

Does Physics Say Anything about God?

Transcript

I recently went to a debate between a Christian and an atheist on the existence of God. The Christian guy used 3 arguments: fine-tuning, biological complexity, and free will. All these arguments have been around for a while. For this video, I'm going to comment on the 2 physics parts.

Here's the fine-tuning argument: the constants of nature are just right for life as we know it to evolve. Some Christians take this to mean the Universe must have been created by a supreme intelligence. Well, if you change the value of any one constant, then the Universe will not be right for us, but if you change all the constants, the Universe will be just right for some other form of life.

In the same way, if you change the amount of one ingredient in a recipe for food, then the result will not taste right, but if you change all the ingredients, you can make another dish that is just as delicious. And there's no limit to the number of different recipes you can create. If you choose ingredients at random, then most of the recipes will be not so good, but that still leaves room for an enormous number of good ones.

In the 1970's, physicists developed the “anthropic principle” to tell us we see laws of physics that are compatible with life because otherwise we wouldn't be here to see them. Even here on earth, fish in the ocean see an environment just right for them, while animals in the jungle see a different environment, just right for different creatures. And some theoreticians suggest there could be an infinite number of parallel Universes with different laws of physics.

So I think fine-tuning arguments say nothing about God. Free will is a different story. This has been a philosophical issue at least since the time the New Testament was written, because the books of Romans and Ephesians tell us we are predestined to the life God chose for us. Free will means we make our own choices. And the Bible tells us to make good choices, but it also tells us God has already chosen what we're going to be. Amazon lists a few thousand books on free will, determinism, and predestination.

Physics tells us that if all the atoms in our brains follow the laws of nature, then we can't have free will; we just respond to our environment the same way plants do. A remarkable number of people have written that free will is an illusion. I don't believe they seriously believe that. Do I have no choice about anything I ever do, or even think? And they have no choice about their own beliefs? Is there really no difference between us and the plant world, in terms of making choices?

Here's a very important difference between us and plants: we have consciousness. We have complicated sense organs, such as eyes and ears, to collect data about our environment, and we are aware of ourselves and our environment. Now if we don't have free will, then we can't use that information to make any decisions about what we do. Our brains use approx. 20% of the energy we need to stay alive, and if we're not making any choices, then we're wasting a lot of energy staying conscious for no reason.

The philosopher Rene Descartes told us in 1641 that the mind is made of a different substance from the brain, and the mind is not constrained by the known laws of physics. I think physicists would have been very interested in this mind substance, except for one thing. It sounds too much like the Christian belief in a soul can be condemned to hell.

Just 41 years earlier, Giordano Bruno was burned at the stake because he accepted the scientific view of cosmology which includes the earth going around the sun. Galileo got sentenced to house arrest in 1633 for the same heresy.

Today standard physics theory includes speculative items such as dark matter, dark energy, extra spatial dimensions, parallel universes, and quantum fields. There is no direct evidence for any of these things, but they were not just dreamed up for entertainment. They were proposed to solve problems, such as why galaxies rotate the way they do. The “mind stuff” or soul is not any more speculative; it solves the problems of free will and consciousness.

If we had proof that the soul exists, that would not actually prove God exists, and it would certainly not prove that God sends people to hell. There would still be a LOT of questions about how the soul interacts with the brain, just as there are still a LOT of questions about dark matter, dark energy, and so on. But the possibility shows us that physics may tell us something about God.

Here's a picture of a Christian arguing with an atheistic scientist. The Christian says, "You're immoral and sinful, so you're going to hell." The atheist replies, "You're stupid, so I'm not going to listen to you." Of course this is not fair to either one.

I would like to see all of us listening to each other a bit more. We're all curious about the world we live in, and I believe there is always more to discover. Sometimes good ideas come from unexpected places.