

Review of Lennox / Singer Debate: Is There A God?

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The Debate:

The Fixed Point Foundation sponsored a debate in Melbourne, Australia on Wednesday 20th July 2011 on the topic "Is There a God?". The debate featured Princeton University Bio-ethicist and atheist Peter Singer and Oxford University Professor and Christian John Lennox, and was held at the Melbourne Town Hall at 7pm.

For further information on the debate, visit the official website:
<http://www.fixed-point.org/index.php/debates/497-isthereagod>

At the beginning of the debate, moderated by Larry Taunton, it was clarified that the participants would be debating the existence of the God of the Bible, not some vague deity. The structure of the debate was as follows:

- Opening statements
- Rebuttals
- Question & Answer session
- Closing statements

A summary and assessment of the debate is presented below, followed by a selection of short summary statements that are intended to convey the broad thrust of selected arguments that were presented by each participant.

Assessment:

The debate was marked by its civil and pleasant tone. Lennox spoke in a measured and clear manner, and Singer appeared relaxed and casual. While both speakers occasionally made points at the other's expense, the debate was always congenial and free of malice, and in that regard was a fine example of mature, intelligent dialogue between both camps.

Surprisingly, during his opening address, Lennox did not present any of the more well-known classical arguments for theism, instead he concentrated on stressing the rationality of a world undergirded by the existence of God; that God provides strong grounds for belief in reason itself (and that the non-existence of God undermines reason); and that the Resurrection demonstrates God's action in history, thereby pointing to the existence of the Christian God.

In this sense, Singer had something of a 'free kick' with his opening address, as he was able to methodically introduce three classical historical arguments for God (the first cause, ontological & design arguments), to define them in his own terms, and then attempt to dismantle them. After arguing for the non-necessity of God, Singer criticized 'faith' as irrational by definition, argued that the world's religions were explicable through sociology and thus lacked evidential value, and presented a basic Epicurean statement of the problem of suffering.

So in the first round, Singer seemed to score more points, although Lennox's question about rationality remained well articulated and wasn't addressed. During his rebuttal time, Lennox countered most of Singer's assertions, rejecting his definition of faith, instead proposing that intelligent faith was grounded in reason, and challenging the proposition that the first cause argument also needs to apply to the Creator.

During his rebuttal time, Singer dismissed claims of miraculous events, including the resurrection of Jesus, arguing that the evidence for such events was unacceptably slim, and in any case various claims were present amongst all religions, hinting that an anthropological explanation for miraculous claims would be more likely to be true. He concluded by arguing for the existence of objective moral truths (objective in the sense of being universal insights made by rational people of many cultures) without the need to posit a God.

Christians would probably have been frustrated that several very controversial statements made by Singer (eg. that "Protestants have given up on rational arguments for God", and "There are virtually no facts about the life of Jesus that could be known or are at least well-documented") were not challenged more strongly by

Lennox. Concerning the historicity of Jesus, Singer appeared vulnerable, seeming to endorse a position of extreme skepticism that would be at the very far end of the spectrum of historical scholarship. Similarly, Singer failed to present any evidence for an oscillating universe, or even a multiverse. This was a clear weakness that wasn't contested; arguments from fine-tuning were not substantively examined by either participant.

The question and answer segment was dominated by an extended discussion of the issue of suffering, with Singer articulating Atheism 101 regarding this issue. Lennox's response was to argue pragmatically; that by removing God one may solve an intellectual problem of sorts, but it also removes all hope, as there is no one to ensure that suffering is assuaged and compensated for. His response, including the mention of his own close family's experience of suffering, probably gained him sympathy from the audience, although it enabled Singer to pose several hypothetical 'what if God did such-and-such' questions that went largely unanswered.

In summary, were this a boxing match, there were no knock-down arguments, so it would have come down to a points decision, in which case it probably would probably be called a draw. From a debating perspective quite a few arguments were left hanging and unchallenged, but on the positive side there were fewer than average straw men presented, and neither side made personal attacks or attempted to belittle the other. I think it would be unlikely that those already inclined towards either atheism or theism will have been persuaded by either participant. But everyone present would certainly be able to walk away knowing that the opposing side had been respectfully treated and their case clearly presented.

Lennox's opening statement:

- Praised Singer's recent book 'The Life You Can Save' as a thoughtful, ethical challenge, and noted that they both had in common a shared concern to stop the inhumane treatment of animals. He did not share Singer's views on infanticide and euthanasia, but senses a consistency in the way Singer takes his atheism to its logical conclusion, noting that ethics depends on values, and values on worldview.
- Faith is reasonable. science points towards God, despite the fact that so often the opposite is claimed.
- Lennox's first contact with Christianity was through his parents, who allowed him think and gave him space, this is what led him to his career in mathematics and science.
- Argued for the positive Christian contribution to rise of science in 16th and 17th centuries. Edwin Judge claims that biblical doctrine of creation is itself the creator of the methodology of modern science. Greek science is NOT the origin of modern science.
- In support of compatibility between theism and science, quoted Maxwell, who was fond of the Psalm 'Great are the works of the Lord, studied by all who delight in him', Newton's dedication of Principia Mathematica to God, and Arno Penzias quote that astronomy leads back to a beginning of the universe.
- Singer and Lennox both share an underlying belief in the importance of reason. But on what evidence do we base our faith in human reason? Why is the universe intelligible to the human mind? Atheists are obliged to regard thought as evolutionary adaption, but as J.S. Haldane noted, if my thoughts are the products of a mindless, irrational process, why should I trust them? The human mind serves evolutionary success, not truth.
- Lennox's atheist friends believe the evolution of human reason was not directed for the purpose of acquiring human truth. But as Plantinga has commented, evolution/naturalism casts doubt on reliability of human thought. Therefore, atheism undermines the very foundation of rationality. There's clearly something wrong here - and Lennox suggests that it is the fundamental assumption on which atheism is based. Atheism derives the rational from the irrational, whereas in biblical theism, rationality is grounded in the existence of a rational God. Rationality and morality cannot ultimately be supported without God.
- Quote from Jurgan Habermas; the direct positive legacies of the Judaeo view of justice & the Christian view of love. The dangers of atheism; Lennox's Russian friends have told him that 'we abolished God and we destroyed millions of human beings'. If you do away with God, you do away with human freedom. Humans were coughed up by blind forces that will ultimately destroy them. Atheists defend liberal freedoms without asking where they come from.
- Singer says that there may be Objective ethical truths. But God is only complete answer to the question of why we should act morally.
- Lennox then discussed revelation. The Bible offers a unique solution to the problem of human disconnection with God.
- Jesus' central claims are staggering. But so is the central claim of the universe; that everything is energy!
- Lennox's conviction that Jesus is the son of God is based on the historical fact of his resurrection. If he rose from the dead, death is not the end and atheism is false. If Jesus did not rise from the dead, Christianity is false.
- Christianity is intensely stimulating. In addition to this intellectual satisfaction, Lennox also senses the voice of God speaking to him. This is intensely personal, but he shared this belief because he has been asked to present evidence, and this IS evidence, for him.
- In summary, Lennox finds in God a profound resource for facing life's complexity and problems, and the supreme evidence for the existence of God is found in relationship.

Singer's opening statement:

- Singer presented 3 reasons why he did not believe in God; 1 positive reason and 2 negative reasons.
- The positive reason - to quote Laplace: I have no need of that hypothesis. In other words, the universe is sufficiently explicable without positing a God, or at least it is no more explicable if we don't posit a God than if we do. So if we don't need to posit one, why posit one? Singer believes Laplace is still correct today; belief in God is not required, nor does it help us explain the universe.
- So why do people believe in God? Looking at this as a philosophical question (rather than psychological), in the Christian tradition, believers tended to develop rational arguments for existence of God. These were;
- First Cause - we need to believe in God to answer the question 'what causes the universe to exist'.
- Ontological Argument - which works from the definition of God as being of all perfection.
- Argument from Design - God as an explanation of complexity in nature.
- Singer looked briefly at these, and offered short rebuttals to each.
- The First Cause argument is sometimes resurrected these days as something that's compatible with science - ie . the big bang theory. But scientists are guilty of sowing confusion when they use the word 'universe' when they say 'the universe began 13.7 billion years ago'. When you ask a physicist what they mean by that statement is 'the observable universe' or 'the known universe'. If you ask them whether they know if it began from nothing, they will answer no, since we can't see behind the big bang. These are not scientific statements. It may well be that oscillating universe has been going forever, with infinite time - that's compatible with science. And the First cause argument applies to God as well - if we say God needs no first cause, then we ought to be able to say the universe needs no first cause.
- As for the Ontological Argument - very few philosophers believe this argument. If your instinct is that it's a conjuring trick, then you're probably right. Plantinga is probably one of only few who accept it. Existence is not an attribute in the same way that beauty & goodness are attributes. The ontological argument derives its existence from its definition, which is a simple confusion.
- Regarding the Argument from Design - now that we understand evolution, design has fallen into disrepute. We understand much better how we have certain organs - they have evolved over time. Fossil records and genetics support evolution. Evolution is very firmly established, therefore we don't need an argument from design to understand how the universe is as it is.
- In the protestant tradition, these arguments fell into disrepute a long time ago. Therefore, protestants now argue that what it matters is 'faith'. Faith is belief in something without good evidence.
- Singer used the example of William Clifford's essay about faith, which refers to a ship owner who didn't bother to inspect his ship, since 'God would take care of it'. We would, of course, criticize the captain's approach. You need more than faith.
- Unfortunately, in the real world today, faith puts life at risk. eg. the refusal of the Catholic church to condone use of condoms has cost perhaps millions of people. We pay a high price for faith of some religious leaders. We shouldn't rely on faith to replace arguments
- Singer then proposed two negative arguments against the God of the Bible.
- Firstly - we know as argument of sociological fact; that if people were brought up in different cultures, they'd be much more likely to be Hindus or Muslims rather than Christians. There's a kind of relativism to religious belief that should at least incline us to skepticism. Regarding John Lennox's Christian parents, it's not just a coincidence; this cultural tradition made it easier for John to accept his belief.
- The second negative argument is the much the stronger one: suffering. Christians believe that an

all-knowing, all-powerful, all-good god runs the world. But suffering is in the world. How could there be suffering if God knew about suffering, and had the power and will to prevent it?

- Christians are not ignorant of this problem, and they say many things in response, eg. the Free will defence. We might question whether the gift of free will is worth the amount of suffering - but will put this question aside.
- But there's suffering in the world that has nothing to do with free will. eg. the terrible drought in Australia, many animals died simply because they couldn't find food or water. It was not human action that caused that suffering.
- Christians sometimes say that suffering is result of sin - but it's impossible to believe that a child crushed by building in earthquake has sinned. And yet animals also suffer, and they haven't sinned.
- Singer said that he has asked thoughtful, intelligent Christians to explain how existence of undeserved suffering squares with God, and why didn't God reduce suffering. It seems wildly implausible that the world was created by this kind of God. It's much more likely that the world has risen by evolution according to blind, unguided forces of which we are now becoming aware. This is by far more plausible picture of world than the one theists try to persuade us to accept.

Lennox's rebuttal:

- Regarding the non-necessity of God: Laplace gave the right answer. The problem was in thinking that God could be mathematically described.
- There's a difference between having mechanism & law on one side, and God as agent on the other side. God is the agent, not the creation; you won't find Henry Ford inside the motor car.
- Regarding the argument from design: whatever evolution can or cannot do, evolution is still a mechanism. The existence of a mechanism that does something is not of itself an argument for the absence of an agent that designed the mechanism.
- Evolution needs a mutating replicator. The fascinating thing to Lennox's mind is the existence of the language of DNA. DNA is 3.5 billion letters long, all arranged in the right order, like a computer. We intuitively posit that some sort of intelligence is responsible.
- Quite apart from evolution, the very existence of this language-like structure is powerful evidence for God.
- Regarding first causes - the question 'Who created the creator' is a clever question - but it assumes that the creator is created! For centuries we've known that created gods have been false - we call them idols. God is not created!
- Does not accept Singer's definition of faith. That is blind faith. We discovered during the Global Financial Crisis that our faith was not evidence based. Christian faith is commitment based on evidence. The intention of John's gospel, for example, is to present evidence upon which faith can be based.
- Lennox agreed he was brought up by parents who were Christians, but then asked Singer: were your parents atheists? Singer's response that his mother was certainly an atheist and his father was probably agnostic. (this point drew applause & laughter from the audience) Lennox said that this is the genetic fallacy, as Singer should well know.
- Lennox said that he has spent his life among people who are not of the Christian faith precisely to make sure that he is NOT deluded or incorrect.
- Will have to deal with suffering later, due to running out of his rebuttal time.

Singer's rebuttal:

- Going back to the point about an uncreated universe. Doesn't see a problem in thinking that the universe was not created, that it always existed. He clarified that he was not arguing that the existence of the universe is incompatible with a creator, but just that a creator is not required. But a creator also needs the First Cause.
- Commenting about historical fact of resurrection, the evidence for this 'fact' is extremely slim. We don't have any contemporary documents that attest to this event. We know that the so-called gospels we read were written considerably after events. They may have an earlier source, sometimes called Q, but they were written at least a generation after the events.
- We also know all sorts of religions offer all sorts of claims of people rising from the dead, in all sorts of anthropological conditions. This does seem to violate all laws of nature. We would need particularly strong evidence in order to believe in it (Hume). Singer doesn't think that it's impossible to have events so well documented as to prove a miracle, but it is unlikely.
- There are virtually no facts about the life of Jesus that could be known or are at least well-documented. You have to be a believer already to say that the Resurrection is something I will stake my belief on.
- Regarding a "design agent": don't see any problem with idea of consciousness arising from process of evolution. Non-human animals have consciousness to various degrees; certainly it proves useful to survival. Rudimentary mathematics can be useful for survival (eg. if you spy three tigers going into a cave, and two come out, rudimentary mathematics tells you it's not a good idea to go into the cave!)
- Something similar applies with morality; we can have insight into what are (possibly) objective moral truths, which have nothing to do with God, but are nonetheless objective. These are rational insights that are universal. The idea of equality doesn't spring from Christian roots. It's part of the universal morality espoused by philosophers (eg. Stoics, Chinese thought) Human minds in different cultures accept these aspects of universal morality.

Questions and Responses:

Question to Singer: "Do away with God and you do away with freedom." Respond.

SINGER:

- the word 'freedom' means different things. eg. political freedom. But presumably he means free will - there's a sense in which it's true, and a sense in which it's false.
- Obviously we have freedom to make choices; eg. he chose to participate in this debate. But in some sense, it was predetermined, if someone knew the position of all atoms in the universe, then maybe, yes, deep metaphysical freedom is not possible on the view of the universe that he holds. We should not be deluded though into thinking this means we make no real choices. Of course we do.

Question to Lennox: "Is the idea of God creating freedom counter-intuitive?"

LENNOX:

- was talking before about Russian experience, about them feeling like they had been robbed of freedom under an atheist state. when it comes down to it, Singer's view of the universe is at the bottom what we would expect to find no good and no evil (Dawkins' famous quote). If that kind of determinism is true, then that would spell the end of Singer's kind of ethics.

SINGER:

- Dawkins is not saying that as a scientist. We don't need to reject IDEAS that some sorts of things are good/bad (eg. child suffering)
- Regarding Russia, is that a biased sample? What if you asked Iran, could they argue that theism deprives them of freedom?

LENNOX:

- Agree, especially coming from Northern Ireland. It's very important to distinguish (as Singer does) between different religions. Christ himself refused to allow the use of violence to defend him or his message. This is tremendously important. Christians who take up weapons to defend their faith are disobeying Christ.

SINGER:

- That may be, but that raises questions of whether or not we should be pacifists.

LENNOX:

- I was using my words very carefully. I was talking about Christ's disciples defending his message.

Question to Lennox: "Is there a leap from 'Science demonstrates that there may be a god' to belief in the 'God of the Bible'?"

LENNOX:

- No. Arguments from the intelligibility of science do only get you so far. Agrees it's a step further - but a step into history - not into imagination - to get to a relational God.
- The evidence for the New Testament is very considerable indeed. We have documents going back to the very early centuries indeed. Sherwin-Wright says confirmation of historicity is utterly overwhelming. Historians are much more confident than Singer appears to be.
- Disagrees with Hume; the notion of miracles as 'violation' of laws of nature has been very unhelpful. Gives an example of C.S. Lewis story of money disappearing from drawer. So how do you recognize if someone has put his hand into the system? We need to know about the stable laws, &

regularities, otherwise you cannot recognize miracles when they occur.

- No Christians believe that Christ was raised by natural causes, but that God breathed his power into the system. Science can tell us that resurrections are improbable but not impossible, because they don't violate any laws.

SINGER:

- If you're relying on historical evidence for the Resurrection, it's extremely slim. We have plenty of claims that people are healed, fly through the air, and so on. We should be skeptical.

LENNOX:

- Agreed.

SINGER:

- But if we accept 1st century history; this is the sort of environment where stories, which accumulate like Chinese whispers, would be readily accepted. And we have no eyewitnesses.

LENNOX:

- What about Paul? He was an eyewitness of something!

SINGER:

- One of these visions, or apparitions. We know people have these about aliens, and all sorts of weird things. In Paul's day people weren't so skeptical, but I think they should have been.

LENNOX:

- But they WERE skeptical. People see what they expect to see, but in Jesus' resurrection, no one expected to see it. Without that, the Christian cause was hopeless.

SINGER:

- Wouldn't agree with that. Christianity answered certain needs that people had at that time.
- Islam also grew in remarkable ways. Just because a religion survives and thrives doesn't mean that they're true.
- And regarding the claim that none of them were expecting the resurrection - we just don't know that! we don't have their writings.

LENNOX:

- But we have Luke, a historian. Accurate in many details, of which we can check.

SINGER:

- But we now have good reason to believe that gospel writers put Jesus' sayings together. And there are contradictions, eg. sermon on mount and the plain.

LENNOX:

- Jesus preached same sermon twice, like many preachers!

Question to Singer: "Do you see all religious beliefs as irrational?"

SINGER:

- At the foundation, all religious belief is irrational, in that they believe in a deity or supernatural force of that sort. But it depends on what you call a religion (eg. Buddhism)

- It wasn't necessarily irrational for people in the past to explain events using religious explanations. But now we understand what thunder, lightning, etc. are, so we have no need for religious explanations.

LENNOX:

- Believes atheism is irrational because it tries to derive rationality from irrationality. Huge leap of faith to go from mindless unguided processes to masses of rationality that we see around us.
- As for coherence, the notion that there is an intelligent mind behind our own thought 'fits', 'makes sense'.
- We're talking about two diametrically opposed worldviews. Singer accepts the universe as 'brute fact'. I take the opposite - that the universe (or multiverse or whatever it is) is derived from Mind.
- The question is WHICH ultimate fact we believe in.

SINGER:

- Agrees on this being the main issue between us. Doesn't agree about essential connection between Christianity and modern science. There was resistance to Galileo, even Darwin. There were certainly scientific minds in other cultures (eg. Indian astronomy). True that rise of modern science in the West happened for a variety of reasons, but can't see any real connection with Christianity.

Question to Lennox: "How do you respond to the suffering argument?"

LENNOX:

- With tremendous sympathy. It's by far the hardest argument to face. Recalls standing in Auschwitz, weeping. Correct to identify moral and natural evil distinctions. In short, there's no simplistic answers.
- If you deduce there's no God, you may solve an intellectual problem, but you don't remove the suffering. What you remove is all hope.
- We could have lengthy discussions about 'what if God did this, or this'- we could argue until the cows come home about what God could have done, but we're faced with a world with two ruined cathedrals. One in Coventry (bombed by humans), one in Christchurch (ruined by earthquake).
- My niece had an earthquake in her brain at 22, my brother was blown up by a terrorist bomb.
- Granted that this is the case, is there any evidence that there is a loving God? Believes Jesus is answer, God entering into our suffering in solidarity.

SINGER:

- But why doesn't God minimize suffering?
- Death is the end of each one of us, but not of our species. There is hope that humans will learn from the mistakes of the past, suffering can be minimized, science advanced, world may improve, etc.
- Suppose you re-compensate someone for living a painful or bad life, that still doesn't remove the immorality of the suffering.
- The standard Christian view is that only human beings have this hope of afterlife? Do animals get rewarded? Why not have the rewards without the pain and suffering that came before?

Question to Lennox: "So, where is the compensation?"

LENNOX:

- Christ told a story of a man who suffered terribly because he was discriminated against (Lazarus). Finds it very interesting that Christ tells what happened to him after death. That man found himself in the company of Abraham, which is interesting as Abraham was known as 'the friend of God'. That little cameo suggests that God does compensate. You say you can't imagine how God could compensate, but what if he could? If there is a world like that, granted that the suffering is here anyway, isn't that infinitely better than saying there's hope for the species, but no hope for me whatsoever?
- The fact that Christ becomes part of suffering impacts heavily on him. One can, in Christ, get some kind of peace.

SINGER:

- But I do have personal hope. I hope that I can live for another decade or so, and can see improvements in the world. Dying is not something that causes psychologically despair. I can see how it would seem nice (afterlife) but it's just like you're telling yourself a fairytale.

LENNOX:

- But you could be telling yourself a fairy tale too!

[Author's note: the summary dot points shown above are not direct transcriptions of the comments made by the participants during the debate, but are instead short summary statements intended to convey the broad thrust of selected arguments that were presented. Every effort has been made to present a fair and balanced articulation of the participant's points. Any errors, omissions or mis-representations are those of the author alone.]