

Does God Exist? Ricky Gervais Takes Your Questions

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By

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Editor's Note: Earlier this week, in an essay that drew a deluge of comments, British comic, actor and filmmaker Ricky Gervais argued against the existence of God. (<http://blogs.wsj.com/speakeasy/2010/12/19/a-holiday-message-from-ricky-gervais-why-im-an-atheist/>)

To give Wall Street Journal readers a chance to respond, we asked Gervais to answer via email some of the most frequently asked questions about his article.

In your piece you write, that "Science is humble. It knows what it knows and it knows what it doesn't know." In fact, mainstream scientific thought has sometimes been wrong, and it is constantly changing and revising itself. So how can you be so sure that science supports your belief that God does not exist?

Ricky Gervais: Science doesn't concern itself with the non-existence of something. The periodic table of imaginary things would be too big for a classroom- infinitely big in fact, and rather pointless. It's not trying to prove the non-existence of anything supernatural. All it knows is there is no scientific proof of anything supernatural so far. When someone presents a jar of God it will test it. If it finds some evidence of "godness" it will follow the evidence till it knows everything it can.

The fact that science can say "we don't know" is exactly my point. Science doesn't start with a set of convenient conclusions and try to justify them. It follows evidence. In fact, it tries to prove itself wrong. When it can't, it's right.

Superstition, religion and blind faith cherry pick the evidence and justify the results by changing the goal posts. There are no cover-ups in science. For better or worse it finds stuff out. It has no moral code as such. It leaves those decisions to society. It discovers life saving drugs but leaves it up to you whether to use them or not. It discovers that splitting the atom can release a massive amount of energy very quickly and leaves it up to governments to try it out or not. It finds out what and how and why. It asks can we? Not should we? This is why it baffles me that some god fearers believe that without a god there is no reason to be good. Really?

Doesn't the idea that God was somehow involved in the making of the universe seem immensely more reasonable than believing that some random form of matter has existed for all of time, or that matter just up and popped into existence?

So you're asking whether it's more plausible that everything in the known universe including man was made by a supernatural being, in 6 days, than from a massive explosion of matter that expanded and gradually became the known universe in all it's beauty over the last 14 billion years? I don't think so, no.

If you don't know what made the universe it seems pointless to say a God must have made it then. You have to then say "But what made God?" If you are then willing to say that God was always around, you may as well say that the universe was too. Saves time doesn't it? How long did he wait till he made the universe by the way? And where was he? Did it turn out just like he planned? If he had to make another one would he do it any different? Where would he put it?

Does science really have an objective agenda?

Yes.

Wasn't it also used to justify slavery, genocide and the subjugation of women? Why should we trust science when it comes to God?

When was science used to justify slavery, genocide and the subjugation of women? There are bad people who believe in God and bad people who don't but neither can claim to have science on their side when they commit their deeds. I don't know who's been going round saying that science justifies any of those

things. It certainly doesn't and anyone who says it does is taking the name of science in vain. Many theories try to wear the badge of science to give their practices credibility but the badge is a forgery. Religion even tries to claim scientific evidence but fails. Astrology wants to be recognized as a science. It isn't. Real science comes along and shows them the door. Its only agenda is truth. It doesn't wish something were true. It finds out whether something is or isn't true. Believing something is true simply because you wish it was, isn't science. It's faith.

Woody Allen is widely quoted

(<http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2007/02/07/ghost-stories/#more-9>) as having once said: "You cannot prove the nonexistence of God; you just have to take it on faith." Is being an atheist as unscientific a stance as believing in God? Isn't it more intellectually honest to be agnostic?

Well Woody Allen was being facetious but makes a good point. Is being an atheist as unscientific a stance as believing in God? No definitely not. How can not believing in something that is backed up with no empirical evidence be less scientific than believing in something that not only has no empirical evidence but actually goes against the laws of the universe and in many cases actually contradicts itself?

What does a comedian really know about God anyway?

Since there is nothing to know about god, a comedian knows as much about god as any one else. An atheist however is alone in knowing that there is nothing to know so probably has the edge. An Atheist comedian can make people laugh about belief or lack of it. A good atheist comedian can make people laugh AND think about belief or lack of it. An agnostic would say that since you can neither prove the existence nor the non-existence of God then the only answer to the question "Is there a God?" is "I don't know." Basically they are saying just because you haven't found something yet doesn't mean it doesn't exist. Well firstly we have to know what definition of God we are asking about. Many can be dismissed as logical impossibilities. In the same way that if you were asked can you imagine a square circle the answer is of course "No." Let's give them the benefit of the doubt. Let's just say there is a definition of a God that is possible. Does he exist? "I don't know" in this case is indeed the correct answer. However

this must also be the answer to many other questions. Is there an elephant up your a---? Even if you've looked you can't say "no." It could be that you just haven't found it yet. Please look again and this time really believe there is an elephant up there because however mad it sounds no one can prove that you don't have a lovely big African elephant up your a---.

People who believe in God sometimes have moments of doubt about their faith. Have you had any moments of doubt about your atheism?

Atheism isn't a belief system. I have a belief system but it's not "based on" atheism, it's just not based on the existence of a god. I make none of my moral, social, or artistic decisions based on any god or superstitions. Saying atheism is a belief system is like saying not going skiing is a hobby. I've never been skiing. It's my biggest hobby. I literally do it all the time. But to answer your question I am constantly faced with theories of God, and angels, and hell. It's everywhere. But unless there is an ounce of credibility to it, I reject. I have to. You can't lie to yourself. If you do you've only fooled a deluded person and where's the victory in that?

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How do you plan on celebrating Christmas?

Eating and drinking too much with friends and family. Celebrating life and remembering those that did, but can no longer.

They are not looking down on me but they live in my mind and heart more than they ever did probably. Some, I was lucky enough to bump into on this planet of six billion people. Others shared much of my genetic material. One selflessly did her best for me all my life. That's what mums do though. They do it for no other reason than love. Not for reward. Not for recognition. They create you. From nothing. Miracle? They do those every day. No big deal. They are not worshiped. They would give their life without the promise of heaven. They teach you everything they know yet they are not declared prophets. And you only have one.

I am crying as I write this.

It usually gets me this time of year. That's what's special about Christmas. It's when you visit or reminisce about the ones you love. And reflect on how lucky you are. How they helped shape you. I remember the first time my mum took me to see a movie. I'd never been to a cinema before. I can still remember the place to this day. Everything seemed carpeted. The floors, the walls, everything. I had sweets and Pepsi and the biggest screen in the world, I thought. I was blown away. I lived a life in a couple of hours. When I thought Baloo was dead I was sobbing uncontrollably but trying to hide it. My mum was consoling me but didn't seem as distressed as me. Then when it turned out that Baloo was still alive I was f---ing euphoric.

But it made me think. On the way home I asked my mum how old I'd be when she died. "Old," she said. "Will I care?" I asked worried about my far off future feelings. She wasn't sure what to say. She knew I wanted the answer "no" in some ways but as usual she chose honesty. "Yes," she said. "But it won't happen for a very long time." That was good enough for me.

When I returned to school a few weeks later we had to do a little presentation about our holidays. I proceeded to act out the entire movie (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PmUtbu5xo-Q>) using the other kids in the class. I told them where to stand and what to say, filling in the action with narration. Eventually the teacher had to stop me because I was taking up the whole day. Now I'm a real director I never make that same mistake. I'm home by 4 o'clock on any movie I do.

I haven't seen the film for 40 years so I'm not sure how good it is but it's still one of my fondest memories because it was a gift from my mum. My mum died when I was 40.

She was right by the way. I did care. But luckily 35 five years before, I'd learnt the bear necessities (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9ogQ0uge06o>) to get me through.

Just like Baloo, she's still with me.

Dads are pretty cool too. Mine was a man of few words. He let me make my own way. He taught me one important lesson though. That it's OK for a man to cry. He only cried once in his life. Just one time. When his mum died. Luckily for him

all his children out-lived him. Otherwise there would surely have been a second.

I hope you are with your loved ones at this wonderful time of year. That's what will make it wonderful.

Peace to all mankind. Christian, Jew, Muslim and Atheist.

What about Agnostics?

Uhm?...I don't know. Only joking. Yes even Agnostics.

Peace and goodwill to ALL mankind.

Ricky Gervais is the star of HBO's "Ricky Gervais Out of England 2: The Stand-Up Special." Ricky will be answering more questions on his blog at rickygervais.com (<http://www.rickygervais.com/thissideofthetruth.php>) over the holiday period.

You can leave your thoughts about this essay in the comments.

For another take on the issue go to Anne Rice's Christmas Eve Confession (<http://blogs.wsj.com/speakeasy/2010/12/24/anne-rice-on-the-true-meaning-of-christmas/>)

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