

A Question of Faith

Essay by Steven Carlton

Faith, by definition, is a belief in something without concrete proof of its veracity. Lacking empirical evidence, we can only utilize our personal experience and intuition when discussing the possible existence of something like God. Yet many beliefs must always hinge upon personal extrapolation, dependent upon nothing more than inward observation and heartfelt sentiment.

Take, for example, the debate between Creationism and Evolution. Examining the world as it is, logic dictates that evolution (both biological and cosmological) agrees with the observable facts. We witness the mechanics of star formation, deduce the mathematics of physics, determine the age of rocks and of the universe itself. We find fossils in the earth and observe the ongoing biological processes around us. Scientific fact becomes the basis for all we can see, for all we know. Logic tells us the universe proceeds along unvarying paths of predictable change, a pattern we can trace backward through billions of years. What we see is what we know to be true. Our sun formed from the remnants of a supernova explosion five billion years ago. Life first appeared on Earth three billion years ago. That life evolved from single-celled animals into complex ones, into creatures that left the seas and ruled continents much different than ours. Dinosaurs once walked the Earth.

The first hominids appeared four million years ago, evolving over time into modern humans. This is what we see in the fossil record and the science of DNA proves we share a common ancestor with other primates. Evolution is not myth, it is observable fact. Yet there are those who contend it is not so. The Earth, the universe, and all life, they say, began a mere five thousand years ago. God created the universe in six days, bringing everything we know into existence all at once. This is the reasoning of Creationism. Forget what we observe, for we are misinterpreting the facts. Evolution becomes the myth, and from a certain standpoint it is difficult to refute it.

God, being omnipotent, could have made the world as we see it now. He could have made the universe in only six days if we assume He intentionally made it old. Like turning new furniture into “antiques.” Created in six days, the Earth sprang from nothing into a form that scientific analysis tells us is thirteen billion years old. For a being with infinite power, this task is not beyond God’s grasp.

Yet we must ask ourselves why would it be so? Why would God have done such a thing? To test us? In giving us free will, He meant for us to exercise our judgment and hoped we would freely choose Him. Every choice needs a minimum of two options or else there is no choice at all. If God were obviously manifest in our daily lives, opting to

disbelieve would be moronic. He remains obscure in order to provide us with the freedom needed to make an informed choice. Still, without the introduction of an element of doubt, the choice we faced would be between a belief in God or a belief in nothing at all. Presenting us with the seeming evidence of geological processes and evolutionary progression could be God's way of allowing us to make a choice between a soulless reality and one firmly rooted in faith. A faith made stronger by a resolute abidance in the face of incontrovertible evidence to the contrary.

There is, however, another way to look at it, one in which deciding between the two extremes is not necessary. It begins with an examination of self. There is one absolute fact which anyone of us can see and not deny, and it is from that basis that a chain of logic can be built. I must speak from personal experience on this because it is a fact that needs no proof and yet can only be absolutely certain as it pertains to myself.

I exist.

Certainly you are able to say this about yourself and be equally positive of its absolute truth, but only as it applies to yourself. There is no way to be certain that anyone else you meet truly exists. I exist, and I am sure that I do so because I think, I feel; I experience existence.

I have faith that I am not unique in this aspect. I believe you exist as well, and I make this assumption without any evidence whatsoever. I choose to believe it because otherwise all debate is an exercise in futility. If only I exist, then there is no need to ponder the existence of God, for all the world I observe is a figment of my deluded imagination. Nonetheless, I do ponder such a question, therefore I cannot be alone. Circular logic, but a real explanation is unnecessary. I know that I exist.

As a self-aware entity, it is impossible for me to conceive of a cessation of existence. It is not impossible that I am wrong, that upon the expiration of my flesh all that I perceive to be me will vanish. If so, then what was reality? If, when I die, I cease to exist utterly, and I am all that was ever real, then what was reality? It, too, would cease to exist, and it is absurd to think that all reality hinges upon my involvement. Therefore, it behooves me to accept that others exist as well.

My memories go back only so far and no one (discounting the so-called memories of "past lives") has ever been able to recall a memory prior to birth. At some point, then, I began to exist. Unless, of course, my existence prior to the birth of my body was so alien to my current state that any conceptualization of it remains barred to conscious thought. Even so, all things have a beginning, so at some point I began and it is not inconceivable that an ending might also be possible. If I am to return to oblivion, then all others who also exist will return to oblivion as well. Who, then, does reality hinge upon if not us, the impermanent observers?

Regardless of our possible future, if we look backward to find a point where souls began to exist another question arises. Where do souls come from? Creationism makes the

answer obvious: souls come from God. Evolution provides a less satisfying solution. Self-awareness might be merely a side-effect of higher intellect. We evolved into reasoning, thinking beings in response to a hostile environment. Intellect was a survival trait. As our brains grew in size and our reasoning skills progressed, it might be inevitable that self-awareness would follow. Or would it? If it is our contention that the death of our bodies also means the cessation of all awareness, then our chain of reasoning ends here. If, on the other hand, we are right in our belief that some part of us lives on past the point of death, then some part of us exists apart from the flesh that our intellect, derived from evolution or otherwise, is dependent upon. What kind of evolutionary quirk would produce that? And at what point along the evolutionary road did souls first appear?

In attempting to reconcile Creationism and Evolution, a possible explanation appears. Look to, as an analogy, the construction of a new home. Is a house a house when the foundation is poured? Or perhaps when the walls are framed? Carpet laid? Furniture added? As construction draws to a close, the project appears more and more like what it is intended to be. Yet it only becomes a home once people have inhabited it. All the rest was merely a process necessary to reach the desired conclusion.

Likewise, our ancient universe is nothing more than a means to an end. In establishing the physical laws, God constructed His project along a necessary process resulting in what we humans now inhabit. A billions-of-years old world whose fossil record indicates vast amounts of changes leading to one, inevitable consummation. All the rest is construction remnants. God created all that is, but He did so in exactly the way scientists agree occurred naturally. And just as a house becomes a home with the arrival of tenants, so did God's act of divine creation culminate with the arrival of the first souls.

Both theories can be true simultaneously. God created the universe we know, and that creation period ended at the dawn of recordable history. It is the possession of a soul that separates mankind from all other animals and delineates history from pre-history.

As for the act of Creation taking only six days, we must ask: how long is a day to God? By what reference is the measurement taken? Without answers to either of those questions there is no way to be certain that a "day" to God is not any length of time He required to complete a certain task. God's day could be a million years or a billion. The problem with the purely religious view is that its proponents have a tendency to twist desired meaning from Biblical text. There is no rigorous standard of methodology such as exists in science. Science, on the other hand, relies too heavily upon the machinations of research and discovery, refusing to allow for the possible existence of a metaphysical reality. In keeping religion firmly separated from science, scientists believe they are preserving the purity of theoretic postulation. Instead, scientists are performing a disservice by not acknowledging the possible truths inherent in religious myth, just as theologians are wrong to oppose the data produced by scientific methodology.

Seeking knowledge and understanding without allowing for the possibility that the answers we receive might not conform to the ideals we so fervently hoped for is worse

than blind ignorance. Faith means holding fast to an inherently unprovable belief, not ignoring the obvious truths in favor of clinging stubbornly to whimsical fantasy. And the truth is that there is more to the universe than we can possibly measure. How much does an idea weigh? What is the volume of a person's love? Such things are as real as they are intangible. We exist. It is not a leap of faith to assume the presence of a Creator, it is merely the next logical step taken by an open mind.

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