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How to Slay a Spaghetti Monster

“It makes one feel such a fool.”

“I know,” assented the other, “but one often has to choose between feeling a fool and being one.”

GK Chesterton, The Strange Crime of John Boulnois

Mockers resent correction,
so they avoid the wise.

Sneer Pressure

I'll begin with a simple lesson for anyone who wants to teach. You can be opinionated; you can be controversial. You can consider the bizarre, the heretical and the reactionary. But you can never, ever, be dogmatic. Today you might know more than your students; one day they might know more than you. So be patient; your students are fighting a long battle. They need time to form their ideas, and to settle on their beliefs. And if their opinions differ from yours, so much the better. You are meant to free their minds from yours.

Of course, it's never pleasant to have your ideas challenged in class. So you have several options when a student challenges



your opinions. If the student has made a simple factual error, you should correct them. If the disagreement is over interpretations, simply state why you disagree with the student. But help them to state their objection with greater clarity, and more precision. Encourage students to pursue their own ideas in their own time. The best teachers engage with opinionated students, offering guidance and even incorporating that student's viewpoints into the class.

But there is another course of action that is too tempting for many teachers to resist—especially for those in higher education. The academic holds all the cards in the lecture theatre. He *has* and he *is* the authority. So it is all too easy to ridicule the student's ideas in front of her peers. Or, at the very least, make her seem backward, ill-informed and out of fashion. Doesn't she know that her ideas have been abandoned long ago, and are dismissed in the latest publications? Who has put these ridiculous notions in her head? The student's question is not thoroughly examined. Her position is dismissed without critique. We can't have the Professor's opinions challenged by an undergraduate, can we?

This is the strategy pursued by the New Atheists. Dawkins' grasp of philosophical arguments wouldn't get him a pass grade in a high school class. But he doesn't mean to deal with the questions that theists are asking. He's ridiculing his opponents' position. The reasons for theism must be so bad, why even read about them? My goodness, no, you just dismiss them. For example, Dawkins asserts that scientists who hold orthodox Christian beliefs 'stand out for their rarity and are a subject of bafflement to their peers in the academic community.' He cites surveys to show that the majority of scientists do not believe in a personal God, and that the vast majority of Nobel Laureates are unbelievers.

In *The God Delusion* Dawkins discusses a similar tactic in a section entitled 'The Argument from Admired Religious Scientists'. There Dawkins, correctly, ridicules the idea that



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the existence of theistic scientists, past or present, is somehow evidence for the existence of God. So why mention that 'American scientists are less religious than the American public generally, and that the most distinguished scientists are the least religious of all' or that Nobel Laureates don't tend to be religious? If we can't use religious scientists as evidence for God's existence, why argue *against* God's existence from admired *non-religious* scientists?

So maybe Dawkins is pursuing a very different strategy. Perhaps it isn't so much that Dawkins wants young scientists reading his book to consider these statistics as evidence against the existence of God. Rather Dawkins is showing young scientists what they need to believe to fit in with the elite. No-one who wants to be considered well informed could possibly consider theism as an option. Don't they know it's all just fairy tales and imaginary friends?

We can dub this rhetorical strategy 'sneer pressure'. The aim is to gain converts by peer pressure, to make the faithful feel foolish and out of place in the modern academic environment. The reader is pressured to yield to the Professor's superior intellect, and to conform to the norms of the ideal rational community. The New Atheists have not offered one original argument for atheism. But they've plenty of original *insults*. Dawkins merely talks about theistic arguments in condescending terms, and implies that the well-educated would never take a theist seriously. If a young man or woman wishes to get ahead in the academy they should be advised to drop any religious conviction as soon as possible. This must be a sobering thought for those at the bottom of the academic food chain.

Dawn of the Spaghetti Monsters

The New Atheism aims to present theism as a backward superstition held by rednecks and suicide bombers. Theistic beliefs are not critiqued, but mocked and caricatured. And the





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strangest of all the caricatures is the Flying Spaghetti Monster. The monster started life as a clumsy parody of the Intelligent Design Movement. Physics graduate Bobby Henderson wrote an open letter to the Kansas State Board of Education asking if his 'Flying Spaghetti Monster' (or FSM) could have a place on the science curriculum alongside other theories of Intelligent Design.

I and many others around the world are of the strong belief that the universe was created by a Flying Spaghetti Monster. It was He who created all that we see and all that we feel. We feel strongly that the overwhelming scientific evidence pointing towards evolutionary processes is nothing but a coincidence, put in place by Him...

Some find that hard to believe, so it may be helpful to tell you a little more about our beliefs. We have evidence that a Flying Spaghetti Monster created the universe. None of us, of course, were around to see it, but we have written accounts of it. We have several lengthy volumes explaining all details of His power. Also, you may be surprised to hear that there are over 10 million of us, and growing. We tend to be very secretive, as many people claim our beliefs are not substantiated by observable evidence.⁵

The Flying Spaghetti Monster became an internet phenomenon, spawning a parody religion. It appeared on numerous websites and blogs. Bloggers began to refer to themselves as 'Pastafarians'. Someone wrote an FSM bible, someone else formulated a liturgy. Evangelistic tracts were produced. Scientific and photographic 'evidence' was fabricated to convince 'unbelievers' of the existence of the FSM. Richard Dawkins gave his blessing. All this pseudo-religious activity was manufactured in an effort to 'send up' the Christian Church. Thousands of atheists seem to think that the send-up works.

⁵ Bobby Henderson's full letter to the Kansas School Board can be read at: www.venganza.org/about/open-letter/ (Retrieved 16th Sept 2011).





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The point of the FSM satire *seems to be* that belief in God always requires blind faith; a faith that always ignores the relevant evidence. But we can believe in *any ridiculous idea* if we have enough faith. If we ignore the evidence we can believe in whatever we choose. If it is acceptable to have blind faith in God, or the atonement, or the incarnation then we can believe in anything we like. We can have blind faith in fairies or ghosts, or Flying Spaghetti Monsters. Faith in God is deconstructed—it just looks silly in this sort of company.

This is powerful agitprop—grouping belief in God with a belief that no rational person would ever take seriously. As soon as you start to explain why belief in God is superior to belief in a piece of sentient pasta, your whole worldview sounds a bit suspect. But, as this book will show, the parody is clueless and pointless; Christianity does not depend on blind faith. The FSM parody only manages to trivialise an important debate.

How the Monster Came Out of its Teapot

The FSM is meant to update Bertrand Russell's 'celestial teapot', an argument that Richard Dawkins revived in *The God Delusion*. Richard Dawkins acknowledges that he cannot prove that God does not exist, but maintains that this is not a ground for agnosticism. Dawkins thinks that in the absence of evidence the only rational viewpoint is one of disbelief. To make his point, he draws on Bertrand Russell's story of a celestial teapot.

Suppose an astronomer claims that between Earth and Mars a teapot that it is too small to be observed, even by the most powerful telescopes, orbits the sun. Should we believe the astronomer? The teapot is so small he can't prove that it exists. But we cannot prove that it does not exist either. Since there is no evidence either way, does this mean we should be agnostic about the existence of the teapot? Should we take the view that there is a 50:50 chance that it exists?

Clearly not. In the absence of evidence, we should think that there very probably is no celestial teapot. The same, Dawkins





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claims, is true of God. He claims that, if there is no good evidence for the existence of God, atheism is the only rational position. He claims that when there is no evidence, we should not suspend belief. We should *disbelieve*. After all, wouldn't the onus be on adults who believe in the Tooth Fairy and Santa Claus to make their case?

Is there Life on Mars?

So the basic idea is—if there is no evidence for the existence of an entity, you should believe that the entity probably doesn't exist. That sounds like common sense on the first reading. But consider the following claims:

- (a) 'Intelligent life now exists on the surface of our moon'
- And
- (b) 'Life exists on several planets in our universe'.

Now, we'd seem to be justified in rejecting (a). We've relatively good knowledge of our moon, and it just doesn't seem that we could find intelligent life on its surface.⁶

But we'd be much more hesitant in rejecting (b). The universe is a big place. Other 'earth-like' planets *might* be out there. But we don't know how many planets capable of sustaining life exist in our universe. We just don't have enough information to make a definitive judgment. There is a clear lesson here: in some cases, such as Santa Claus and fairies, a presumption of non-belief is appropriate. In other cases, like the possibility of plant or animal life elsewhere in our universe, it is not. What explains the difference?

Sometimes we just don't have enough *background information* to make an informed judgement. Sometimes we do. And that's the difference between believing that little green men live on the Moon and believing that a little green fungus is growing on

⁶ See 'Probability and the Presumption of Atheism' by David Glass. A version is available at www.infj.ulst.ac.uk/~dvglass/Research/PresumptionAtheism.pdf





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a planet far, far away. What we know about the Moon makes it seem unlikely that ET is attempting to make a phone call from its surface. But we do know that the universe is so vast that there's at least a chance that life exists somewhere out there. One day the human race may even find evidence of this life.

We can feel fairly confident that NASA hasn't sent crockery into orbit. So we'll dismiss the celestial teapot. So what about God? Is he like the teapot, ET on the Moon or the existence of life elsewhere in the Universe? It's a matter of considering the background information. Our knowledge of our moon *rules out* a good chance of life existing there. Our knowledge of the space exploration industry *rules out* the theory that it would waste resources by putting tea cups in space. What about Flying Spaghetti Monsters and God? Does our background knowledge mean that their existence is probable or improbable?

Nessie versus the Flying Spaghetti Monster: Whoever Wins We Lose...

Our background knowledge of the universe certainly rules out absurd entities—like living, sentient pasta with magical abilities. In our experience pasta isn't the sort of thing that goes around creating anything, never mind universes. Spaghetti doesn't typically gain mystical powers. If the FSM 'worshipper' wants to 'argue' that the FSM is made of invisible, intangible, eternal pasta, I'm afraid that I'll have to point out that we're not really talking about spaghetti anymore.

Let's take an example that is a little more tangible, just to grasp how background knowledge helps us decide which theories we should take seriously. Instead of a Spaghetti monster, let's consider the Loch Ness monster.⁷ For generations, eyewitnesses

⁷ Nessie is taken rather seriously at her home site: www.nessie.co.uk. But before you dive in, be sure to watch the excellent 1999 PBS documentary 'The Beast of Loch Ness'. A transcript of the broadcast is available www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/transcripts/2601lochness.html





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there have reported sightings of a large beast, often with at least one hump protruding from the surface waters of the loch. Some reported seeing fins or flippers on the creature. Many of these eyewitnesses were sensible, sober and well-educated.

The Loch Ness Monster ('Nessie') generated significant media interest (and several terrible movies). Scientific expeditions were organised, and in 1975 a team led by Robert Rines, a lawyer with training in physics, registered a large moving object on sonar. The team even managed to take photographs. With computer enhancement the photos revealed what appeared to be the flippers of a large aquatic animal.

Sir Peter Scott, a respected naturalist, was impressed with the photograph. This boosted the prestige of Rine's findings. But then Scott advanced a theory that caused stock in the 'Nessie' hypothesis to plummet. Scott suggested that the creature in the photograph was a Plesiosaur, a giant long-necked reptile that went extinct with the dinosaurs. This was too much for the zoological community, which dismissed Scott's idea as preposterous.

Was the zoological community right to assume that plesiosaurs do not live in the loch? In the 1970s, it would have been very difficult to prove that a beast was *not* present. Loch Ness stretches for 24 miles, and its sheer walls are 800ft deep. The loch is filled with peat particles, which limit visibility to a few feet. The steep sides play havoc with sonar, and changes in water temperature can create sonar images where no target exists. It would have been extraordinarily difficult, and prohibitively expensive, to organise an expedition to search the whole loch.

But even though zoologists could not search the loch to rule out the presence of a plesiosaur, their *background knowledge* justified their belief that plesiosaurs did not dwell in the loch. It is highly unlikely that large reptiles, like Plesiosaurs, could survive the events that eliminated the dinosaurs. If a few did somehow survive, Plesiosaurs were cold blooded creatures, and would find it difficult to live in the cold waters of Loch Ness, even if they had made their way from the ocean to the loch.





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It is extremely unlikely that the loch could support a family of animals as large as Plesiosaurs. Chemical nutrients are relatively few, and the peat particles that make visibility so poor also prevent light from penetrating deep into the water. This prevents plant growth, which limits the amount of plankton that the loch can support. This leaves the loch with surprisingly few fish—certainly not enough to sustain a family of Plesiosaurs for hundreds of thousands of years.

So the background knowledge available to zoologists justified their response to Sir Peter Scott's Plesiosaur hypothesis. Background knowledge can also give us estimates on the likelihood of Vampires, Werewolves, Giant Octopi that drown bathers in North American Lakes, and strange little Mexican beasts that suckle on goat's blood. By contrast, background knowledge doesn't help us to reach a clear estimate of the probability of intelligent life existing in the visible universe. We don't know enough as yet. But in general it can give us a good idea about what is physically possible.

But how can background knowledge about the physical universe give us probabilities about things which are not physical? What about entities that exist outside space and time? In other words, does our background knowledge of the physical universe rule out the possibility that *God* exists? It can tell us a lot about many things purported to exist *in* the physical universe. But God is meant to exist *outside* the physical universe. God would be *transcendent*. God would not be made of physical parts, and he would not be limited by space, time, or the laws of nature.

Only physical beings exist in the physical universe. So it would be a circular argument to assert that the physical universe tells us that non-physical beings *can't* exist, or *probably don't* exist. Our background knowledge of the physical universe only tells us what *physical events* are probable in the *physical universe*. Knowledge of what is physically possible in our universe doesn't tell us much about what is possible *beyond* our physical universe.





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So although it can teach us which *physical* beings are unlikely, it seems very unlikely that our knowledge of the physical universe can *directly* rule out transcendent, non-physical, entities. Can our background knowledge of the universe tell us nothing about how sensible it is to take the idea of God seriously? Are we doomed to agnosticism?

Not at all. We can still ask if God's existence would function as a good *hypothesis*.⁸ If Theism is a good hypothesis, then we could discover that God's existence is probable. History teaches us to prefer simpler hypotheses. The fewer entities, properties, laws or kinds of entity or property postulated by a hypothesis, the simpler it is. So if theism is a simple hypothesis, it could be worth taking seriously.

That sounds a bit abstract. We can illustrate the importance of simplicity by thinking of Kepler drawing ellipses to show the path the Earth takes around the Sun. Kepler had a limited number of observations that showed the heavenly bodies at different points at different times. He could have drawn a wild, winding, circuitous path. But the ellipse was the simplest path available that accounted for the evidence. That's what he drew, and it turned out to be the best explanation.

Similarly, Newton's Theory of Motion is simple, postulating only four very general laws in its simplest formulation. Even in abstract subjects like logic and mathematics, theoreticians seek out a few simple rules that account for a potentially infinite amount of observations. And so on, and so on. The history of thought teaches us to look for simple theories.

⁸ See Richard Swinburne's *The Existence of God* (Oxford: 2004), especially chapters 1-6. An excellent introduction to the various analyses of a good explanation can be found in Timothy McGrew's article 'Toward a Rational Reconstruction of Design Inferences,' *Philosophia Christi* 7 (2005): 253-98.





The Simplicity of Serial Killers

Perhaps this still sounds very abstract and academic; let's illustrate our point a little more with two tragic tales. In 1912 Bessie Mundy drowned in her bath after having a seizure. In 1913 Alice Burnham was found dead in her bath in her home in Blackpool after suffering a fit and drowning. Then, in 1914, Margaret Lofty was found dead in her bath in the town of Highgate. Once more, doctors suspected that the unfortunate lady had suffered an epileptic fit.

Gradually more facts emerged which linked the three cases. All three women were recent brides. All three had made a will, with very generous terms for their husbands, just before they drowned. All three women had married exactly the same man just before they died. He had used different names on each occasion, but police soon identified George Joseph Smith as the lucrative widower. Smith never confessed to any crime, and no physical evidence tied him to the death of his wives. His defence maintained that he was unlucky in love, and hoped that judge and jury would buy that explanation.

The judge was not convinced that anyone could be *that* unlucky, and the jury opined that there was a simpler explanation available. The justice system concluded that Smith murdered each woman for money. One man motivated by greed was more likely than chance to produce these deaths; and certainly more likely than a rather unusual form of epilepsy which only occurs when the sufferer encounters warm water after writing her will. Smith was convicted of murder.

Fast forward one century. Between late October and early December 2006, five young women, all prostitutes and victims of Britain's drug culture, were murdered in the city of Ipswich. Police immediately went on the hunt for a serial killer. It was much more probable that a serial killer was responsible for all five deaths, than a vast criminal conspiracy. And even though these young women were likely to have been assaulted by clients every week, it was simpler, and more probable, that one





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man had escalated to murder than five different men during the same time period.⁹

Steve Wright, a dockside worker was quickly apprehended; but he maintained that he was innocent. No direct physical evidence established that Wright was involved in violent activity. (In the defence's terms, there was no 'smoking gun'.) Wright admitted to soliciting all five girls—so he had an explanation for the forensic evidence that linked him to the five victims. Finally, there was one other suspect, who had been arrested by police before Wright was charged. This suspect admitted to knowing some of the victims, and he had no alibi.

But after the first killings, the Police used Automatic Number Plate Recognition cameras to record all the vehicles frequenting Ipswich's red light district. That, and CCTV evidence, put Wright in the vicinity of each girl just before she disappeared. Wright had solicited the five girls in the exact order they had died. In fact, CCTV footage showed one of the girls getting into his car on the night that she died. Whoever disposed of the bodies had local knowledge, and Wright was a local man. He drove past the brook where two of the bodies had been found on his way to work. Forensic evidence tied him, and no-one else, to *all* the murdered girls; DNA evidence tied him to three of the girls. And blood from some of the young women had been found on his jacket.

Wright was the 'common denominator' in the disappearance and murder of all five women. By far, the simplest explanation before the jury was that Steve Wright was guilty of murder. To suggest that a series of coincidences had produced the evidence against Wright was needlessly complicated. The jury found the simplest explanation the most powerful: Steve Wright was found guilty of murder. If juries could not use the simplest

⁹ The tragic tales of Bessie Mundy and the Ipswich Serial Killings are both discussed with sensitivity and intelligence in Paul Harrison and David Wilson's *Hunting Evil: Inside the Ipswich Serial Murders* (Sphere:2008).





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explanation to account for the evidence, at least one serial killer would be walking free.

Away with the Fairies

Let's do a quick stocktaking. We judge what hypotheses are worth considering by checking them against our background knowledge. We can also compare our hypothesis to theories that have turned out to be true in the past. Our best theories tend to be simple. So we want a hypothesis that is simple and coherent. And theism is certainly a simple hypothesis. One God of limitless, loving power is the foundation of everything else that exists

But is simplicity all that we need? Or should we seek for something more? Consider ghosts. These are non-physical beings (although they would have a spatial location and so, unlike God, would not transcend the physical world). Unlike the FSM, we can give ghosts a fairly simple description: disembodied agents with intentions similar to our own. So if there's no evidence against their existence, and no reason to think that they're impossible, should we remain agnostic about their existence? Can we believe in poltergeists and ghouls?

No, because there's no point in believing in a hypothesis just because it is simple. A simple and coherent hypothesis is a good place to start. But there's simply no point in believing in a hypothesis unless it explains something. A hypothesis must have *explanatory power*. Hypotheses have explanatory power if they lead us to *expect various observations; particularly observations that would be unlikely to occur if the hypothesis was false*. This is what we mean by *evidence*.¹⁰

Consider the Ipswich serial killer Steve Wright. Given the extensive use of police surveillance, if Wright was the killer

¹⁰ Swinburne discusses the nature and meaning of evidence '*The Existence of God*' 52-72; Elliott Sober's discussion in *Evidence and Evolution* is brief and informative (Cambridge: 2008), 1-7.





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we would expect to find evidence that linked him to the murdered girls. We also would expect to find that he had some local knowledge, given where the bodies were hidden. Wright matched the criteria perfectly. On the other hand, if Wright was innocent, it would be extraordinarily unlikely to find that he solicited the five murdered girls in the order they disappeared.

'Nessie the Plesiosaur' has very little explanatory power. Yes, there have been numerous sightings of odd creatures in the loch. But we would expect to find odd sightings and sonar contacts given the murky conditions of Loch Ness. Even trained observers can mistake a log or a wake for something else. We have already mentioned that the steep sides of the loch create strange sonar contacts which could be mistaken for large moving objects. And the photographic evidence is either ambiguous (Rine's photographs) or a fake (e.g. The famous 'Surgeon's Photograph'). The 'Plesiosaur Hypothesis' is a complex theory with little or no explanatory power.

Theism claims that the universe has a *personal* cause.¹¹ If we believe in God we should expect to find evidence of purpose in the universe. Is there evidence of purposive activity in our universe? Does our universe contain the type of order that agents bring about? Does it have features that a rational agent would value? Absolutely! God accounts for the order that we see in our universe. God explains why the universe has conscious living knowing beings. God explains why good and evil are as real and as important as electromagnetism or gravity. God explains why humans crave purpose and meaning. We'll examine these arguments in more detail as the book progresses.

This highlights why it is wrong to compare God to invisible pixies and fairies. These examples just postulate one more entity or class of entities in the universe which don't explain

¹¹ Christians believe that God is not a single, isolated person; rather, God is three co-equal, co-eternal persons sharing the same essential nature.





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anything. If theism can play an important role in explaining our universe we should take it very seriously indeed; we should not waste our time pondering crude caricatures. We might also note that meaningless and trivial stories (like the belief that invisible fairies dwell at the bottom of the garden) are so disconnected from the real world that it isn't only impossible to provide evidence *for* them. It is impossible to provide evidence *against* them. So it is very interesting that evidence can count *against* theism.

If there is a God worthy of worship, why does he allow suffering? Why is the living world so wasteful—what was the point of making those marvellous dinosaurs, just to wipe them out? Why is it not clear which religion provides the best way of approaching God? Now theists have different responses to this counter-evidence, which we'll discuss in chapter seven. But what is important to note is that it *is* counter-evidence. If it is possible to provide evidence against the existence of God, then theism is not a meaningless fairy tale.

Nothing in this chapter proves that God exists. I have only argued that theism is a simple hypothesis which could have explanatory power; and that the probability of God's existence isn't so ridiculously low that we can ignore evidence for his existence. The infantile antics of the Flying Spaghetti Monster's followers shouldn't make theists pause and reconsider their worldview. But the FSM did provide an excuse to show that the concept of God is meaningful and worthy of attention.

