

# Less Than Meets the Eye:

## *The God Debates* by John R Shook

By Ian Kluge

### Part I

Let's start with the good news: *The God Debates* maintains a civil tone amid the often shrill abuse of the God debates. Nothing like Hitchen's hysterical screeches that teaching children religion is equivalent to child-abuse; no suggestion like Harris's ominously totalitarian claim that even tolerating religious belief and freedom is intolerable; none of Dawkins' withering scorn for philosophical texts and arguments he obviously hasn't read and just as obviously doesn't understand; and no sign of sign of Dennett's insult of referring to atheists as "brights" and by implication relegating Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Leibniz, Descartes, Kant, Hegel, Whitehead and Goedel (among others) to the "stupids." With *The God Debates*, a new tone emerges and even for this small step we are grateful. This book sets a better example for atheist-believer discussions – civil and courteous – but, for the most part, tone is often as far as it goes.

Welcome as it is, Shook's civil tone does not improve the quality of his arguments. Even though he tries to embed his contentions in a typology of religious and secular beliefs and, thereby, tries to give them an aura of scientific objectivity and rigor, all too often he gives straw men representations of religious and philosophical viewpoints opposed to his. To be more precise, he generally presents religious and theist philosophical arguments in their weakest and even silliest forms and then puts on a show of refuting them. This is good strategy for scoring easy – and cheap – points in a high school debate but it is a poor way to discover truth. To actually find truth, it is necessary to analyze the strongest arguments from both sides.

If Shook has found these straw-man arguments somewhere, he should reference them to demonstrate that reasonable philosophers and/or theologians have actually advanced the theist arguments as he presents them. I doubt he will be able to do that. In my opinion, he has made up his semi-syllogisms as examples of how he believes certain theist arguments run. If his belief is sincere, then obviously he does not understand many of these arguments; if he is not, then he is presenting straw-men parodies and to that extent is deceiving his readers.

Here is an example of Shook's method at work:

7. We couldn't enjoy experiencing the world without consciousness.
8. God would want us to experience the world.

Conclusion. God must exist to have endowed our brains with consciousness.[1]

Shook's tactics are pretty obvious. First, he de-contextualizes the theist argument, stripping it of vital background information; then, he introduces premises irrelevant to proving that God must exist as the origin of consciousness; finally, he leads to a non-sequitur conclusion. Premises 7 and 8 are irrelevant because they are about the alleged wishes of God, and the alleged necessity of consciousness for enjoyment. Interesting topics, to be sure, but there is no logically necessary connection to God's existence – even as the origin of consciousness. As presented by Shook, the theist argument is silly. The problem is, that's not how the theist argument actually works.

The context is the difficulties of explaining consciousness in strictly physical terms – a debate very much alive in our day.[2] The notion that mind-consciousness is identical to brain is far from settled. Moreover, as Wittgenstein pointed out decades ago, a computer is not conscious in the way people are. It does not reflect, ponder, reconsider, regret, hope, care, question and hypothesize – all of which are aspects of human consciousness or mind. A computer will not even do an analogue of weeping if I type in, "Dear Computer, although we've been intimately connected for six years, I'm going to terminate you and our relationship one minute from now." The computer doesn't have a mind-consciousness to know what that means and will go on functioning just as before – not because it doesn't care but because it is incapable of doing anything else. It doesn't even 'not-care.' The habit of ascribing consciousness to computers is just a scientific misapplication of a literary technique called personification. Personification is not intended to be taken literally – and one would expect scientists and philosophers to know better.

Let's look closer. The meaning of the 'break-up' message to my computer is not in the physical blips on the screen; no amount of scientific analysis of those blips will even begin to hint at the existence of any meaning. However, say those words to your spouse and you'll get a different response because s/he knows what they mean – and will react accordingly. S/he has a mind-consciousness capable of comprehending a non-physical meaning. This mind-consciousness must be non-physical because if it were not, we would be back at the 'electronic blip problem.' The brain, after all, is only a 'meat-computer' using electro-chemical blips that are also inherently devoid of meaning.

To cut to the chase: if the twin problems of mind-consciousness and meaning lack – even in principle – a physical explanation then it is not inherently illogical to propose a non-physical entity as the origin of a non-physical phenomenon. Since physical nature cannot explain it, then perforce we must seek a non-physical origin. Eventually, this leads us to God is the origin of consciousness. The problem cannot be solved by simply more scientific, i.e. physicalist research. Put in this context, the theist's proposition is eminently reasonable.

Once we have established a non-physical origin for consciousness, we can then go on to talk about different concepts of that non-physical entity (that some call ‘God’) and its alleged wishes for humankind. We can also go on to consider why it might make consciousness necessary to enjoy the world or if God. But for now it suffices to note that Shook shoe-horns these topics into his faux syllogism to set it up as a straw-man or parody.

## Part II

Behind this logical plausibility of God lies another argument Shook dismisses, namely, the “Theology beyond the World” [3] which argues that “god is the necessary condition for the universe, for its order, and for its intelligibility.”[4] He recognizes that this assertion appeals to the principle of sufficient reason which he takes seriously – except, of course, in this case. He calls this “the argument from pseudo-cosmology.”[5] (“Pseudo” is a word Shook uses frequently for viewpoints he objects to.) Here is how he sets up the argument.

Everything that exists requires an explanation for its existence [a rough statement of the principle of sufficient reason, PSR]

Nature (a collective label for all that natural things) exists so an explanation is required.

Nothing natural can serve as an explanation for nature, since a proposed natural thing would just count as more nature.

Only something supernatural could serve as an explanation for nature.

It is more reasonable to accept a proposed explanation than to leave something unexplained.

Conclusion. Something supernatural exists to explain nature.[6]

He accepts premise 1, the PSR, and then extrapolates that since natural things require a sufficient cause, so must super-natural things. This is a logical category mistake, i.e. treating one kind of thing as if it were another kind of thing. We don’t confuse telephones and the meaning of the conversations held on them. The “child’s question, ‘Who made God’”[7] is a child’s question precisely because it is an elementary category mistake. The whole point of religion is that God, It, the Ground of Being – whatever – is not subject to natural limitations like time, space, mass simply because He is the pre-condition for time, space and mass etc to exist. That is why He belongs to a different category than ordinary contingent beings. Children usually don’t get this – but adults should.

Shook’s conclusion shows him skating around the logical force of premise 3. Premise 3 claims that even in principle, nature, matter, the physical world does not explain itself. Any attempt to

explain the existence of nature by means of nature ends with an infinite regress – a sign that our reasoning is off. In other words, any attempt to explain nature in strictly natural terms fails to satisfy the PSR.

If we try to identify a natural event that caused it all, we need simply ask what natural event caused that and so on ad infinitum. Since it is a natural event and not a ‘super-natural’ event, it requires a natural cause. Obviously, there cannot be an infinite line of events any more than there can be an infinite line of particular things. Every causal act and every individual entity can always be counted. No matter how many, they have a definite number – which infinity does not. You cannot have an indefinite, i.e. infinite number of things or events. If there are individual events and/or things, we need a starting point or as Aristotle put it, a first mover, i.e. God. (This is not, of course, necessarily a personal God.) This is one among the many reasons why nature cannot explain nature.

Second, how could a cause (A) ever work its way through (a supposed) infinity of individual causes to have a particular effect at a future moment? It cannot get to the future – and, therefore, cannot be a cause. The distance between it and that future moment is infinite. We hasten to add that this is not a misuse of Zeno’s paradox because the space through which Zeno’s arrow travels is not made of real individual points. They are only imagined. However, the causal events in a supposedly infinite causal sequence are indeed made up of individual events which must be traversed one at a time. Thus, we know there can be no infinite line of causal events leading to the Big Bang. But if such a line is impossible, then there must be a limit, i.e. a first cause – or “God” if you prefer to initiate the sequence.

The strictly naturalist explanation of the existence of nature fails the PSR which states that every thing-event requires an explanation for its existence and why it exists the way it does and not in some other way. There are reasons why running shoes exist and why they are the way they are. As we have seen, Shook’s naturalist explanation does not explain the existence of nature, let alone why nature is the way it is. No matter how much mathematics we bring to bear to our explanations, sooner or later we will bring up the PSR to the singularity, the branes, the quantum vacuum (which turns out to be not so empty) and so on. The bottom line is that in principle no physical explanation for the existence of the universe can ultimately satisfy the PSR. It’s time for science to stop playing Don Quixote and the windmills.

The upshot is that if nature cannot explain the origin of nature, then the possibility of some kind of non-natural origin of nature must be considered. It is not a matter of shoe-horning in a silly premise like 5 and conclusion as Shook does in his parody of a theist argument, but a matter of

recognizing that if nature cannot explain nature, then we have no choice but to look at non-natural, i.e. supernatural alternatives. This does not prove that a personal God exists but it does make rationally necessary to consider super-natural origins of nature.

## Part III

Let us look at one more example of Shook's straw-man methodology. He says, "The basic 'fine-tuning' argument for god has this form:

If god exists, then it is highly probable that this universe would permit life;

The universe is organized to permit life;

On the naturalistic "multiverse" theory it is not highly probable that the universe would permit life;

It is more reasonable to accept the theory that makes it more probable that this universe exists;

Conclusion: God exists.[8]

First of all, what reputable theist – philosopher or theologian – has ever argued for this hodge-podge? Can Shook document anyone but a philosophical naïf presenting this argument? Once again, we are back to the main problem in *The God Debates* – Shook is making up straw-man parodies of theist arguments in order to refute them. This example shows how far he is willing to go. All sorts of different arguments are mixed up: the existence of God, the existence of life, a gratuitous premise about multiverses as well as a debatable premise on what is or is not reasonable to believe. These are so sloppily put together that they do not form any kind of argument at all and it is disingenuous to lead readers to think that intelligent theists argue like this or this is the best theism can do.

The fine-tuning argument for God's existence – which is a probabilistic proof – might go as follows:

Our universe is extremely fine-tuned in regards to a large number of fundamental physical constants without which none of the cosmic structure and life we know would be possible;

These constants all lie within an exceedingly narrow range;

Even a change in one or a small number of constants makes the current universe impossible.

The odds of such an inter-related web of fine-tuning or the conditions for such fine-tuning arising by chance are so low as to be almost zero;

Conclusion: The more unlikely a natural cause for this fine-tuning, the more likely a non-natural or super-natural cause, i.e. God.

This probabilistic proof is, of course, not an absolute proof, but it has the advantage of being

linked to the current research. Moreover, it makes the decision to believe in God a rational, evidence-based decision and works with calculable probabilities.

It might be objected that if the universe has enough time – infinity supposedly – then this rare combination of fine-tuned factors will inevitably arise. This is arguing like my neighbor that his wife’s chances of producing a boy improved with each pregnancy. (They wound up with six girls.) Odds close to zero remain close to zero no matter how many times the universe or universes re-configure. We could, of course, discuss variations on this scenario, but that would take us too far from exposing Shook’s straw man parodies.

Let us sample one more problem argument from The God Debates. According to Shook, “Recent cognitive psychology and brain experiments have been able to duplicate many of the characteristics of religious mystical experiences.”[9] To his credit, he admits that these experiments cannot eliminate the possibility of God. But then he proceeds to argue that because science can induce a brain experience of “an X that doesn’t probably exist anyway”[10] then “You have never really had an interaction with an X.”[11] X, for those who haven’t guessed by now, is God. He thinks this argument is “logically effective against gods”[12] – but this is a sad mistake. Why should not a lab-induced experience of X be just as valid as a natural one? The fact that X is given as a brain-experience is no surprise – how else do the scientists expect a vision to appear to a human brain? And how does the lab experience prove that X is not real? One is reminded of an incident in Shaw’s St Joan, in which the Inquisitor asks Joan if St Catherine appears in her head and Joan replies, that of course she does – where else could St Catherine appear? Appearing there was no proof that Joan never saw St. Catherine or that St Catherine was unreal. The same with X. The only way that Shook can even make his semi-syllogism appear plausible is to make it circular, i.e. to introduce the “an X that probably doesn’t exist anyway”[13] in the first premise and then use that to conclude “You never really had an interaction with X.”[14] Sad stuff.

## Conclusion

To conclude: The God Debates is a disappointing book – disappointing because it promises so much and delivers so little of real substance to the aware reader. The civil tone is welcome and major step forward in “the God debates” but it is not enough to make up for the serious mistrust aroused by the numerous fallacious arguments such as we have sampled. He seems intent on strengthening the case for secular humanism by straw men parodies of theistic arguments –

which is surely a losing strategy and does nothing to advance our understanding of this important subject.

## Footnotes

[1] John R Shook, *The God Debates*, p. 88.

[2] See the latest issue of *Philosophy Now*, Nov-Dec. 2011. The theme is “Brains and Minds.”

[3] John R Shook, *The God Debates*, p. 153.

[4] John R Shook, *The God Debates*, p. 153.

[5] John R Shook, *The God Debates*, p. 153.

[6] John R Shook, *The God Debates*, p. 134.

[7] John R Shook, *The God Debates*, p. 134.

[8] *The God Debates*, p. 142.

[9] *The God Debates*, p. 103.

[10] *The God Debates*, p. 104.

[11] *The God Debates*, p. 105.

[12] *The God Debates*, p. 105.

[13] *The God Debates*, p. 104.

[14] *The God Debates*, p. 105.

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