

WARRANTED SKEPTICISM? PUTTING THE CENTER FOR INQUIRY'S RATIONALE TO THE TEST

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to take the Center for Inquiry's ((CFI) a highly influential organization in the west), mission statement to task with respect to their critique of supposed extraordinary claims through the application of Carl Sagan's quote: "extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence." Specifically those which are defensible through rational argumentation (God's existence) i.e., in order to question whether or not they are actually promoting rigorous critical thought through the utilization of science and reason. A look will be also taken into whether they are actually fostering freedom of inquiry or if they are becoming masterful at insulating themselves from any criticisms against their own respective position. This will be carried forth through the examination of the following: i) emotions and non-belief, ii) the epistemology of Carl Sagan's quote, iii) philosophy, science and the question of God, iv) the presumption of atheism and its relation to Sagan's quote, v) proper basicity and Sagan's quote and vi) Jesus' resurrection as a test case.

INTRODUCTION

Several years ago, throughout North America and England, the Center for Inquiry (CFI), a secular humanist organization, that has branches throughout the world,¹ placed a series of advertisements on public transportation buses. These bus advertisements included a quote from the late astronomer and host of the 1980s TV: *Cosmos: A Personal Voyage*,² Carl Sagan. Sagan's quote, states that: "Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence." Although Sagan popularized the principle in effect, the notion itself seems to have originated with David Hume. David Hume stated in *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, that, "a wise man... proportions his belief to the evidence. In such conclusions as are founded on an infallible experience, he expects the event with the last degree of assurance, and regards his past experience as a full *proof* of the future existence of that event."³ Much has been written on Hume's principle which is essentially an assault on the concept of miracles.⁴ In recent years, philosophers have debated the legitimacy of Hume's claim. John Earman has heavily criticized it and has deemed it without merit, in his book *Hume's Abject Failure*⁵ whereas Robert Fogelin⁶ has vigorously defended Hume's approach.⁷ My intention is not to immerse myself in such debates but to focus my criticisms on the CFI's applicability of Sagan's quote. However, I will briefly examine why such line of reasoning is unreasonable and ultimately fallacious, when directed towards, for example, the miracle of Jesus' resurrection in the final section.

¹ The organization holds conferences and events where many prominent atheist philosophers and scientists such as Stephen Law, Daniel Dennett, Keith Parsons, John Shook, Richard Dawkins and Lawrence Krauss participate. The reflective atheist philosopher, Austin Dacey, in 2009, left the organization and published a thoughtful critique of some of its motives, see, Austin Dacey, "Decomposing Humanism: Why Replace Religion?" October 29, 2009, accessed August 20, 2015,

http://www.religiondispatches.org/archive/atheologies/1963/decomposing_humanism%3A_why_replace_religion

² This show has been recently remade; it is now titled *Cosmos: A Spacetime Odyssey* and is hosted by astrophysicist Neil Tyson deGrasse.

³ David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 10.4.

⁴ Particularly, Hume, attacked Jesus' resurrection, as he observed that, dead people stay dead.

⁵ See John Earman, *Hume's Abject Failure: The Argument Against Miracles* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

⁶ Robert J. Fogelin, *A Defense of Hume on Miracles* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2005).

⁷ Erik J. Wielenberg, *God and the Reach of Reason: C.S. Lewis, David Hume and Bertrand Russell* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 126; see also Eds., James F. Sennett and Douglas Groothuis, *In Defense of Natural Theology: A Post-Humean Assessment* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), for a thorough treatment and critique of Hume's views on miracles and natural theology in general.

The CFI is an influential secular organization throughout the western world, so, I believe it is important to seriously engage with their assertions and arguments since particularly young unequipped minds, both within and outside of the church, can be easily persuaded by their rhetoric. The purpose of this article is to take the CFI's mission statement to task with respect to their critique of supposed extraordinary claims, specifically those that are defensible through rational argumentation (God's existence), i.e., to question whether or not they are actually promoting rigorous critical thought through the utilization of science and reason. A look will be also taken into whether they are actually fostering freedom of inquiry or if they are becoming masterful at insulating themselves from any criticisms against their own respective position. Having said that, the purpose is not to provide a rigorous defense of belief in God but to provide a critique of the CFI's methodology, with respect to Sagan's quote and to demonstrate that one must be critical of one's own position as well, something I believe is clearly lacking in the CFI's approach.⁸ Although, I will briefly outline reasons as to why theism is reasonable to believe in, I will not examine the reasons with any great depth, as such an endeavour is beyond the scope of this article.

I propose to present my case against the CFI's position by examining the following: i) emotions and non-belief, ii) the epistemology of Carl Sagan's quote, iii) philosophy, science and the question of God, iv) the presumption of atheism and its relation to Sagan's quote, v) properly basicity with respect to Sagan's quote and vi) test case of Jesus' resurrection in light of argumentation against the CFI's position.

For the sake of clarity, I take materialism⁹ to mean the philosophical view that all that exists is matter and that everything including consciousness and information are created by the interactions of matter. I will also take naturalism to mean the philosophical view that nature is all that exists, i.e., that nothing beyond nature exists including supernatural and spiritual realities. Although materialism and naturalism possess their distinctions, I will however, for the purposes of this article use them interchangeably since in their essence they both deny the supernatural and spiritual realms.

⁸ I take this as a presupposition within the article since I am not providing a rigorous defense of every argument I mention. Many thorough Christian apologists have taken into account conceivable objections to their arguments and have demonstrated why their position was still reasonable to accept, arguing that it is ultimately more probable than its denial. The CFI and many atheists do not do this nor do they seem to think it is necessary to do so, since they presume atheism. Alvin Plantinga has mentioned atheists' lack of consistency, i.e., that the burden of proof they place on Christian philosophers is never consistent with the burden they place on their own arguments.

⁹ It is worth noting that there are theists, particularly Christians, who are materialists/physicalists; they believe in God but not in things like souls. This is a minority position but one nonetheless. Christian materialists/physicalists include Nancy Murphy and Peter van Inwagen. So, the category of materialism isn't as tidy as one would hope.

EMOTIONS: A MOTIVATION FOR NON-BELIEF?

The subsequent part of the abovementioned advertisement's slogan also included a slew of claims that are deemed to be extraordinary by the CFI, such as: God, Christ, Allah, UFOs and Big Foot. The CFI related website for extraordinary claims: <https://extraordinarybus.wordpress.com/>, includes many more of these supposed extraordinary claims. I would agree that many of the extraordinary claims including elves, gnomes, fairies, mermaids, dragons, witches, wizards etc., that are listed on the site, have very little evidence if any to support them. In fact, a large number of people have little vested interest in many of these claims. It is for deliberate reasons that the CFI is intertwining many religious claims together with characters from fairy tales. It is quite clear that their goal is to undermine and even ridicule religious belief. So, as their mission statement declares, they are able to "foster a secular society based on science, reason, freedom of inquiry, and humanist values."¹⁰ The problem arises when uninformed readers of the bus ads and website get the wrongful impression that claims about the existence of God are on par with fairy tale characters. For many atheists, such an organization provides comfort for their disdain and often unwarranted rejection of religious beliefs, which are both based on more emotion than reasoned argumentation. In a sense, one could argue that the disdain and emotions are what occur first then the justification for naturalism occurs secondary. A case in point could be made of a respected philosopher like Thomas Nagel, who candidly admits, that he has an aversion and even fear regarding the concept of a theistic God (something also known as the cosmic authority problem). He hopes that such a God does not exist. He articulates such a view when he states:

I want atheism to be true and am made uneasy by the fact that some of the most intelligent and well-informed people I know are religious believers. It isn't just that I don't believe in God, and naturally, hope that I'm right in my belief it's that I hope there is no God! I don't want there to be a God; I don't want the universe to be like that.

My guess is that this cosmic authority problem is not a rare condition and that it is responsible for much of the scientism and reductionism of our time. One of the tendencies it supports is the ludicrous overuse of evolutionary biology to explain everything about life, including everything about the human mind. Darwin enabled modern secular culture to heave a great collective sigh of relief, by apparently providing a way to eliminate purpose, meaning and design as fundamental features of the world.¹¹

¹⁰ Center for Inquiry, "About the Center for Inquiry," accessed May 16th, 2014, <http://www.centerforinquiry.net/about>

¹¹ Thomas Nagel, *The Last Word* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 130-1.

It seems as though, at least the first paragraph is a sentiment shared by a significant number of atheists whether vocalized or not. Nevertheless, it should be noted that some of the greatest thinkers throughout history and in contemporary times have devoted a significant amount of time to demonstrate the existence of God and the coherence of His nature.¹² This fact alone does not make their claims true but it places these sorts of claims on a higher epistemic level than ones that are grouped together with God such as other “extraordinary claims.” A significant proportion of the world believes in a transcendent reality that may or may not include explicit belief in a personal God. In spite of this, secular humanists must maintain that the majority of people are either delusional or have something wrong with their cognitive faculties in order to explain why most people still believe in some sort of spiritual religion. But is such the case?

THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF SAGAN’S QUOTE

Before we delve into a critique of the CFI’s position, let us begin by examining Sagan’s quote a bit more closely since it plays a central role in the CFI’s undermining of dissenting viewpoints from their position. On the surface, the quote by Carl Sagan seems to employ a healthy and reasonable type of skepticism, one that I have no problem advocating. In our everyday living, most adults employ a general level of skepticism. This skepticism can be applied to a mundane example such as purchasing a new house, for instance. One would want to be sure that the house lacks serious

¹² Arguments concerning God’s existence have had a revival since the 1960s with thinkers such as Alvin Plantinga, William Alston, Stuart Hackett, Richard Swinburne, Dallas Willard, William Lane Craig and J.P. Moreland. This is in part due to the collapse of verificationism which suggested that for a sentence to have meaning it should be empirically verifiable, i.e., by the senses, therefore knowledge of God was impossible and rendered meaningless. The interesting thing about the verification principle is that it was revealed to be incoherent itself, by its own very criteria, since it could not be verified by the senses. So, in part, because of this there has been a burgeoning of arguments for God’s existence in the Anglo-American philosophical realm. It seems to me that European Continental philosophy has been out of touch with such resurgence or has met it with much resistance. This was glaringly obvious to me in the response I received from French philosopher and theologian, Philippe Capelle-Dumont, at his lecture titled “Le Retour de Dieu en Philosophie?” in April of 2014 at the Dominican University College in Ottawa, Canada; given the question I had posed regarding the renaissance of Christian philosophy and the reaction from European-continental philosophy. I believe there is much groundwork to be done in helping create solidified bridges between Anglo-American analytic tradition and the Continental European philosophy with respect to epistemological and metaphysical approaches concerning the question of God. I believe it ultimately boils down to talking past one another without really communicating effectively. As Canadians we may be at an advantage to bridge such chasms since we are more balanced in our exposure to both schools of thought and their literature.

electrical, plumbing and structural problems. These days most people would demand an inspection to insure that the house is in good condition. No one would expect a buyer to rely on the word of the seller on the condition of the house (even if the seller was honest, perhaps they are unaware of certain problems and/or damages). On the other hand, we take many things for granted depending on our context. For instance, someone in Israel, maybe skeptical about going on public transportation for fear of a bomb threat; whereas in Canada such a skepticism would not be warranted since in Canada such occurrences are not part of the common living experience. That is not to say that such a thing could not transpire but the occurrence of a bomb exploding on a public bus in Canada would be fairly improbable. The aforementioned examples have been used to highlight the fact that the evaluation of certain claims being either ordinary or extraordinary can be to a degree subjective. Everyone incorporates particular presuppositions in their everyday living whether they are aware of them or not. Some of these presuppositions might be quite implicit. For instance, to return to the bomb threat example, in Canada an implicit presupposition would be that public transport buses will neither have bombs planted in them set to detonate nor suicide bombers on them ready to explode themselves. However, in certain parts of Israel, the opposite may be presupposed as something that may not be out of the ordinary. So, this raises some epistemological issues about Sagan's quote – how do we know what can be deemed as extraordinary as opposed to ordinary? What counts as evidence? Can Sagan's quote be applied objectively?

In order to address these questions, it will be worth examining the meaning of the words extraordinary and evidence. So, what can be considered extraordinary? It is an adjective that is defined by the Miriam-Webster's dictionary as being something that goes "beyond what is usual, regular or customary." What is meant by evidence? According to the Miriam-Webster's dictionary "it is something that furnishes proof." We could take that to be synonymous with corroboration, attestation, validation and confirmation. If we accept these definitions it would indicate that Sagan's quote would comprise any claim of what is outside of the norm would require evidence that is also outside of the norm. Well, this seems quite broad and susceptible to one's own subjective interpretation as to what precisely constitutes something as being outside of the norm and what would be deemed as furnishing proof. In this case it seems as though our subjective experience will play a significant role as to how we come to interpret claims, evidences and if they are extraordinary or not. Every individual aside from their genetic makeup has all sorts of experiential influences including a host of environmental factors such as geographic location(s) upon which the individual lived over the course of their life, culture, socio-economic situation, education, beliefs, food and chemical intake just to name a few. These and other factors can impact how we come to perceive and understand reality. They even play a pivotal role on how one considers a particular thing as being extraordinary as opposed

to ordinary and what one may deem as evidence. It is difficult to completely remove one's self from one's own experience. In the context of applying Sagan's quote to claims about God and religion, its application seems to become a bit more ambiguous. For instance, to a person who has claimed to have a spiritual experience they believe is an encounter with God, that person will most likely, unless they are a fideist, be convinced of particular arguments for the truth of God's existence. Or they may, at the very least, see a coherence among them which could provide warrant for such beliefs.¹³ On the other hand, perhaps a non-religious person in the absence of such an experience would deny that any of those arguments have any validity. Both beings are undoubtedly influenced by their subjective experiences but when it comes to rational discussion one must attempt to look at the evidence before us, as impartially as possible. Although at times, it may be a difficult task, it is what is required in any intellectual endeavour.

PHILOSOPHY, SCIENCE & THE QUESTION OF GOD

Skepticism is a useful tool, especially when it is not biased towards a specific claim. The more evidence for a claim, the more compelling it becomes. However, when dealing with abstract philosophical notions, one may not have direct access to evidence as is the case with a house inspection or discerning if a bus has a bomb planted on it or not. One cannot always use a strictly empirical approach to find truth in the validity of a particular claim.

I would argue that both philosophical and scientific inquiry, particularly the historical sciences, which are better served through the utilization of rational empiricism. Rational empiricism is the idea that the possibility of knowledge is the amalgamation of both *a priori* and *a posteriori* elements, therefore combining both rational and empirical methods of knowing. Philosopher Stuart Hackett explicates this notion:

Rational empiricism, as I profess it, is the doctrine that knowledge is possible only because it involves the combination of two elements: a mind that comes to experience with a structure of thought in terms of which it is necessarily disposed to understand that experience – this is the *a priori* or “before-experience” element; data upon which this structure of thought terminates to gain specific knowledge of particulars – this is the *a posteriori* or “after-experience” element.¹⁴

¹³ Below, I will discuss some of such arguments including something known as properly basic beliefs.

¹⁴ Stuart C. Hackett, *The Resurrection of Theism: Prolegomena to Christian Apology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1957), 37.

Thus, neither pure empiricism nor pure rationalism are tenable in both philosophical and scientific inquiry, i.e., it is insufficient to rely solely on one's sense experience or independence from it to gain accurate knowledge of the world.¹⁵ A conjoint of the two is of most value (especially in gaining knowledge of God whether through natural or supernatural revelation). Moreover, as I will argue below, this type of epistemological approach is useful to both scientific and philosophical inquiry and for the intersection of the two (in reference to using science in philosophical arguments but not merely asserting conclusions from science without further explanation).

It is important to note that historical scientists utilize what is known as abductive reasoning, namely the use of presently acting causes to make reasonable inferences about the past. Both Charles Darwin and Charles Lyell made use of such methods. Such a methodology is particularly useful in making inferences to the best explanation to rule out competing hypotheses.¹⁶ Inference to the best explanation has its uses in attempting to demonstrate the cause of singular occurrences in the past such as the origin of the universe, the origin of life, the Cambrian explosion, the origin of consciousness and even the resurrection of Jesus. Abductive reasoning as opposed to deductive reasoning does not guarantee the conclusion with certainty nor as with inductive reasoning, can a conclusion be regarded as necessarily highly likely. However, despite this, abductive reasoning is very useful in ascertaining events of the past. This is a perfectly acceptable method of providing evidence for the existence of God in an overall philosophical argument (more will be said on this below). Moreover, the aforementioned singular events are the sort of thing you would expect if a personal God were to exist and wanted to reveal Himself to conscious beings throughout nature.

It would be naive, as some natural scientists seem to think, such as the biologist Richard Dawkins and the physicist Stephen Hawking, that the issue of God's existence could be determined solely by the scientific method.¹⁷ God as understood by classical theism is an immaterial being who by definition cannot be examined by empirical tools. Only the effects of God's action, from primary and secondary causes, can be examined in such a fashion.

Scientists such as Hawking seem to expound what is known as a *strong scientism*.¹⁸ However, it is worth mentioning, some conceptions of God or god(s)

¹⁵ Hackett, *The Resurrection of Theism*, 37.

¹⁶ Peter Lipton, *Inference to the Best Explanation* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 1.

¹⁷ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006), 55, 59; Stephen Hawking and Leonard Mlodinow, *The Grand Design* (New York: Random House, 2010), 5.

¹⁸ This is the view that things should only believe if they are deemed scientific, i.e., only scientific truths exist and if it can't be tested by the scientific method then it's not true. This

throughout history have been demonstrated to be false or at least highly implausible based on primarily empirical methods. For instance, in terms of searching for the existence of Zeus and other gods of Mount Olympus, seekers could over time notice that such gods did not inhabit Mount Olympus as was claimed and could at least rule out their inhabitation of such an area. Primitive anthropomorphic conceptions of gods or demi-gods are more readily susceptible to certain empirical methods than to a transcendent conception of God, as is conceived by theistic faiths. To verify claims of the existence of a transcendent God, that may or may not be immanent as well, is a more challenging task than one(s) that seem to be part of the material world or at least inhabit it (such as Zeus and other such gods). In this sense, the scientific method has its limitations by definition and cannot fully adjudicate such questions. However, that is not to say that reason cannot help adduce and draw precision to such questions. That would require a mediating philosophy to do such. Science, as is defined by methodological naturalism, must operate with the material world, anything that goes outside of that, would be beyond the purview of natural science by its own definition.¹⁹ This raises the demarcation problem²⁰ in the philosophy of science but for our purposes we will not delve into this. It should be noted that when scientists, such as Richard Dawkins or Stephen Hawking, are attempting to use science to answer questions such as the existence of God, they are actually expounding their own brand of philosophy²¹, albeit a naive one but still one nonetheless.

When such occurrences take place, as is the case of these scientists, attempting to rule out the existence of God solely through the tools of the natural sciences - there

should be contrasted with weak scientism which allows for other truths but science is still regarded as the highest and most important method of knowing.

¹⁹ That is beyond the dictates of methodological naturalism. Scientists often conflate methodological naturalism with metaphysical naturalism – the view that all that exists is nature.

²⁰ This is the problem of distinguishing and defining science. Typically, historians and philosophers of science are better equipped, as opposed to scientists, to answer such questions, as Stephen Meyer explains on pages 400-401 of *Signature of the Cell*: “As they say of the catcher in baseball, the philosopher and the historian of science has a view of the whole field of play, meaning he or she is less likely to fall into error of defining all of science by practices used in one corner of the scientific world. I already had some inkling of this from my work as a geophysicist. I was aware that historical and structural geology use distinct (if partially overlapping) methods. But as I delved into the demarcation question, I discovered that different sciences use a wide variety of methods.” For a thorough treatment, see Stephen C. Meyer *Signature in the Cell: DNA and the Evidence for Intelligent Design* (New York: Harper One, 2009), 400-401, 419, 430-431. Meyer provides a series of useful resources from a variety of thinkers concerning this issue.

²¹ Peter van Inwagen, “Can Science Disprove the Existence of God?” *Philosophic Exchange* 34 (2004): 41; see also Peter van Inwagen, “La Science Peut-Elle Prouver L’inexistence de Dieu?” *Science et Esprit*, 56/3 (2004):285-302.

inevitably occurs an obvious conflation between methodological naturalism and metaphysical naturalism. A well thought out sophisticated type of philosophy, when coupled with science, provides a better tool for providing argumentations for and against religious (Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism etc...) and non-religious (materialism, naturalism, agnosticism, secular humanism, atheism, etc.) outlooks. Thus, it would be useful to use rational empirical approach. Robert J. Spitzer in his book *New Proofs for the Existence of God* explains why science alone cannot decide questions pertaining to God's existence:

First, unlike philosophy and metaphysics, science cannot deductively prove [or disprove] a creation or God. This is because natural science deals with the physical universe and with the regularities which we call "laws of nature" that are obeyed by the phenomena within that universe. But God is not an object or phenomenon or regularity within the physical universe; so science cannot say anything about God. Moreover, science is an empirical and inductive discipline. As such, science cannot be certain that it has considered all possible data that would be relevant to a complete explanation of particular physical phenomena or the universe itself.²²

So, in order to avoid the overused god-of-the-gaps criticism it should be realized that science alone does not get you to a sound argument about God; it is the use of scientific evidence in a philosophical premise of an overall argument that builds the case for God's existence. For example, an argument such as the Kalam Cosmological Argument (KCA),²³ which states that:

1. Whatever begins to exist has a cause
 2. The universe began to exist.
- Therefore, the universe has a cause.

This argument is hotly debated in peer-review philosophical journals among philosophers of religion.

The appropriate approach to tackling metaphysical questions such as God's existence, or whether to argue for atheism, must possess the recognition that a scientific model or theory on its own cannot justify a certain belief system. It is once you couple it with philosophy that you have an argument that can be used to support the particular worldview. As philosopher Peter van Inwagen rightly recognizes:

²² Robert J. Spitzer, *New Proofs for the Existence of God: Contributions of Contemporary Physics and Philosophy* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), 22.

²³ It is the most examined argument in contemporary times for the existence of God, popularly defended by W.L. Craig.

When it comes to classifying arguments, philosophy trumps science: if an argument has a single “philosophical” premise (a single premise that requires a philosophical defense), it is a philosophical argument. But an argument is a scientific argument only if *all* its premises are either propositions that have been established by science or else propositions so trivial that they require no defense.²⁴

So, the evidence for big bang cosmology would be used to justify the second premise of the KCA but nowhere is this seen as a god-of-the-gaps argument; it is a sound deductive argument where the conclusion follows logically from its premises. The onus is on the one who disagrees with the argument to demonstrate which of the premises is false and why. So, it should be evident that science in and of itself remains neutral on the question of God, as was above-mentioned, but rather science can be used to fortify premises as evidences in philosophical argumentation for God which is a completely separate issue.

Consequently, one would have to ask themselves the question – what sorts of things would I expect given a particular claim? If God exists, who is the cause of the universe (both determinant and sustaining), immaterial, spaceless, eternal, omniscient, omnipotent and omnibenevolent - what sorts of things would I expect to be true in reality? Each attribute must be examined and deemed whether or not such a being possessing said attribute(s) could possibly exist. It is important to note that, for instance, one argument may establish one attribute of such a God, as perhaps being the cause of the universe, that same argument will not establish God’s all loving nature. Typically, what is needed is a cumulative method of argumentation to establish multiple attributes. Some atheists will have the unreasonable assumption that the argument such as the *Kalam Cosmological Argument* (KCA) is meant to establish the existence of the Christian God but of course that is not the purpose of such an argument.²⁵ Other important questions that arise include: what sorts of things could be deemed as being consistent and inconsistent with how we come to observe and know reality given the existence of such a God? It seems that at first glance, some things may be more consistent with the existence of God than His non-existence.

²⁴ Van Inwagen, “Can Science Disprove the Existence of God?” 41.

²⁵ Philosopher and editor of the Cambridge University Press journal, *Think*, Stephen Law, has echoed that something such as the KCA does not establish the existence of a benevolent God but could establish the existence of a malevolent God. I would agree with Law here but the KCA is not meant to establish the moral nature of the cause of the universe if the argument is in fact deemed successful for its very limited purposes.

THE PRESUMPTION OF ATHEISM & SAGAN'S QUOTE

A significant proportion of atheists (or adherents to natural religious views) from all sorts of avenues of life, whether academicians or not, past and present, have been surreptitious in insulating themselves from criticisms. There exists an inherent presupposition, namely that nature is all that exists, whereby consequently material reality is the only rational proposition and that the burden of proof rests on their opponents to show them otherwise. Unfortunately, what seems to be revealed by the statement: “extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence,” is what is known as the presumption of atheism. Thus, to pose the question again, “can Sagan’s quote be applied objectively?” It seems that perhaps it can, but it is not within the context upon which the CFI is using it. The statement itself, especially as is applied, in only a one directional type of skepticism (particularly when applied to religious beliefs and/or the existence of God) contains the assumption that anything dealing with God or the supernatural does not have any evidence or at least any good evidence in its favour. This view is commonly known as the *presumption of atheism*.²⁶ Therefore, given this view, because of the lack of evidence in favour of God’s existence it is logical to presume that such a being does not exist. It seems as though this is the assumption which lies at the core of the statement when it is applied, as it is towards solely supernatural claims. Yet, burden of proof for the presumption of atheism seems way too high to sustain. It is much too audacious to suggest there is no evidence at all for claims about God’s existence or that the evidence is insufficient. How can the atheist come to know such a thing? The atheist must either show that if God existed, God would have provided more evidence than is provided, since the claims purported to be evidential made by the theist are considered to be insufficient or even non-existent. William Craig elucidates this notion further:

this is an enormously heavy burden of proof for the atheist to bear, for two reasons: (1) On at least Christian theism the primary way in which we come to know God is not through evidence but through the inner work of his Holy Spirit, which is effectual in bringing persons into relation with God wholly apart from evidence. (2) On Christian theism God has provided the stupendous miracles of the creation of the universe from nothing and the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, for which events there is good scientific and historical evidence – not to mention all the other arguments from natural theology. In this light, the presumption of atheism is presumptuous indeed!²⁷

For the sake of argument, it seems that even as an atheist or agnostic, one could see the coherence of the view that God created the universe out of nothing in its

²⁶ William Lane Craig, “Theistic Critiques of Atheism” in *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism*, ed. Michael Martin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 70.

²⁷ Craig, “Theistic Critiques of Atheism,” 70-71.

relation to modern big bang cosmology. This seems to be fortified by the Borde, Guth and Vilenkin paper “Inflationary space-times are not past-complete” whereby all three physicists draw the strong conclusion that all eternally inflating models point to having a necessary beginning, that is, a definite finite past.²⁸ Moreover, there seems to be consistencies with other arguments from natural theology in relation to reality, for example, such as a modern formulation of the teleological argument involving that of the fine-tuning of the physical laws, constants and initial conditions present with the universe. Furthermore, given, certain propositions and notions such as the existence of the universe and its creation out of nothingness, it does not seem so extraordinary that there could exist, a transcendent cause. It seems that perhaps the postulation of the universe’s past eternality or uncaused nature, given the indications of the finitude of the past as evidenced by modern cosmology becomes more of an extraordinary claim. At the very heart of the application of Sagan’s quote, although not made explicit, is the belief in materialism that is held *a priori* before even examining the evidence contrary to it. To give a brief illustration of how the presumption of atheism and its ability to cloud one’s judgement in metaphysical issues, we can consider an atheist philosopher’s reply to a profound question in a debate over God’s existence. In 2008 between Christian philosopher and theologian, William Lane Craig and John Shook, Craig probed Shook over what could possibly exist beyond nature if anything and Shook responded “more nature.”²⁹ This response cannot be taken seriously because if nature is all there is, there is not more nature since it would already embody the totality of reality – this demonstrates his unwillingness to even allow for the possibility of a supernatural reality. This is just a typical example of how atheists, even perfectly good working philosophers, such as Shook, attempt to insulate themselves from criticism. Moreover, as a further point, naturalists suggest that not only does methodological naturalism have an impeccable track record in the natural sciences but also that metaphysical naturalism is the best way to make sense of reality.

The truth of the matter is that Christian theology is what played a vital role in the rise of modern science, not materialism. The presupposition of Christian theology that the universe emanated from a benevolent and omniscient creator gives one justification to rely on one’s own cognitive faculties in its correspondence with how reality actually is; it is foundational to scientific understanding. In fact, the very comprehensibility of the universe and its laws which are necessary for scientific

²⁸ Arvind Borde, Alan Guth and Alexander Vilenkin, “Inflationary spacetimes are not past-complete,” *Physical Review Letters*, vol. 90, no. 15 (2003): 3.

²⁹ See a video on the debate between Dr. William Lane Craig and Dr. John Shook over the question: “Does God Exist?” in this video extracted from that debate, titled: “Dr. William Lane Craig humiliates Dr. John Shook,” accessed August 30, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XcnZRctcleM>

discovery makes better sense under a universe that emanates from a mind as opposed to from just matter or nothingness. This is especially true in the works of great scientists such as Isaac Newton, Johannes Kepler, Rene Descartes, Galileo Galilei and Nicolas Copernicus who posited that the structure of physical reality could be knowable.³⁰

The CFI seems to be practicing one sided skepticism. True skepticism in its purest form would question everything. This type of skepticism seems extreme. However, many nonbelievers who stylize themselves as skeptics typically do so only from one direction, one that seeks to discredit and undermine anything that pertains to the supernatural. Ironically, when the CFI practices such an arbitrary form of skepticism they betray reason. Not only do they betray forms of knowing that they claim comprise the basis of knowledge they also stifle freedom of inquiry. That is not to say, there are not non-religious thinkers who do not attempt to practice bi-directional or multi-directional skepticism. To be sure, there are reputable atheistic philosophers that have put forth some sophisticated a-theological arguments including the problem of evil, the incoherency of theism and the argument from non-culpability for non-belief known as divine hiddenness. However, the CFI does not seem interested in building a positive case for their a-theological views particularly with their application of Sagan's quote but instead want to solely attack anything they presuppose as being irrational particularly whatever is supernatural.

PROPER BASICILITY & SAGAN'S QUOTE

To be sure, there are many arguments that point away from the position of materialism and metaphysical naturalism. Some of these arguments include the ontological argument, the cosmological argument in variant forms (including the KCA), the argument from reason, the teleological argument, the moral argument, the anthropic argument, the transcendental argument, the argument from consciousness, the best explanation for the origin of information for a self-replicating system and the origin of consciousness. There are many writings that explore these arguments in great detail. Many of them are highly defensible and have modern formulations.³¹ It is worth noting that outside of positive arguments for and against the existence and/or coherence of a theistic God, there is also the concept of properly basic beliefs which seeks to ground belief in God and provide a warrant for religious experience. It is inescapable, that human experience is permeated with many beliefs that cannot be

³⁰ Edward Grant, "Science and Theology in the Middle Ages" in David C. Lindberg and Ronald L. Numbers, eds., *God & Nature: Historical Essays on the Encounter between Christianity and Science* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986), 59.

³¹ If one has further interest please see the Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology edited by W.L. Craig and J.P. Moreland for a contemporary treatment of arguments for God's existence?

proven nor disproven,³² including, for example, belief in the external physical world, our own minds, other minds³³, the intelligibility of the world and that the past was not suddenly created with the appearance of age, just to name a few. These types of beliefs have been deemed by some Christian philosophers, such as Alvin Plantinga and William Alston, as self-evident axioms, also known as properly basic beliefs. Belief in God is also included in such a type of belief.³⁴ So, given this conception, belief itself (particularly in the aforementioned examples) is intrinsic to humans. If this concept of properly basic beliefs with respect to belief in God as developed by Plantinga and Alston is true or can be shown to have epistemic warrant then belief in God has a status of being ordinary and not extraordinary. Moreover, perhaps it could also be argued that claims about materialism and naturalism given this view could be deemed as extraordinary since they lie outside of human experience. Such naturalistic outlooks require extraordinary evidence and should not just be presumed from the outset as is typically done. Naturalists, at least many involved with the CFI, seem to conflate the existence of nature with the totality of reality, while ignoring all the signposts to transcendence (e.g., origin of the universe, the laws of physics, information and consciousness).

As, W.L. Craig aforementioned, the inner witness of the Holy Spirit is what is foundational for brining humans into relationship with God. Furthermore, if belief in God is properly basic, then such a belief is perfectly rational and the converse could be potentially deemed otherwise. Hence, as illustrated with this list of arguments, there seems to be a pointing towards a transcendent reality, i.e., the God of theism, which runs contrary to that of materialism. These reasons, although not proofs, especially when taken together cumulatively, provide a more powerful evidential basis for a transcendent and immaterial reality, as opposed to the postulation that material nature is all that exists. It makes one wonder, given these powerful reasons, why it never occurs to the CFI that their secular views may indeed be extraordinary resting outside of our everyday experience about spiritual realities.

³² I understand proof and disproof in this context, to be applicable strictly to mathematics and formal logic. In my estimation, the terms have been hijacked by popular culture without justification.

³³ Alvin Plantinga cleverly argues that belief in other minds is on the same epistemic grounds as belief in God, who entails among many other attributes such as a disembodied mind, ultimately demonstrating that atheists cannot consistently deny God's existence as such while adhering to belief in other minds, let alone their own. For a thorough reflection see, *God and Other Minds: A Study of the Rational Justification of Belief in God* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967).

³⁴ Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 180.

TEST CASE: JESUS' RESURRECTION

Aside from subjective delineations, can one look at dictum in an objective manner? It seems that one can. Science cannot adjudicate whether the supernatural exists or not. As long as the possibility of God is feasible then so are miracles. One must be careful that miracles are not artificially ruled out through the presumption of atheism. We have already seen, in the section on the presumption of atheism, that such a burden cannot be adequately sustained. Science by definition, under methodological naturalism, examines naturalistic causes. Miracles such as Jesus' resurrection are supernatural events that are beyond the purview of such methodologies. It must be made clear that, this however does not mean they do not occur.

As was briefly mentioned in the introduction, I do not intend to extensively enter into the debates between philosophers such as John Earman and Robert Fogelin. But Sagan's dictum has been undoubtedly heavily influenced by Hume's own philosophical analyses of miracles in the 17th century, by attempting to demonstrate their impossibility. Academia, as Earman, has put it, has too often been "genuflecting at Hume's altar."³⁵ Indeed, there has been an uncritical acceptance of Hume's argumentation for well over two centuries which has infected biblical exegesis, scientific and historical analyses based on a rationale that is highly questionable. It is no surprise that scholars such as Rudolf Bultmann have affirmed the position that miracles are outside of historical and biblical studies. Likewise, the famous New Testament critic Bart Ehrman rejects the possibility of miracles off hand regardless of the background knowledge at hand. So, since Ehrman rejects God's existence and the evidence for it, he therefore also rejects miracles. The problem with this as we have seen, is that the evidence for God's existence is more probable than not, especially when we consider the KCA (including all the other unexamined arguments for God's existence) and proper basicity (i.e., the inner witness of the Holy Spirit). In essence, Ehrman's reasoning is circular since he presumes the impossibility of miracles as a "fait accompli."

The fact is that probability calculus and Bayes theorem have shown the fallaciousness of Hume's arguments, which wasn't as readily apparent beforehand. Although such argumentation would be the subject of a paper in and of itself, in a nutshell, the argument suggests that given the background knowledge of a particular claim – in this case, that of the historical evidence of the resurrection of Jesus; the empty tomb, the disciples having experiences of Jesus appearing to them and the

³⁵ John Earman, *Hume's Abject Failure: The Argument Against Miracles* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), vi.

origin of the disciples' belief that Jesus was raised from the dead³⁶ – it is more probable that such an event in fact occurred as opposed to the claim that it did not – given this background knowledge. In other words, to claim the improbability of a particular event, the background knowledge should provide compelling disconfirming evidence but this is clearly not the case with respect to Jesus' resurrection. This demonstrates that Ehrman's reasoning is wholly biased against miracles in spite of the evidence – his presuppositions influence and guide his conclusions. Craig in a response to philosopher Stephen Law who takes an agnostic position to the remarkable claim of Jesus' inexistence, while using Sagan's dictum in such a case (while applying it to Jesus' resurrection), shows why such reasoning does not hold weight and is actually improbable:

This sounds so commonsensical, doesn't it? But in fact it is demonstrably false. Probability theorists studying what sort of evidence it would take to establish a highly improbable event came to realize that if you just weigh the improbability of the event against the reliability of the testimony, we'd have to be skeptical of many commonly accepted claims. Rather what's crucial is the probability that we should have the evidence we do if the extraordinary event had not occurred. This can easily offset any improbability of the event itself. In the case of the resurrection of Jesus, for example, this means that we must also ask, "What is the probability of the facts of the empty tomb, the post-mortem appearances, and the origin of the disciples' belief in Jesus' resurrection, if the resurrection had not occurred?" It is highly, highly, highly, improbable that we should have that evidence if the resurrection had not occurred.³⁷

So, even with the example of a particular historical miracle such as Jesus' resurrection, the extraordinary claim is its negation as opposed to its confirmation, given the background knowledge. In other words, the view that Jesus was not raised from the dead constitutes an extraordinary claim without the evidence to back it up.

³⁶ For such evidence and argumentation please see, Eds. Paul Copan & Ronald K. Tacelli, *Jesus Resurrection a Debate Between William Lane Craig & Gerd Ludemann* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000).

³⁷ William Lane Craig deals extensively with Sagan's dictum in this response to Stephen Law: http://www.reasonablefaith.org/stephen-law-on-the-non-existence-of-jesus-of-nazareth#_edn3 accessed, April 10, 2015. Please also see William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 3rd Ed. (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2008).

CONCLUSION

It has become a typical tactic for a number of naturalists to attempt to avoid criticisms by suggesting they do not need any arguments in favour of naturalism and/or materialism since they believe it to be self-evident. However, they do so in the absence of any proper warrant. Once carefully examined, the CFI's tactics ironically work to discredit part of their own mission statement which gives the false impression that it is bolstered on reason, science and free inquiry. Instead a closed mindedness is revealed with a failure to acknowledge the weaknesses in their own position. The skepticism they drive against supernatural beliefs seems wholly unwarranted and motivated more by emotions than by calm and objective reason. This is evident after thoroughly looking at the epistemology of Sagan's quote and the use of philosophy and science to assess the question of God. When applying Sagan's dictum to the existence of God it becomes apparent for all the explanations examined through scientific and philosophical reasoning, that naturalistic conclusions are the extraordinary claims lacking extraordinary evidence. Moreover, such is the case when also applied to the miracle of Jesus' resurrection, as Craig has so aptly demonstrated. What is ultimately revealed is the unjustified presumptuous nature of atheism which seems to be motivated by an aversion to the concept of God (the cosmic authority problem) especially given the absence of compelling reasons to accept non-belief as a rational proposition.

Any intellectual debate will require each side to present arguments in favour of their position. If it is a debate regarding the existence of God, it is simply inadequate just to present evidence against a particular proposition, rather one must also present arguments and evidences in favour of the position they maintain to be true. Indeed the secular humanist position against God's existence lacks extraordinary evidence for such an extraordinary claim! So, the atheist, as much as the theist, must present a positive case for their belief system. Progress will be reached by both sides through the acknowledgement of their own shortcomings and by admitting weaknesses, as opposed to attempting to constantly insulate themselves from legitimate criticisms as if they do not exist.