

Is Faith Blind? A Response to Victor Stenger



In the September issue of *Skeptical Briefs* newsletter, Victor Stenger, physicist and author of the best-selling *God: The Failed Hypothesis -- How Science Shows that God Does Not Exist*, takes me to task (apparently)¹ over my argument that Christian faith is reasonable in *The Truth Behind the New Atheism*. Stenger's tone is courteous, and I appreciate his reading and considering some of my ideas. However, I also think he still misconstrues the relationship between science and faith – and in some cases, my arguments. I will respond to each part of his argument in turn, then offer conclusions at the end.

Stenger: "Christian apologists argue that evidence in religion is no less credible than evidence in science. As David Marshall asserts: "Almost everything we know—not just about first-century Palestine, but about dwarf stars, neutrinos, state capitals, vitamins, and sports scores—we believe because we find the person telling us the information is credible."

My response: Stenger's summary of my comments, and the actual comments themselves, do not mean quite the same thing. It is not a matter of weighing the respective credibility of evidence supporting something called "religion" and something else called "science." My actual point is that our reasons for believing both kinds of claim often trace to the same source -- reports we regard as credible from people we see as trustworthy. It does not follow either that in any given case, the evidence for a "scientific" claim and a "religious" claim will be equal, or even that they are equal as categories.

The root of the confusion here may lie in the words "science" with "religion," which are often compared without considering whether they really are comparable. The first is an epistemology, a specific way of finding things out. The second is (among other things) a set of beliefs about particular realities, which may be based on a variety of epistemologies -- not only science, but history, philosophy, personal experience, and the testimony of people you know. Comparing the two is like comparing being a Seattle Mariners fan with the physics of radio broadcasting.

A better comparison would be between science and, say, the historical epistemology on which many Christian claims (such as for the resurrection of Jesus) are based. If one compares science and history IN GENERAL, one might say that science is a more direct way of knowing, and therefore GENERALLY more reliable. But particular historical claims (say, that Germany and Russia were at war in 1942) might be more certain than particular scientific claims, and SOME "scientific" claims (say, that birds evolved from dinosaurs) are essentially historical. Similarly, mathematics and logic are IN GENERAL more direct epistemologies than science, but that doesn't mean scientific claims are not as useful as Dr. Stenger clearly takes them to be.

¹ I found his preliminary response on-line, but have not read the newsletter yet. I am responding to the draft version of his critique.

Stenger: "Yes, but the stories of the Bible are *incredible*."

Response: But they are not. The word "incredible" means, according to Funk & Wagnall, "Not credible, impossible to believe, unbelievable." Billions of Christians have in fact believed the stories of the Bible, and billions of non-Christians also believe that miracles happen. If you do something, then that act by definition is not impossible! Clearly, believing biblical stories -- whether miraculous or not -- is doable.

What Stenger no doubt means is that he cannot both believe in materialism, and in the miracles of the Bible. That's probably true; but the "argument from personal incredulity" is not logically persuasive.

Stenger: "Isn't it incredible that someone born of a virgin rose from the dead? To believe that requires far more evidence than a ball score in the newspaper. And, as someone who labored for thirty years to learn the properties of neutrinos, I can tell you that the evidence for their existence far exceeds any evidence that someone rose from the dead."

Response: Perhaps it does. As N. T. Wright and others have shown, the historical evidence for the resurrection of Jesus is exceedingly strong, as historical evidence goes. But I don't deny that evidence for some physical hypothesis may be far stronger than any claim about ancient history. Similarly, the evidence for the hypothesis, "2 plus 2 equals 4" may exceed any postulate about, say, evolution, because it derives from a more direct epistemology. Nevertheless, all these postulates are based on reason and empirical evidence which may be quite strong in any practical sense. And that is the issue.

Stenger: "Marshall continues the same line of argument: 'The second level of faith is trust in our senses . . . Again there's no way to prove your eyes, ears, nose, mouth, and skin are giving you the real scoop about the outside world.'

"True, we can't prove our senses are giving us the 'real scoop.' But we have plenty of personal experience that our senses do a good job of alerting us to oncoming cars, warning us when something on the stove has caught fire, and telling us that the baby needs to be fed."

Response: Stenger is referring to my "four steps of faith," described on pages 26 to 31 in *The Truth Behind the New Atheism*, and 23-26 of *Jesus and the Religions of Man*. Briefly speaking, the steps are faith in mind, senses, other mortal (human) beings, and God or gods.

I'll respond to the substance of his critique below. But for the moment, note that the "plenty of personal experience" favoring our senses depend on the very same senses! We really have no way of knowing for sure that we are not, for example, caught in some sort of Matrix-like computer program, and all the "raw data" that comes to us through our senses -- really comes to us through our senses. We believe through reasonable faith.

Stenger: "Marshall turns to testimonial evidence: 'Third, to learn anything we accept "testimonial evidence" from parents, teachers, books, street signs, Wikipedia, and "familiar" voices transmitted as electronic pulses over miles of wire and electromagnetic signals, then decoded into waves in the air. Almost everything we know comes from other people one way or another. This is true in science.'

"Yes, but we don't just take anyone's word for it. We test against independent observations. If I went up to a colleague and told him I solved some major physics problem, do you think he would simply accept that without insisting I prove it to him?"

"Of course we don't have time to independently test everything we hear, so we take the word of credible people. But that's because these people have already demonstrated their credibility by proving to be reliable in the past. That's why scientists and scholars of all kinds work so hard to maintain a good reputation. No one pays attention anymore to Stanley Pons and Martin Fleischmann, the chemists who announced to the world in 1989 that they had discovered cold fusion."

Response: This is, of course, quite true. I make the same points in the chapter Stenger cites. Science is a set of human epistemologies, based very largely on a network of trust between human beings. But in general, each "step of faith" is rational and based on evidence. We also trust our minds, and senses, because they prove more or less reliable. Each step, including religious faith, is liable to error, but if it proves solid, expands the basis of our understanding. Scientific research is thus part of a "continuum of faith."

Science has special ways of verifying claims which IN THEORY do not depend on human testimony. But in practice they always or almost always do. And there is nothing wrong with that.

Stenger: "It also depends on what is the message. If an airline pilot flying over Yellowstone National Park reports seeing a forest fire, we have no reason to doubt her. But if she reports seeing a flying saucer whose pilot waved a green tentacle at her, I would demand more evidence."

Response: So, of course, would I. Given the inherent difficulty and expense of interstellar space travel, for one thing, one would expect alien visitors to announce their presence a little less casually. Also, the "green tentacle" is a bit of a cliché, which for reasons Carl Sagan gives in *Demon-Haunted World*, ought to alert us to the story's phoniness:

"Despite this apparent variety of extraterrestrials, the UFO abduction syndrome portrays, it seems to me, a banal Universe . . . Not a single being presented in all these accounts is as astonishing as a cockatoo would be if you have never before beheld a bird. Any protozoology or bacteriology or mycology textbook is filled with wonders that far outshine the most exotic descriptions of the alien abductionists." Carl Sagan, *The Demon-Haunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark*, 133

The Jesus of the Gospels is the furthest thing from "banal" that the human race has yet found. Green tentacles in flying saucers, I do not take seriously. Jesus, I do.

Stenger: "Besides, much testimonial evidence is highly unreliable, as demonstrated by the hundreds of death row inmates who were convicted by eyewitness testimony and later exonerated by DNA evidence in recent decades. Physical evidence is what matters the most."

Response: Here Stenger changes his tune a bit from his more careful earlier distinction between testimonial evidence from people who possess or lack credibility.

In any case, the argument is not very convincing. In fact, even when inmates plead for DNA tests to prove their innocence, in half of all cases, it proves their guilt instead. And of course those who know they are guilty are far more likely to keep quiet. So it is probable that the vast majority of convictions are just.

Nor do we know, from what Stenger says, that the original problem with the convictions was eyewitness testimony, rather than physical evidence. Even physical evidence can be ambiguous -- remember O. J. Simpson's gloves? -- and it usually requires expert testimony to interpret.

You can't really generalize about the reliability of either "physical evidence" or "human testimony." The value of the latter, for instance, depends not only on who the human is, but also on circumstances. Did the witness see the event recently, or long ago? Close up, or far away? Over months, or short moments? Was the object she saw familiar or unfamiliar? Brightly lighted or in deep shadow? What she expected to see, or something that caught her by surprise?

Testing my students' memory in Japan, I found that in some circumstances, human testimony can be pretty reliable. Good thing. Taking a turn onto the bottom of the "U" in a busy street near my in-laws home in hilly Nagasaki, I often asked my wife to look left while I looked right. In other words, I was willing to risk the lives of those I loved most in the world on her word. We had no problem; I have an excellent driving record. We not only put our lives in the hands of strangers when we get onto an airplane, but those strangers rely on human testimony, as when air traffic controllers tell them where to land in a fog. Most are not scientists, yet we trust their testimony, in some cases and for good reasons, with our lives.

It is possible to devise an experiment in which knowledge based on human testimony can exceed the probability bounds of the entire universe. (That is, at least 10^{150} to one against it being in error.) This is because the more independent witnesses you have who agree, the more likely what they agree on is to be based on a real event.

Stenger then criticized theologian John Haught's take on faith and reason. I have not read Haught, and will not respond to that part of his critique. Let me scroll down to Stenger's final comments rebutting Paul Davies:

Stenger: "Physicist, prolific author, and Templeton Prize winner Paul Davies caused quite a stir among his fellow scientists when he wrote in an op-ed piece for the *New York Times* in 2007, 'Science has its own faith-based belief system.' He explains, 'All science proceeds on the assumption that nature is ordered in a rational and intelligible way.'

"This was greeted by many letters to the editor that pointed out, as I have, that our confidence in science is based on its practical success, not some logical deduction derived from dubious metaphysical assumptions."

Response: One could make the same generalization about history, logic, flight control, accounting, or (non-maritime) basket-weaving. Stenger is reifying, even apotheosizing, a broad, abstractly conceived set of intellectual tools that are useful for some functions, not others. But even the observation that "scientists have made useful discoveries" is itself based on the first three levels of faith, as I argue. How does Stengel know

that Kepler discovered the laws of motion of the planets? How does he know Darwin observed pigeons? By reading history, and trusting historians of science. Faith is an irreducible part of how we know things.

Historically, as Davies has argued, faith in the intelligibility and lawfulness of nature was contingent, in Europe, on the belief that God made Nature. If trust in Nature has proven warranted -- as I agree it has -- that only demonstrates the mutual symbiosis between faith and reason, of "faith seeking understanding" as early natural philosophers put it.

Stenger concludes with a few applause lines for the choir, still quoting a *New York Times* letter to the editor:

Stenger: "We trust scientific method, logic, and mathematics because they work. They give us answers that we can independently test against objective observations. They give us electric lights, computers, and cell phones.

"Science flies us to the moon. Religion flies us into buildings."

Response & Conclusion: Neither "Science" nor "Religion" do anything, of course. People fly airplanes, and spaceships, for their own unique reasons, which may be good, bad, or indifferent. Stenger is still reifying these two very different abstractions, treating them almost like deities on Olympus that opposing tribes pray to. Were he to similarly reify a more comparable pair -- say "History" and "Dentistry," or "Christianity" and "Marxism," the absurdity of the jabs would become evident.

But in its own way, Christianity also "works." If he has read the rest of my book by now (his comments are in response to the first chapter), Stenger will know what I mean, and hopefully understand that while the utility of Christianity cannot be proven "scientifically," it has nevertheless been well demonstrated. And among its uses, as Davies shows, is in the invention of the science in which Stenger delights and glories.

Is Science Based on Faith?

Victor J. Stenger

For **Reality Check** in *Skeptical Briefs* Vol. 19, No. 3 September 2009.

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Almost everything we know – not just about first-century Palestine, but about dwarf stars, neutrinos, state capitals, vitamins, and sports scores – we believe because we find the person telling us the information is credible.

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Marshall continues the same line of argument: "The second level of faith is trust in our senses. . . . Again there's no way to prove your eyes, ears, nose, mouth, and skin are giving you the real scoop about the outside world."

True, we can't prove our senses are giving us the "real scoop." But we have plenty of personal experience that our senses do a good job of alerting us to oncoming cars, warning us when something on the stove has caught fire, and telling us that the baby needs to be fed.

Marshall turns to testimonial evidence:

Third, to learn anything we accept "testimonial evidence" from parents, teachers, books, street signs, Wikipedia, and "familiar" voices transmitted as electronic pulses over miles of wire and electromagnetic signals, then decoded into waves in the air. Almost everything we know comes from other people one way or another. This is true in science.

Yes, but we don't just take anyone's word for it. We test against independent observations. If I went up to a colleague and told him I solved some major physics problem, do you think he would simply accept that without insisting I prove it to him?

Of course we don't have time to independently test everything we hear, so we take the word of credible people. But that's because these people have already demonstrated their credibility by proving to be reliable in the past. That's why scientists and scholars of all kinds work so hard to maintain a good reputation. No one pays

attention anymore to Stanley Pons and Martin Fleischmann, the chemists who announced to the world in 1989 that they had discovered cold fusion.

It also depends on what is the message. If an airline pilot flying over Yellowstone National Park reports seeing a forest fire, we have no reason to doubt her. But if she reports seeing a flying saucer whose pilot waved a green tentacle at her, I would demand more evidence.

Besides, much testimonial evidence is highly unreliable, as demonstrated by the hundreds of death row inmates who were convicted by eyewitness testimony and later exonerated by DNA evidence in recent decades. Physical evidence is what matters the most.

Theologian John Haught agrees with Marshall: "Unacknowledged declarations of faith underlie every claim the atheist makes as well, including the repudiation of faith." He refers to the statement made in the 1960s by the eminent biochemist and atheist Jacques Monod that it is unethical to accept any ideas that fail to adhere to the "postulate of objectivity." Haught asks, "what about the precept itself? Can anyone prove objectively that the postulate of objectivity is true?"

The validity of the postulate of objectivity is not to be proven by some philosophical, deductive argument. Its validity is proved beyond a reasonable doubt by the empirical evidence of its methodological success.

Haught counters,

There is no way, without circular thinking, to set up a scientific experiment to demonstrate that every true proposition must be based on empirical evidence rather than faith. . . . The claim that truth can be attained only by reason and science functioning independently of any faith is itself a faith claim.

On the contrary, every successful scientific experiment that results in a practical application demonstrates the utility of basing our theories on empirical evidence. Whether or not it is “true” in some metaphysical sense is irrelevant, as long as it works.

Haught uses the same line of argument to claim that atheists have an unjustified *faith* that the real world is rational. What’s the alternative, an irrational world? It’s not the world that is or isn’t rational. It’s human beings. Being rational just means that when you talk about some subject, the words you use are well defined and the statements you make are self-consistent. How can irrational thinking with ill-defined words and inconsistent statements lead us to any credible knowledge?

The disagreement here rests on the different way scientists and intellectual theists view the world. To a scientist, calling the world “rational” or “irrational” makes no sense. It’s like calling the world “hungry” or “angry.” These are human mental states. Theists, on the other hand, hold to a concept of reason that is more platonic, more personal, more akin to a mystical light that suffuses the universe. In this they adhere to a more archaic idea of reason, or at least one that has not advanced along with the advance of science.

Science makes no assumption about the real world being “rational.” It simply applies rational methods in taking and analyzing data, following certain rules to assure that data are as free from error as possible, and checking the logic of our models to make sure they are self-consistent. The only alternative is irrationality – error-filled data and inconsistent models.

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Excerpted from Vic Stenger’s latest book: *The New Atheism: Taking a Stand for Science and Reason* (Prometheus Books 2009).

Further Reading

David Marshall, *The Truth Behind the New Atheism: Responding to the Emerging Challenges*

to God and Christianity (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2007).

John F. Haught, *God and the New Atheism: A Critical Response to Dawkins, Harris, and*

Hitchens (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008).