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## Introduction:

# Understanding the Question

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*There is no reason to suppose that science cannot deal with every aspect of existence. Only the religious – among whom I include not merely the prejudiced but the underinformed – hope there is a dark corner of the physical Universe, or of the universe of experience, that science can never hope to illuminate. But science has never encountered a barrier, and the only grounds for supposing that reductionism will fail are pessimism in the minds of scientists and fear in the minds of the religious.<sup>1</sup> – Peter Atkins (Former Chemistry Fellow at Lincoln College, Oxford)*

*The findings of science imply that the belief systems of all the world's traditional religions and cultures... are factually mistaken.<sup>2</sup> – Steven Pinker (Psychology Professor, Harvard University)*

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- 1 Peter Atkins, *Nature's Imagination: The Frontiers of Scientific Vision*, ed. John Cornwell (Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 125.
  - 2 Stephen Pinker, *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress* (Penguin, 2018), p. 394.

**A**lthough most wouldn't state it quite so fervently, the sentiment remains, tickling the back of our brain: given the advances in science, haven't we outgrown the need for the Christian God? Isn't God just a pre-scientific 'placeholder' awaiting the technological and theoretical breakthroughs provided by the scientific revolution to fill in the gaps and render God obsolete?

Stated another way by Dr. Ian Hutchinson, an MIT professor, 'Rather, the self-congratulatory attitude among the enlightened (including me) was that Christianity had been discovered to be irrelevant and outdated. Its commitment to past ideas was its problem, and those ideas had proven to be ineffective. Those of us who had escaped the religious trammels were free thinkers, finding out by our own efforts and intelligence what was really going on, not only in natural science but also across all the academic disciplines.'<sup>3</sup>

In this short volume, I will examine the idea that science has shown that we don't need God. I hope my treatment is deep, thorough and robust, while maintaining clarity, simplicity and accessibility. But, before we begin in earnest, I think it will be helpful to focus our question and clear up some misconceptions.

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3 Ian Hutchinson, *Can A Scientist Believe in Miracles: An MIT Professor Answers Questions on God and Science* (InterVarsity Press, 2018), p. 5.

### **DOES SCIENCE PROVE THAT GOD DOESN'T EXIST?**

I hope we can quickly agree that the answer here is a clear 'No.' No one has yet devised a way to walk into a lab, perform a set of controlled experiments, and definitively say that God doesn't exist. Albert Einstein confessed: 'To be sure, the doctrine of a personal God interfering with the natural events could never be refuted, in the real sense, by science.'<sup>4</sup> To 'prove' anything sets a very high standard, and it's not typically a word that scientists use. Given my quick dismissal of this question, I should also be quick to address the flip side:

### **DOES SCIENCE PROVE THAT GOD DOES EXIST?**

In the limited sense that I mentioned, above, we can also say that, No, there isn't a particular set of laboratory experiments that definitively prove God's existence either. So, have we arrived at some sort of evidential impasse where we can say nothing about God's existence? Well, no – although neither side may be able to provide a scientific 'proof' in a laboratory sense, we can consider other kinds of scientific evidence and philosophical proofs. I believe we come closer to the core of the issue by asking:

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4 Albert Einstein, 'Science and Religion,' quoted in *Religion and the Natural Sciences: The Range of Engagement*, ed. James Hutchinson (Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1993), p. 150.

**BY PROVIDING AN EXPLANATION FOR EVERYTHING, DOES SCIENCE SHOW THAT WE DON'T NEED GOD?**

Even here though, we need more clarification since it is easy to see that science currently does not explain everything. That would've put all scientists out of a job! So, we can more accurately state the question as:

**COULD SCIENCE *EVENTUALLY* EXPLAIN EVERYTHING AND THEREFORE MAKE GOD IRRELEVANT AND REDUNDANT?**

**WILL SCIENCE EVENTUALLY HAVE ALL THE ANSWERS AND PUT GOD OUT OF A JOB?**

Herein lies an interesting and compelling question. If science *can* explain everything, then God becomes superfluous. As Laplace, the eighteenth-century scholar and polymath, famously put it when asked why he didn't include references to a Creator in his *Celestial Mechanics* treatise, 'I have no need of that hypothesis.'<sup>5</sup> Without a need for God, why speculate and hypothesize an unnecessary entity that exists so far outside of the bounds of science?

But what happens if science cannot explain everything? This is different from simply saying that science does not currently explain it all. What if, by the very nature and definition of science itself, there are some things that *cannot* be explained by science? How do we explain those things? These are the questions I hope to consider as we progress.

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5 Pierre Simon de Laplace, quoted in *Science and Religion* ed. Paul Kurtz (Prometheus Books, 2003), p. 78.

## **PERSONAL REQUEST**

Before we begin to examine details, I have a personal request. I'd like to ask that you consider the attitude with which you approach the topic. You and I cannot help but bring our preconceived notions, personal history, and foundational beliefs to any discussion. I realize it's perhaps unreasonable to abandon all defenses or come without any trepidation or suspicions. But insofar as it's possible, the more honest and open we can be, the more we stand to gain.

That being the case, I should say a brief word about true beliefs and the pursuit of truth. All too often we say we want to believe true things, but, in actuality, we want truth to accord with our already established beliefs. It's so much easier that way! It can be very challenging to accept a truth that is inconvenient, uncomfortable or offensive. Scientific studies bear this out. We are prone to deliberately avoid information that counters our beliefs and misinterpret that information if we do see it.<sup>6</sup> If you have ever gotten bad news from a doctor's diagnosis, a poor job evaluation, or a failing test score, you know how hard it can be to accept the truth of those things. Ignorance really can be bliss.

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6 J.A. Frimer *et al.*, 'Liberals and Conservatives Are Similarly Motivated to Avoid Exposure to One Another's Opinions,' *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* vol. 72 (2017), pp. 1-12; D. Kahan *et al.*, 'Motivated Numeracy and Enlightened Self-Government,' *Behavioural Public Policy* vol. 1, no. 1 (2017), pp. 54-86.

## Has Science Made God Unnecessary?

Similarly, any discussion of God is liable to make us uncomfortable for personal reasons, not scientific or logical ones. It might require a massive shift in thinking. Sometimes we may refuse to accept evidence for fear of what it means practically for our lives. We simply don't want it to be true; however, all our wishing and believing never makes a true thing untrue. When I worked in retail for a while, I had a good friend who would talk philosophy with me during breaks. Eventually our discussions got around to God and, after several talks, he admitted that although there might be evidence for God, he didn't like the idea of a God who would have authority over our lives and to whom we would be accountable. Ultimately, he rejected a possibly true thing because it made him personally uncomfortable.

The aforementioned Dr. Hutchinson candidly confessed as he considered Christianity '...my limited understanding of Christianity told me that being a Christian would close off lots of options – choices, freedoms – about how to live my life. That was a major influence causing me to keep my distance, to hold Christianity at arms' length. I did not want a Lord; I wanted to be my own Lord. I did not spend too much time thinking about whether Christianity was actually true, because I already knew that it was personally inconvenient. I did not much want it to be true.'<sup>7</sup>

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7 Hutchinson, *Can A Scientist Believe in Miracles?*, p. 6. NYU Emeritus Philosophy Professor Thomas Nagel has expressed similar

Let's be honest: talking about God is scary! There is a lot at stake here. It can be terrifying to ask sincere questions where the answers have a deep impact on the fundamental parts of our life. What if we're wrong? Leading up to writing this book, I didn't want to read some of the evidences and counter-arguments presented in the literature because I was afraid it would shake me at the core. In the end, I decided the cost was worth it in order to pursue truth, and I hope you too will decide that the pursuit is worth the potential worldview upheaval.

Therefore, as Christian theologian C.S. Lewis puts it: 'I can only beg you, before you throw the book away, to consider seriously whether your instinctive repugnance to such a conception is really rational, or whether it is only emotional or aesthetic...Are we mistaking for an intrinsic probability what is really a human desire?'<sup>8</sup> In other words, don't use intellectualism as a smokescreen for a deeper issue. Our heads can rationalize so much while our hearts remain veiled.

If you are contemplating the possibility of God, I'm curious: what would it take to believe that God *does* exist?

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sentiments: 'I want atheism to be true and am made uneasy by the fact that some of the most intelligent and well-informed people I know are religious believers. It isn't just that I don't believe in God and, naturally, hope that I'm right in my belief. It's that I hope there is no God! I don't want there to be a God; I don't want the universe to be like that.' Thomas Nagel, *The Last Word* (Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 130-31.

8 C.S. Lewis, *Miracles* (HarperCollins, 1947 restored 1996), p. 40.

## Has Science Made God Unnecessary?

Would you refuse to believe in God unless all other possible explanations have been disproven? Famous evolutionary biologist and atheist Richard Dawkins has confessed that he is not sure *any* evidence could convince him of the existence of a supernatural entity. In this case, Dawkins actually has an *a priori* belief in the non-existence of the supernatural that is not based on scientific evidence. Thus, no experiment could show it to him. For those for whom no amount of evidence is sufficient, could we take a moment to consider how many other things in life we hold to this kind of evidential standard? For example, how do we know we're not living in a very complicated simulation (a la *The Truman Show* or *The Matrix*)? It would be impossible to disprove every conceivable scenario. This is partly why it's so hard to counter conspiracy theorists. No matter how much evidence you pile in front of them, people will always find some loophole or roundabout excuse not to believe you.

If you feel like you're willing to seriously and honestly wrestle with the evidence, then this book is for you. The rest of this book has roughly two sections. The first section (Chapters 1–8) examines whether God's existence is necessary for science to function. The second section (Chapter 9–14) discusses positive evidence for God from within science.