

Why God Does Not Give Us Universal 'Knock-Down' Evidence for God's Existence

Chris Barrigar, PhD

Malcolm Jeeves has made the following observation: 'In neuroscience, a leading theist was Sir John Eccles and a leading atheist Francis Crick, both Nobel laureates. When we see such distinguished scientists in psychology and neuroscience taking such radically different views, the lesson becomes clear: there are no easy answers to these questions. There are no knock-down arguments to settle the debates.'¹ There are those, however, who count it a strike against Theism that God provides neither knock-down (irrefutably overwhelming) rational *arguments* for God's existence nor knock-down observational *evidence* of God's existence universally available to all of humanity. In short, that God does not provide *proof* of God's own existence. One thinks here of Bertrand Russell's famous comment that, should he have to face God someday, he would say 'But God, you did not give me sufficient evidence for your existence'. It turns out, however, that God has good reasons for *not* providing either arguments or evidence that are so overwhelmingly-convincing that every rational person could only conclude that God exists.

First is a *volitional* reason. God knows that 'proofs' do not necessarily convince. Human nature is such that, even with unambiguous evidence, people would still choose not to believe. An infamous example of this human stubbornness (to resist following evidence to its obvious and rightful conclusion) is provided by the group of jurors who, in 1991, acquitted four police officers of brutality against Rodney King. This event led to widespread riots in Los Angeles, and to great social distress in the United States at the time. King, a black man, was beaten by numerous white police officers on a street in Los Angeles. The incident was captured on video, which showed King lying on the ground while being repeatedly kicked and batoned by the officers. Four of the officers present were charged with brutality, but, at their trial, white jurors, who repeatedly watched the video, acquitted the officers, saying 'King was in control of the situation the whole time, he could have walked away any time he wanted'. Millions of others, who saw this video repeatedly on the news for months, could see that Rodney King certainly was not in control of the situation, indeed that he was being severely abused, and so the widespread feeling was that the acquittal was based on racial bias, not on the clear video evidence. Even clear and certain evidence will not convince minds and hearts that do not want to commit to the evidence—a quality of human nature of which God is very aware! This is the point behind Jesus' words in Jn.6:36: 'You have seen me [and my works] but you still do not believe'.

Second is a *relational* reason. God does not provide proof because it reverses the order of accountability in the divine-human relationship. Demanding proofs of God's existence puts God on trial, making God accountable to *us* for what counts as satisfactory evidence, putting the responsibility on *God* to provide evidence of God's own existence. However, if God exists, it is unsurprising that this expectation should be reversed – it would then be *us*, humanity, not God, who is in need of defence. Here we can recall Romans 1:19: 'What may be known about God is plain [to all] because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse' (TNIV). This implies two things: first, that God has ensured that *agape*-capable beings evolve sufficient cognitive ability to engage in inferential reason to the extent needed to be able to see the universe as providing evidence for God's existence; and, second, that God considers the available evidence to be sufficiently clear to human cognition that humanity can be held accountable for dismissing these evidences. Being 'without excuse' therefore implies that people are responsible before God for the implications they draw from their observations of 'what has been made'. The pattern of accountability and need for justification is humans before God, not God before humans, so God

chooses not to meet any standard of unambiguous proof because this would imply that God has to prove himself to humanity, in effect reversing the pattern of accountability between humanity and God.

The third reason is *formational*: uncertainty invites curiosity and investigation, and thus takes seekers into a formational process. Here I will identify two formational aspects. One is *epistemological*: God is concerned to develop our skills of interpretation. Every scientist knows that natural objects need to be interpreted. A chemist looking through a microscope, a biologist dissecting an animal, a geologist looking at a rock sample, a physicist looking at computer data—all of these engage in interpretation of the objects which they observe. Such interpretation is, however, never a neutral exercise. Not just conflicting explanations, but conflicting *interpretations*, even conflicting theories, often occur—a particular piece of evidence may be interpreted one way or another. Our concern here is how to interpret the universe. To repeat a comment I make in my book *Freedom All The Way Up*, Materialists are like the person reading *Gulliver's Travels* or *Moby Dick* who enjoys the narrative at the level of story, but who misses the richer meanings, the satire and social commentary, intended by the authors. Indeed, most copies of *Gulliver's Travels* and *Moby Dick* are sold today not for personal enjoyment of the stories themselves but rather for reading in schools and universities. Precisely because these books are so symbolically rich, so meaningful at so many deeper levels, they are used to teach students appreciation of, and skills for, deeper and richer interpretation. Interpreting the universe as dysteleological (having no purpose or goal) is like interpreting *Moby Dick* or *Gulliver's Travels* as merely stories—the deeper, more significant meanings, and thus the very *telos*, goal, intended by their authors are completely lost. Just as interpretation of literature is a skill that requires training, likewise interpretation of the universe is a skill that requires training. That is, God intends for us to learn *how* to interpret the existence of the universe. In short, God does not provide knock-down evidence for an *epistemological* reason, namely to draw us into learning deeper skills of 'natural interpretation'—of interpreting Creation.

Another formational element is spiritual. Physicist Steven Manly makes the following observation in light of Heisenberg's uncertainty principle in physics: 'As sad and frustrating as it is to lose the power of determinism [because of Heisenberg's uncertainty principle], there is no need to shed tears. It turns out that the uncertainty inherent in quantum mechanics is incredibly liberating and has driven much of the progress in fundamental physics in the last century'.² The same is true in making progress in the spiritual life. The search for God is a process, and 'uncertainty' (that is, lack of knock-down proof) for God can also drive much spiritual progress because it leads to understanding life with God, and learning God's ways, as a journey, rather than letting belief rest comfortably and statically in the effects of a knock-down argument or experience. God is big on using process to shape and form us as flourishing people; and seeking God and God's ways in the midst of our less than 100% certainty is an important impetus to spiritual growth with God. Knock-down experiences could short-circuit such a formative process.

None of these various reasons are intended to deny that God gives *individuals* arguments or experiences that are subjectively persuasive or experientially 'knock-down'. Indeed, countless people through history, from Paul of Tarsus to Chris of Montreal (me!), believe they have had such experiences. But these various reasons do show that God has good reason for not giving all humanity *universal* knock-down arguments and experiences—indeed, that providing such rational or experiential 'proofs' of God's existence would actually be counter-productive to God's purposes with humanity. No doubt God has further reasons as well, beyond those I've identified here.

¹ Malcolm Jeeves and Warren S. Brown, *Neuroscience, Psychology and Religion* (Conshohocken, PA: Templeton, 2009), 5.

² Steven Manly, *Visions of the Multiverse* (Pompton Plains, NJ: New Page Books, 2011), 218.