this moral compass? One alternative is to attempt de-mystify the deliverances of moral intuition, by deconstructing moral properties. One could try to do so by claiming that the data of moral intuition is socially constructed. That is, human beings as individuals or groups have created good and evil, right and wrong. More radically, one can take the view that moral intuition does not

provide factual information at all, but instead merely produces non-cognitive emotional reactions to stimuli.

19:16

Unfortunately ethical reductionism of these types exacts a high cost, for it obliges a person to deny that moral intuition provides us with objectively factual information when assessing morally horrific acts like ISIS public beheadings, or morally heroic acts like doctors risking their lives to fight Ebola. Another option for the atheist is to adopt a Platonic moral realism, according to which acts are good or evil in virtue of exemplifying or failing to exemplify abstract Platonic goodness. While this position has the advantage of retaining the objective facticity of the deliverances of moral intuition, it leaves the COGNITIVE faculty more mysterious than ever.

20:00

How does moral intuition intuit this timeless inert abstract goodness? In sum, moral intuition presents a true mystery for the atheist. I suspect the only reason we do not find moral intuition more extraordinary, is because its deliverances are so immediate and natural to us. Natural though they may be, on atheism they also remain truly extraordinary. While moral intuition is fundamentally perplexing on atheism, it is perfectly sensible if we believe in God, an omnipotent and morally perfect agent, who, as such, has both the ability and motivation to equip his rational agents with the capacity to grasp moral facts, no less than facts about the physical world. Thus, if we intuit moral facts about the world because God designed us to do so of the desire that we have moral knowledge, just as a person provides the best explanation of the light switching on in the room, so a person provides the best explanation of that moral light of conscience by which we grasp moral facts.

21:04

Had we several more hours, we could proceed to build a cumulative case for God's existence by adding additional arguments to the one presented here. Within the moral sphere alone, there are many arguments: God has been invoked as an explanation for the origin of moral value (Thomas Aquinas); moral obligation (Robert Adams; C. Stephen Evans); the satisfaction of justice (Immanuel Kant); the moral gap (John Hare); and human dignity (Nicholas Wolterstorff). Beyond the moral sphere God has been invoked to explain dozens of other phenomenon, some of which I've discussed in my two apologetics books. Suffice it to say, the argument presented here is but the modest tip of a very large iceberg.

21:47

To conclude, in this presentation, I have argued that a person can rationally believe in God, apart from evidence. Next, I defended the status of God as a legitimate explanation against two common objections. Finally, I concluded by arguing that God best explains the cognitive faculty of moral intuition. I presented this as one sample argument among dozens that could be given. Well if you came to this evening hoping for an exchange reminiscent of *Crossfire*, I hope you're not too disappointed. But the reality is that academic philosophy has no patience with the petty triumphalism and quick-and-neat answers that frequently characterize apologetic debates on God's existence. In other words, I'm not here to argue anybody into believing in God. I'm simply [here] to point evidence for the rationality of that belief. If you did experience some disappointment, I hope your cardinal emotion is instead a deepened appreciation for the intellectual seriousness and importance of the question of God, and a renewed commitment to extend charity and adopt intellectual humility toward those with whom you disagree. If I've accomplished that much, I shall consider this evening a success.

Moderator:

23:12

Alright. Thank you Randal for that stirring opening address. And we would now like to invite Justin to continue the case... or to open the case against the existence of God.

Justin Schieber's opening statement:

23:29

OK. Well..., apparently Randal and I are going to be doing some karaoke afterwards, so I look forward to that. Um, well good evening. I want to begin by thanking George Veenhuyzen and Alexander Delorme and the University of Alberta Atheists and Agnostics for their inviting me to participate in tonight's debate. And I also want to thank my opponent and friend, Randal Rauser, for agreeing to participate. And last but not least, I of course want to thank all of you for coming out.

24:03

Now you've already been given the definition of theism that Mr. Rauser wishes to defend, and this is essentially classical standard theism. Now I take it that it is my turn then to say a little bit about what I will be defending tonight. I am an atheist, in the sense that I think standard theism is false. And the atheistic hypothesis I will be defending tonight is called metaphysical naturalism.

24:28

So what is naturalism? Well without getting too detailed, naturalism-at least as I view it-asserts that the natural world is a causally closed system. And this entails that there are no outside, or supernatural, agents capable of creating or otherwise interacting with the natural world. And if naturalism is true, then atheism is also true. And tonight, my goals are twofold: first I will argue that naturalism is a simpler hypothesis than theism, and secondly I will argue that naturalism is a more accurate hypothesis than theism - that is to say that it better fits the evidence that we have.

25:17

First things first. Why is naturalism a simpler hypothesis than theism? Well I agree with Philosopher Paul Draper, when he argues that naturalism and supernaturalism are, at least prior the evidence, roughly equivalent hypothesis in simplicity. But we're not debating naturalism verses supernaturalism tonight, rather we are debating naturalism, and a very specific form of supernaturalism, namely the form that rather viscosly takes on board a plethora of additional assertions about an all-powerful, all-knowing, and morally perfect God. We're debating theistic supernaturalism. And theistic supernaturalism is significantly more complex and less simple than basic supernaturalism. And so compared to theistic supernaturalism, or theism for short, naturalism is a simpler hypothesis. And philosophers generally agree that, all else being equal, you should prefer the simpler hypothesis. And so this is a good pre-evidential reason to prefer my naturalistic hypothesis over my opponent's theistic hypothesis.

26:25

However another indispensable part of comparing hypotheses is to evaluate their explanatory power, to evaluate them according to their evidential fit, or accuracy. Philosopher of science at Johns Hopkins University Victor Difate writes, "The most widely accepted probabilistic account of evidence is the so called 'increasing probability' or 'positive relevance' account." And so the idea here is simply that E is evidence for H if and only if E makes H more probable than it otherwise would have been. And so particularly good evidence for naturalism, and against theism, will be observations that are very much to be expected on the assumption that naturalism is true, but rather surprising on the assumption that theism is true.

27:14

And I want to bring our attention to three observations that fit this description, and so count as evidence for naturalism and against theism. And there are of course other observations, but I will limit my self to these three. And to be clear, none of these evidences will conclusively prove that theism is false, just as none of my opponent's arguments can conclusively prove that theism is true. Rather what we are doing is we are building our respective evidential cases, and your role tonight is to decide who in your opinion has built the stronger case.

27:49

So then what is my evidence for naturalism? Well the fact that we are even having this debate presupposes a few things. It presupposes that it is possible for intelligent and fair minded individuals to disagree about the existence of God. It's quite clear that there are many people who do not believe in God, and I count myself among them. Equally clear, however, is that many of these non-believers are not resisting theism. Rather, some just find that the evidence for theism is poor. Or perhaps they find that after considering the total evidence, both for and against theism, that the evidence is ambiguous - it doesn't really point obviously in one way or the other. There's no real clear winner. Still others are just completely unaware of the very concept of God. And so there's plenty of genuine and rational non-belief in the world that is in no way the fault of the non-believers. All that is to say, is that if God exists, he has not made his existence sufficiently clear to satisfy even those who very much wish he was real. And it is this fact about non-resistant non-believers which will serve as my first point of evidence, represented by H here - that there's plenty of non-belief in the world substantiated by doubt or disbelief or by ignorance of the necessary concepts - that is not, again, the fault of the non-believers.

29:21

Premise one: H is highly unlikely on the assumption that theism is true. On theism we would expect that a perfectly loving God would want a meaningful conscious relationship with the creatures whom he loved. And so for this reason, God would ensure that all such creatures, so long as they were not resistant to him, believed that he existed. Why? Well because only then would these persons then be in a position to freely respond to God, and enter into a meaningful relationship with God. So on theism, the fact that there are unbelievers who are not resisting God in any way is very unlikely.

30:00

Premise two: H is highly likely if naturalism is true. If naturalism is true, of course, this is not at all surprising - indeed the poverty of theistic arguments is entirely expected on naturalism because God does not exist. Therefore, H strongly supports naturalism over theism. And very often, theists of the Christian persuasion will simply say, "But Justin, there are no non-resistant unbelievers; they all resist God with their unrighteousness." These persons are usually quick with a biblical verse to back up their point. However, this kind of arrogance of biblical proportions fails to be anything other than assuming the thing to be true that's actually being challenged, and therefore constitutes a textbook example of question begging. And to his credit, Randal Rauser takes a quite different, and much more interesting approach, to dealing with the hiddenness argument. We'll cross that bridge when we get there, but for now I'd like to move on to my second bit of evidence for naturalism against theism.

31:05

This is a picture taken in 1990, from the Voyager 1 space probe. It was taken 3.7 billion miles from Earth. Now if you look closely, you'll see a pale, little blue dot. That's Earth. Now even this picture only captures but a speck of the observable Universe, which we by the way know is expanding. In

other words, the scale of the Universe is absolutely incredible. Let me be clear: I agree with my opponent, Randal Rauser, that - it was written elsewhere, actually - that the scale of the Universe is of little relevance to the existence of God. However, I think that the fact that the vast majority of this Universe is completely hostile to life clearly is relevant to the existence of God. With extreme heat, extreme cold, radiation, the fact that most planetary orbits are unstable, comets, asteroids - it's hard to come away with any conclusion other than that this, generally, as a whole, Universe seems quite like a death trap.

32:08

Now notice that this fact, when combined with the already mentioned fact about the incredible size of the Universe, suddenly makes our background about the incredible hostility of the Universe even more surprising on theism. Now, not only is it the case that the vast majority of the Universe is completely hostile to life, but now we see that the ratio between the friendly part of the Universe, and the unfriendly parts of the Universe, is disturbingly large.

32:35

Premise one: The hostility of the vast majority of our Universe, and the scale of our Universe represented on the slide as HS (Hostility Scale), is highly unlikely on the assumption that theism is true. If theism is true, and God has created the Universe for us, then it is a strange and awkward fact why our massive Universe should appear to be almost entirely designed to kill the very beings for which it was created to sustain. Let me be clear, God certainly could have created it that way, but of course he could have created it a million other ways which would not have automatically killed us simply for venturing from our pale blue dot. This fact about the near universal hostility of our massive Universe is quite the awkward fit on theism.

33:24

Premise two: The hostility to life in the vast majority of the Universe and our scale of the Universe is not very surprising on naturalism. It is rather likely. Again, if naturalism is true, this isn't at all surprising, because life isn't special in the universe. We shouldn't expect the Universe to care about keeping us safe, any more than it should care about keeping a particular comet on course.

Conclusion: therefore the hostility to life of the vast majority of the Universe, combined with the scale of the Universe, strongly supports naturalism over theism.

34:00

Most of you may be familiar with the logical problem of evil. This is an attempt - an argument, an attempt - to demonstrate that there's a logical contradiction between the existence of God, and any evil we're suffering in the world. However I want to give God a little bit of a break here, after all we do have a little bit of a history. I'm perfectly willing to grant that God may have reasons for allowing certain instances of suffering to occur in the actual world. After all, it seems plausible to me that if God exists, God may have some reasons to allow suffering, perhaps to ensure some greater good, or to avoid some equally bad or worse instance of suffering. However, if God existed, he would not allow the existence of suffering, unless it was logically necessary for, uh, you know, to obtain some greater good, or to avoid some equally bad or worse instance of suffering. But, of course, now we get to the problem: many instances of suffering that we see in our world, by both human and non-human animals, seem suspiciously like the exact kinds of suffering that a perfectly loving being would prevent, if such a being did exist. They seem utterly pointless.

35:11

Think of the Holocaust; think of the slavery in the American South; think of ISIS. Now, the usual response to this is to argue that God gave us free will, and our abuse of that free will is just that: it's an abuse. Now I agree that free will is important; generally speaking people should be allowed to

make their mistakes, learn and grow accordingly. ...[H]owever important free will is, we must recognize that it is not a trump card - everybody in this room already knows this. Imagine you're walking down the street, and you witness an elderly couple just being beaten within an inch of their lives, so that the attacker can score a gold watch, right? Are we not morally obligated to help, if we are able? Of course we are. If respecting the attacker's free will is not an adequate justification for OUR simply walking by and allowing this crime to happen, then why should we suggest that this kind of justification could work for the existence of God?

*36:16*

And then of course we have natural suffering. Think of the central theory of biology, the theory of evolution by natural selection. It can only occur with massive amounts of suffering and death, most of which occurred long before humans entered the world stage. And notice that this is not just an accidental byproduct of evolution. The suffering and death within natural selection is intrinsic to the system. Also in the category of natural suffering, is earthquakes, tornados, droughts, floods, famine, disease. This is all very real and deeply felt suffering. We must admit that this seeming massive amount of seemingly pointless suffering is very unlikely on the assumption that theism is true. But of course if naturalism is true, then there's really no problem in fitting these facts into the naturalistic world view, because... on naturalism, the Universe does not care about our well being - it's blind to it. And so the massive amounts of seemingly pointless suffering in the world strongly favor naturalism over theism. Or in other words, as a philosopher one wrote, suffering counts against the existence of God in the same way that crab grass on the golf green counts against the existence of an efficient greens keeper.

*37:37*

Now you may be thinking, "But Justin, God is mysterious. He may have reasons beyond your understanding for allowing these tragedies." Well that of course may be true, but that does little to undermine my evidential argument, because it may also be that God is mysterious, and he may have extra reasons for preventing these tragedies that we've observed. And so without a reason to think that one set of unknowns is bigger than the other set of unknowns, this point is of little importance to my evidential argument.

*38:08*

And so, so in review, the hiddenness of God, I argue, is evidence for naturalism and against theism. The hostility to life of the vast majority of our massive Universe also counts as evidence for naturalism and against theism, and the massive amounts of seemingly pointless suffering also count as evidence for naturalism and against theism. And one might argue, that, well, sure, isn't it at least possible... that you could still believe in the existence of God with this evidence. And of course it's possible. You could always say, "well, look, you can explain suffering through a kind of unknown reasons," right - but again, if we don't have antecedent reasons for supposing that the unknowns which justify the sufferings are bigger than the unknowns which add to the problems of the sufferings, then appealing to this doesn't do much. And..., thank you very much.

Moderator:

*39:31*

OK. Thank you very much Justin for that wonderful opening, the arguments against the existence of God. We are next going to move into the series of rebuttals between the the speakers. So first we will give Randal a ten minute opportunity to deal with the arguments that were presented by Justin. Then Justin will have the same opportunity back towards Randal. So, without further adieu, we'd like to invite Randal to continue the argument in favor of God.

Randal Rauser's rebuttal:

*40:05*

I'd like to thank Justin for a stimulating opening salvo, I'll see what I can say in response to it. So he had three arguments there, that I want us to keep in mind that he's not simply arguing for agnosticism, he's not simply arguing that the evidence is indeterminate, rather, he's arguing that he is establishing, the probabilities he's presenting are so strong that one should in fact become an atheist and have that conviction.

*40:30*

So I'll work through his arguments, I think I'll begin with the hostility inside of the universe with emphasis on hostility. So Justin here, and I should say this, in each one of these arguments, I will be challenging the first premise, that God is unlikely, given X. So on this one the first premise, is that hostility to life in the universe is unlikely on the assumption that theism is true. And I would challenge that assumption, I think what is in fact being slipped in the back door is not just theism, but theism along with anthropocentrism.

*41:04*

So the idea that somehow this universe should have been designed precisely with human beings in mind, and should provide a maximal place for us to stretch our legs. And... we're not talking about anthropocentrism here, we're simply talking about theism, so, even from the outset I don't find that that first argument is really getting at what we're specifically debating.

But that said, I want to say a little bit more here. So, imagine that you have an architect and they're going to produce their master work.

*41:33*

Are we going to expect that if they're like THE best architect ever, that of course the one thing they are going to build as their master work is going to be a small cozy little home? Probably not. We'd probably expect they would make something rather grand, with broad marble staircases and big balconies, and vaulted ceilings. And also with little nooks, and little alcoves, and nice little areas as well.

*42:00*

Similarly... to the extent where our intuitions are at all reliable as to what kind of universe would a divine being create, I think we can get first of all some guidance from what classical theists have said about God. They said two different things. First of all that God is transcendent, I already referred to that concept, but in terms of theology that God utterly goes beyond the universe. God is infinite. In fact one of the classic attributes of God is immensity, to refer to God as being immense.

*42:30*

The other, is imminence, God is present in the small details. And in fact I think that's what we find in the universe. On the one hand it is a grand, awesome, severe, majestic universe. But also in that pale blue dot from... Carl Sagan's famous image from 1990, it's also intimate, it's also small, it's also immanent. So in fact, I think the universe is, to the extent where I have any reliable intuitions on this, pretty much what I would expect if God were to have made it.

*43:00*

Let me turn to pointless suffering. So again on this, I'm going to challenge the first premise. That apparently pointless suffering is highly unlikely on the assumption that theism is true. Let me begin by giving you an illustration. So imagine that you are beginning an apprenticeship with a master craftsman, which is going to last for many years. And for the next several years you are going to be

shadowing this individual and doing everything they do and following them to try to learn this craft.

42:38

Would you expect that on the first day, they may be asking you to do things that didn't seem to make a lot of sense? That they might be doing things that didn't seem to make a lot of sense, that seemed to be arbitrary and to lack purpose? I think that would be expected precisely because of your lack of knowledge, your GREAT lack of knowledge compared to this person that you are mentoring under.

44:00

I think here, of the 1984 high point, high water mark in 1980's culture, the film *Karate Kid*. Anybody remember that film? I know there's a remake but I'm talking about the original. So in the original, Daniel is getting beat up at school, and so he goes to Mr. Miyagi, and he wants to be taught Karate. The first thing Mr. Miyagi does, is he asks him, go out and polish all my cars, and so he's doing the wax on wax off, and he says go paint my fence and he's painting his fence.

44:32

And he's getting really irritated because everything seems to be pointless, nothing seems to have any point. And he's beginning to think maybe he's just getting exploited. But ultimately in the film it's shown that everything that Mr. Miyagi allows Daniel to do, everything that happens to Daniel, is all for a greater purpose, although Daniel couldn't appreciate it at the time. It's not surprising I would think, that with an infinite God running the universe there would be things that likewise would appear to us to be pointless.

45:03

So how do we deal with the problem of evil in particular? Well this is, of course, an extraordinarily difficult issue. But the way we deal with it, I think, is certainly not in a ten minute rebuttal. So the most thing I can say here is something that Danish writer Karen Blixen said. She said "All sorrow can be born, if you tell a story about it."

45:27

What she is saying there, is, when something terrible happens in the world, you can look at it and it doesn't seem to make any sense to you, like what's the point of that, why would that happen, maybe there is no point. But, what we need to do is embed that event within a wider, broader, narrative. Going back, going forward, and into the network of relations around it. And only then, can you be in an epistemic position, to - in terms of knowledge position - to make a reasonable conclusion about whether this really is indeed a pointless event.

46:00

The philosopher Eleonore Stump makes this point in the 600 page book - *Wandering in Darkness* - which is all about the problem of evil from a philosopher's perspective. She says if you imagine that you have some Martians, and their only window onto planet earth is looking into a hospital. They don't see anything outside of the hospital. They would probably conclude after a while that there are a lot of pointless horrific things going on.

46:30

The point, however, that Stump makes, is for them to have... an evidenced conclusion that can lead to knowledge - to support that conclusion - they would to know what's going on outside the hospital. They would have to know the events prior to people coming into the hospital that led them to be there, and they would have to know what's going to happen to those individuals after leaving the hospital. And it's only when you embed these events in a wider narrative that we can be in a position to make the kinds of... probabilistic judgments that Justin wants to make.

47:00

So let me come now to the point on non-resistant non-believers. Here Justin says non-resistant non-believers are highly unlikely on the assumption that theism is true. Well some Christians - and certainly I think in academic philosophy a minority of Christians - from what I've seen, deny that there are such things as non-resistant non-believers. Others, and myself included, recognize that at least some people certainly seem to be non-resistant non-believers.

47:33

In fact, in my book - *Is The Atheist My Neighbor* - which is coming out in about two months, that's one of the things I'll be talking about there. So I agree that there are such people, the question is: what do we infer from the fact? Well, I think one of the assumptions Justin makes, is, he says a belief in God, and I can't begin to address the whole issue here other than just a little bit of it. And he says that belief in God is required for meaningful relationship with God, and that is a dubious assumption, it's certainly not one that any theist is obliged to accept.

48:08

Think about it first of all with our entry into the world. Our most fundamental formative relationship with our parents begin as non-linguistic, non-cognitive relationships between infant and parent. So from that point that is a meaningful relationship but it is one that is non-cognitive.

48:28

What about people who ARE linguistic, who have mental capacity - a properly functioning adult - who does not believe in God, and introspects and says "it seems like I want to know if there's a God but there just doesn't seem to be one." Well, one thing we can say here is, again, talking about theism, there are many theists who believe such individuals also can have meaningful relationships with God. So, the Catholic Church, since Vatican II in the 1960's, has believed there can be people who are called anonymous Christians, and that means there can be people who are in relationship with God in some way even though conceptually they don't have the right beliefs about God.

49:09

C.S Lewis talks about something similar in the *Chronicles of Narnia* in *The Last Battle*.

Throughout *The Chronicles of Narnia* there is an evil character, a divine figure named Tash. And in the last book, one individual who had been giving obeisance to Tash, now encounters Aslan, who is the true God. And Aslan says to this person "All the service thou hast done to Tash, I accept as service done to me. No service which is vile can be done to me, and none which is not vile can be done to him."

49:40

What happens at the end of the book there, is this individual realizes he HAD BEEN in a meaningful relationship with Aslan, without having known it, and it is certainly open to the theist to recognize that in cases of people who are non-resistant non-believers, they may be to some degree in a meaningful relationship with God. What that looks like is perhaps a question for later or another day. But to say the least, I don't think we're in a position to draw a skeptical conclusion based on this evidence.

Justin Schieber's rebuttal:

50:30

OK, in his opening, Randal Rauser presents us with three arguments to consider. The first argument, was an argument for the rationality of theistic belief in the absence of evidence. Following the philosopher Alvin Plantinga, he argues that theistic belief is warranted in a similar way that belief in the external world, or belief in other minds might be warranted. These are things

which appear to have no good arguments for them, but nevertheless we are still within our epistemic rights to hold these beliefs.

*51:00*

This is because we consider these beliefs properly basic, and belief in God it is being argued, is similarly situated. But is it that easy? I don't think so. One problem is that you could ask yourself, is there any criterion that a belief needs to meet in order that it might rightly be considered properly basic, or all possible beliefs on the table to be justified in this way? What I'm suggesting is that this view works TOO well.

*51:30*

For example, this method works equally as a justification for belief in Islam, or any other promiscuous belief system so long as its adherents have a sufficiently advanced imagination, such that they can paint a story in which their cognitive processes - according to that story - are reliable. What's to stop people from using the same reasoning to justify belief in fairies, for example? When challenged they could always retreat to metaphysics and say that there exists some fairy godmother that, through some yet to be understood magical process, ensures that our belief forming mechanisms in the brain are generally oriented toward true belief.

*52:11*

Now, I'm not arguing belief in God is like belief in fairies. However, I am arguing that the justificatory story that we are being told by Randal is disturbingly similar. There's very little on Randal's view here in his first argument that it couldn't justify.

*52:30*

It's hard to see something so permissive as being something that should be taken particularly seriously. It's only again that it's seen to be the metaphysical imaginations of its adherents. I want to argue that there's a difference, though, between belief in God, and belief in the physical world, or belief in other minds, and the difference I want to offer is that belief in God, unlike belief in the physical world, or in the external world, or belief in other minds, it does not enjoy universal sanction.

*53:04*

This is an idea put forward by, actually, a Christian philosopher, James Sennett, and it's a great way to think about what kinds of belief can be considered, properly basic. Now what do we mean by universal sanction? Well, there's three prongs. First that beliefs of the kind are, under normal circumstances, are accepted by nearly all thinkers. Secondly, that thinkers directly form beliefs of this kind as a matter of normal living.

*53:30*

And third, that the denial of beliefs of this kind, is unthinkable, it would lead to a global skepticism, or something to that effect. And notice that the belief in other minds and in the external world, meet these criteria. How then does a belief in God bear in this criteria? Well it's not obvious that a belief in God can pass any of these three prongs. And so it's a relevantly different kind of belief than the other two.

*54:00*

And so if Randal wants to argue that belief in God can be similarly justified as belief in the external world, or belief in other minds is justified, I think he needs to give a more plausible set of criteria by which to preserve these three things as being properly basic, while also eliminating other wild imaginative stories. He needs some kind of constraint, on this view.

*54:27*

Randal's second argument is an argument against the view that God is in principle, unable to serve as an explanatory hypothesis and I have no argument against this, I think he's absolutely right on this. I think that popular means like the Flying Spaghetti Monster are - quite frankly - an embarrassment. So far, we have discussed two of Randal's arguments, though.

54:54

The first of which, if successful, shows that if theism is true, then theistic belief is warranted. The second, is a defense of the ability of theism to play as an explanatory hypothesis. However, neither of these arguments give us any reason to think that theism actually is true. And in a debate about the existence of God, presumably we are primarily interested in that question. Luckily, Randal's third argument does begin to address this question. Randal's third argument, is not an argument about moral ontology, rather it's an argument about moral epistemology, and that is to say that it's not an argument which appeals to the fact that moral facts indeed exist. Rather, it's an argument which appeals to fact that we can gain some kind of knowledge of these moral facts.

55:39

And we're told that this has a rather awkward fit on naturalism, and a rather comfortable fit on theism. Now one view, which is compatible with atheism is the view that moral facts can be grasped by intuition. An ethical intuition is an intuition whose content is an evaluative statement. So things like murder is bad, or charity is good.

56:02

Now we may not know how this intuition connects with moral facts. But the fact that murder is bad seems so obvious, it means that this intuition is, *prima facie*, justified. And this is not to say that all intuitions are equally justified or even that... it would of course be important to realize that we can wrong about these things and it's important to be open to revising our views on this. Perhaps intuitions about morality operate similarly as intuitions about logic.

56:34

Often when faced with simple invalid arguments, most people will be able to recognize that it's invalid, even though they're not able to articulate why it's invalid. And the same goes for grammar. People can read a sentence and recognize that something is wrong about it, but they can't particularly articulate why it's wrong, and perhaps moral intuition works like that.

57:00

Another objection to Randal's third argument, here, on moral intuition, is perhaps best phrased as a question: Why would God, who is primarily interested in deep relationship with, and the moral maturity of, his created creatures; why would he allow such extreme moral disagreement to persist among his created creatures? We can find theists of all stripes, on all sides, of every controversial moral issue.

57:34

That seems quite a surprise, if God particularly cares about a loving relationship with His creatures, and cares about their moral maturity. You would expect them to have much more of an agreement on some of the, at least the more extreme moral issues that we deal with.

58:00

And so the question is, does theism have explanatory resources to explain such a hands off approach that God, if He exists, quite clearly takes in regard to extreme and sometimes violent moral disagreements of his followers? Well, I don't think it does. On naturalism our knowledge of facts can be in error, and there's no one to guarantee that our knowledge of moral facts is correct and so moral disagreement, even significant moral disagreement is not all that surprising on naturalism.

58:35

I want to now turn to some of the criticisms that Randal gave of my arguments. So if you recall, one of my arguments was that the hostility of the universe in conjunction with the fact that the universe is quite large, is surprising on theism. And, Randal worries that... I'm kind of bringing in an assumption in the back door about how God is anthropocentric, of some sort, and he argues that, perhaps the universe is so large because it can be seen as a kind of big project that God partook in, and so we would expect it to be a very grand display. And that, I don't find that surprising, I would agree with Randal, I would expect it to be large.

59:29

But what I'm asking is that that doesn't actually explain the hostility of his artwork. If, for example, I wanted to create a house, and I was an architect, and I wanted people to enjoy my rad skillz of architecture, I wouldn't make it the case that they can enter the front door, and then not go much further than that, right? It would rather surprising if I were to take another step and fall into a pit of fire, or something to that effect, or there was booby traps. I mean, Randal seems to be suggesting that *Home Alone 1* is really what God is after.

1:00:11

He also worries that, again, against the hiddenness argument, that it might be the case that God had reasons that we don't actually have access to. And the concern I have here is that, sure, it might be that God has reasons beyond our understanding for allowing non-resistant non-believers, but of course God might have extra reasons beyond our understanding for preventing non-resisting non-believers. And, unless we have reason to think that one of those sets is bigger than the other, this objection does nothing to my evidential argument. Thank you.

(End of Justin's rebuttal at 1:00:42)