

## Addressing Some Critics

Jan Narveson

Friar Sirico's rejoinder to me goes something like this: The Christian religious sustained Western civilization for a long time, and has inspired lots of people. And a great many very smart people believed in it and wrote a great deal about it. Therefore, it must be true.

He appears also to think it obvious that the stories reported in the New Testament provide "evidence" for the truth of the Christian religion. Friar Sirico, not surprisingly, claims to know what I have argued is, to put it mildly, unobvious: *why* a supreme being would do that sort of thing—e.g., send his son "to die on the cross for our sins." Ah, well, you see—"It's the Divine mystery!" This exemplifies my point. These are not explanations; they are more utterances of the very faith whose rational credibility is what was in question in the debates on the existence of God. He does not, of course, concern himself with the miracles of one sort or another vouched on behalf of most religions far and wide. Any Christian "knows" that they prove nothing except the depth of ignorance of those who claim to have witnessed them. Deep and sincere beliefs in mutually incompatible propositions are familiar stuff in human history, however.

All of which just reminds us of the serious point at issue here: is there a credible argument, along rational lines, for the view that the universe as we know it was literally created by a minded being of some remarkable sort? Friar Sirico points to the thousands of pages, nay of volumes, written by his fellow believers. But if you look for cogent arguments, or indeed, arguments at all, in the writings of people intelligent enough to have some idea what an argument is supposed to look like, it's remarkable how rapidly those pages dwindle. For every page devoted to providing genuine evidence, or some kind of general argument, for the proposition that there exists a god, you will find a hundred thousand devoted to worshipping "Him", exhorting others to believe in "Him", and question-beggingly reprimanding all who do not. St. Thomas Aquinas, for example, devotes just about one page of actual argument for the existence of god (the famous "five ways"). Some of the five are transparently silly by

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modern standards; some are variants of one argument, namely the Cosmological Argument. My analysis of that argument occupies many more pages than Aquinas' off-the-cuff exposition, come to that. If victory went to the larger battalions on this matter, evidently it is I who would have it here.

But of course it doesn't. Friar Sirico, true to his profession, provides no discussion whatever of my arguments—depending on what you count as discussion, anyway. He does say (p. 122) "Is not Narveson really making a case far more extreme than merely that belief in God is nonsense [note: I did not say that, remember], and is he not really arguing for the non-existence of anything real and non-provability of any truth claim?" This is rhetoric: I obviously was doing nothing of the sort. Science, I take it, has told us a great deal about the world we live in and will no doubt tell us, as time goes by, a great deal more. It is precisely because of the evident fruitfulness of its methods that I propose to apply them to the hypothesis that the world was, after all, created by a super-mind rather than just bungling along on its own or due to some other interesting processes.

Friar Sirico claims that the Christian literature "on the logical (as versus empirical) proofs of God's existence are massive and complex." That is true, in a sense. And he claims to "find them persuasive"; but it will be noted that he does nothing whatever to set the arguments back on their feet. He accuses me of appealing to "authority," though I do nothing but point out that those who have examined these arguments as arguments—as distinct from further professions of faith—have, overwhelmingly, found them wanting. In the case of the strictly "logical" proofs, I have in very general terms explained why they are wanting. What is needed are premises which will show how the claim that the Universe is the product of intelligence is to be understood, and then what would constitute evidence in favor of them; after that, we would see whether the evidence does support them. The problem here is not lack of evidence, but that the hypothesis simply doesn't get to first base. There is, in the end, no hypothesis, no explanation—nothing but, as Hume puts it, "sophistry and illusion".

To take an important example of my point, I noted that the supposed "creation vs. evolution" dispute is not a genuine dispute at all, but simply a muddle, for there isn't actually any theory of "creationism" with any content whatever. The reason for this is quite straightforward. Assume that the universe is created by a super-mind. Now: what would it look like, having been so created? The answer is that it depends ENTIRELY on what the mind in question wanted. But unfortunately, that variable is wide

open, and indeed, according to all the theories of theology, fundamentally unknowable to mere men. Therefore there is NO WAY to know that god wouldn't have created a universe exactly like the one we've got, evolution and all. Saying that the universe was "created" adds nothing whatsoever to our level of information about it, nothing whatever to our idea of what to expect in such a place. What a creative mind will do is limited only by its creative imagination, and humans do so well at this that there's simply no predicting what the next science-fiction writer will dream up. Now make that creative mind absolutely unlimited, and you see the point.

So there is no debate whatever. Those who think there is think they know the divine mind, but on their own account they can't know that. There is no dispute, because there is no rival theory. Evolution is indeed a theory, or rather, a partial theory, a framework with genuine explanatory power given a lot of other information; but creation is not.

The same would be true regarding the moral destination of man, were it not for the complication that we do indeed have some pretty decent ideas what's going on with morality. And what's going on there is well enough known so that the door is anything but wide open on this matter. Can god decide that murder is just fine, starting at 10:43 tomorrow? No. A super-intelligence with no moral pretensions could say such a thing, but it wouldn't do "Him" any good. The reasons why murder is wrong have nothing whatever to do with supposed super-fancy intelligences, and indeed, it's the other way around. It's precisely because we expect our "gods" to be good that we know perfectly well that they can do things like that. Nor can they decide that what morality is "really" all about is staring at your navel from dawn 'til dusk, or seeing how many incisions you can make in a kewpie doll. The idea that the content of morality is wide open is absurd. The Ten Commandments, for example, include the familiar ideas that murder, theft, and fraud are wrong. Big surprise! Do you think that Moses could have come down from the mountain with a couple of stone tablets declaring those things to be just fine, after all? Indeed, he could not: he would have been laughed out of town. Given the sort of thing morality is, it can't help condemning things like that.

The Judaic code also, of course, included several "commandments" making clear who's boss—"though shalt not take MY name in vain!" and "you'll damn well go to church on Sunday and worship ME"—just the sort of thing you'd expect from a dictator asserting control over his turf. In order to see a connection between that sort of thing and morality, we have to look at indirect considerations, such as the desirability of having a day of rest every so often; "commanding" people to spend that day sitting around

in the tabernacle instead of wearing themselves out in the vineyards is a plausible shot at a regulation that conceivably could do some good for us humans. For that matter, trying to get them to have some regard for each other and not behave like a bunch of egomaniacs also has much to be said for it (though doing it by having them all "worship" the same egomaniac is arguably not an ideal way to accomplish that worthwhile end!) And so on. But the point is clear: the idea that morality could be genuinely "based on" the commands of some exotic super-personage is fundamentally wrong. Rather, our image of what a perfect superintelligence would be like is deeply informed by antecedently understood moral considerations. There is no other way. When Socrates asks the theologically pretentious Euthyphro whether what's right is so because God loves it, or instead it's that God loves it because it's right, Euthyphro immediately responds that it's the latter, failing, however, to get the point that it can't be both. And neither do most, evidently. Plato's lesson is not learned easily by would-be believers. But it's there to learn, and the sooner the better, so far as world peace, among other things, is concerned.

Turning to Mark Turiano's response, he thinks to save the argument from design, which he sets forth as follows: (1) if  $x$  is intelligible, then there must have been an intelligence that designed  $x$ . (2) The cosmos is intelligible; therefore, (3) it must have had a designer—god. What makes him think that (1) is true? He rejects what he takes to be my suggestion that intelligibility is essentially a matter of regularity or order. Instead, he says, "when we look at the cosmos we find that it is shot through with intelligibility, so much so that even what appears at first sight to be chaotic can be understood according to principles, i.e. it is intelligible." This is an interesting claim. Others, when looking out at the same cosmos, seeing the same stars, apparently see no such thing. Why not? Evidently intelligibility is not, after all, an observable property. One observes, and one attributes to it this further characteristic of being "intelligible". But what is this characteristic, and why should it be thought to have anything to do with designing intelligences?

Intelligibility certainly relates to intelligence. To say that  $p$  is intelligible is to say that a rational being can understand  $p$ . Just what it is to "understand" is, indeed, a difficult matter. But what Turiano wants to claim is that if  $p$  is intelligible to someone who observes and analyzes the phenomena that  $p$  concerns, then it must also be the case that some further rational being, some other intelligence, brought it about that  $p$  is true in the first place—brought it about intentionally, hence *designed*  $p$ . We may ask

two questions about this. First, is there anything about the nature of intelligibility as such that requires it to be true? And second, does it even make any sense at all?

1. The answer to the first is quite obviously in the negative. That this, that, or the other thing was designed by some clever person is often true and a good explanation of how it came to be. But then, it is precisely because we understand design and designing that we understand that lots of things were not thus originated—so far as the *evidence* is concerned, that is. Watches do not grow on trees, but apples and pears do. And no investigation of trees will show them to have been "designed"—except, latterly, for the rather important set of cases in which agrobiologists have improved on Mother Nature by cross-breeding, gene-splicing, and the like. Now these latter cases are of considerable interest, since for one thing they suggest that Mum Nature, if she is taken to be a "designer," is a pretty incompetent one: people can improve on Her work, and do, all the time. That is why we are so much better off than the cave men.

But of course to talk of mother nature as a "designer" is metaphorical. What scientists find upon closer examination is that nature is ordered by a set of regularities: fundamentally, by basic forces of—so far as we presently know—four different kinds. Perhaps one day a true Unified Field theory will work, in which case we might be able to unify all of nature under a single principle. It will then be about as intelligible as it can manage to be. Now, what about the character of those basic principles?

We could hardly do better for examples of basically intelligible principles than elementary logic. 'If p, then not not-p', for example, is quite delightfully intelligible—so much so that its denial would lead immediately to the destruction of any and all knowledge about everything and anything, gods and all kinds of designers included. Yet the idea that the principle of non-contradiction was "created" or "designed" by anybody is itself totally unintelligible. Think about it: to claim that it was "created" is to claim that there was some time, prior to which the principle *wasn't* true; and then, Lo and behold!, at that time, this amazing Personage waves her magic wand or completes her act of rational gestation and gives birth to the principle. But of course if the principle weren't already true, then the whole story about what happened prior to it would make no sense whatever; and yet if that story were necessary for the "birth of logic," as it were, then logic couldn't ever have *been* born.

Well, a similar thing turns out to be true at the level of physical reality. When we humans design and build something, we utilize principles of nature that were *already in place*, prior to our act of designing. Indeed,

we can build and design anything at all only because principles that, so far as there is any reason to believe, were *not* "designed and built" but are simply true, were already in place. Watt was able to invent the steam engine because steam was already the sort of thing that was capable of imparting accelerations to objects (as in geysers and volcanoes); what Watt did was to note that if he moves one's limbs in various ways, one could bring together various material elements into the sort of juxtaposition that would enable the steam to do what we perceive to be useful work. Invention, in short, presupposes pre-existing physical forces and laws already in place.

Just as design implies a designer, in short, designers imply nondesigned principles. Intelligent beings cannot function except against a background of regularities that can be understood and relied on in the course of our designing activities. The idea that it might have been the other way around at a basic level is, in the end, unintelligible. So the situation is precisely the opposite of what Turiano proclaims. We do not make the cosmos *more* intelligible by supposing that it "has a designer", but *less* so.

Supposing that the universe was the result of some creative act of some being is supposing that there were in existence, *prior* to that being's work, some principles of order and some materials such that the designer could hitch this to that, or pour this into that, or whatever, in such a way that—voilà!—out comes a cosmos! But this account is obviously nonsense when you think of it. And for that reason, all theological "explanations" are surrounded by mystery. They are so because they don't actually make any literal sense. And so the aspiring priest or theologian, hoping to sway the souls of potential parishioners, quickly resorts to what we can see to be his basic *modus operandi*, the principle that "the lord works in mysterious ways". Yes, indeed—'mysterious' ways are the *only* ways to square the supposed theory with the facts.

Monotheism carries a special problem with it. Creation literally *ex nihilo* is crazy, because the creator *himself* has to be already something—yet if he is, then at the time of creation, it is *not* true that there was nothing, nor can it be true that *everything* is the product of intelligent design (it is logically impossible for the eternal deity to "bring himself into existence" by an act of intelligent creation). And if, on the other hand, there was literally nothing—no creators or anything—and yet something did come of it, it logically couldn't be the work of a creator, there not being any creators on hand in the first place.

Fundamental monotheism, then, is necessarily a masterpiece of evasion. However, I should point out that my proffered refutation of religion didn't go quite like that. I have been harping, above, on aspects of creation that I for the sake of argument passed over in my paper. The theist does, I said, owe us an explanation of just how the divinity was supposed to operate, and it is pretty obvious that he is not going to be able to supply it. I have detailed my offhand complaint above. However, creation requires *two* things, not just one. Besides a background of materials and regularities to make talk of "creation" intelligible, it requires, in addition, a *motivational* story. When we make watches, it is easy to see why. People find it useful to keep track of time, because they have things to do, they have a limited temporal budget, and we waste a lot less of it if our arrangements with others can be made more precise by establishing a communicable metric. And so on. But why would an *omnipotent* being create anything at all, for goodness' sake? The idea that the poor old guy might be lonely and bored up there all by himself, and so be moved to create a bunch of little quasi-godlets to entertain him suggests itself—but it does so at the cost of nonsense. For an omnipotent being, it would seem, doesn't and can't need or want anything at all. And there is no reason to think that he would need or want this, that, or the other thing in particular. This, by the way, is what's wrong with "creationism". Creationists think that there is an *alternative* explanatory hypothesis to the collection of specific and general explanations that are marshaled under the general rubric of evolutionary biology.

Evolutionary biology offers a general structural hypothesis that makes all sorts of sense. If species x exists in an environment full of dangers to its continued existence by virtue of having properties f, g, and h, while further properties j, k, and l are resistant to those dangers, then those specimens that happen to be equipped with the latter will survive and those without them will not. Evolutionary biology as such does not tell us where any of those properties "came from"; for that it leans on the work of other sciences, including other branches of biology. But it tells us plenty about the subject it's immediately concerned with, viz, how and why some species in certain circumstances survive and others do not.

But Creationism does nothing of the sort. It instead tells us what whatever happens, it does so "because" some cosmic intelligence *wanted* it that way. Why did it want it that way? Dunno! "God only knows," we say. We say this as a confession of ignorance. Because it is that, however, it is also a confession of explanatory *impotence*. We explain x in terms of the creative activity of y only if we have some idea what y might have been up

to in creating x. When we can observe the painter at work in his studio we have our mechanical story to hand—we know what brushes and paints are like; and in addition, we can talk with the painter, and find out that he is trying to create something visually interesting. Succeed or fail, we at least understand that this painted canvas was, literally, painted by something (a human) with known capabilities of that general type. We may well be baffled by the result—we do not share his intuition—but since we have ample independent evidence that it was he who did it, confirmation of the "creationist" story for this painting is no problem at all. But now if we look at some object whose alleged creator is nowhere to be seen, and nevertheless attribute its existence, on the basis of observable characteristics of the object, to the creative work of an intelligence, we can do so only if we can understand how a thing like that could have been intentionally designed, and some idea of why such a being *would* do a thing like that.

The theological story, however, necessarily fails us on this second feature just as completely as it does on the first. It is, therefore, an "explanation" only in form—an explanation that is fundamentally incapable of genuinely explaining *anything whatever*. Mr. Turiano's vaunted "intelligibility" is, therefore, a total fraud. Something else, one suspects, is going on—such as a desire to survive death and a story that implies the prospect of doing so on favorable terms. However, Turiano evidently agrees with me that the fact that one would like it to be the case that p is really not much of a reason for thinking that p.