

Bring It

Kris King – December 13th 2011

<http://www.rantinaminor.co.uk/2011/12/bring-it/>

So, as I was saying last week before I became hopelessly sidetracked into ranting about Jeremy Clarkson (it's easily done, I know, what with him being in possession of a face that would look infinitely better if a fist was ploughing through it faster than a Bugatti Veyron with a rocket up its arse), I have recently been involved in a Twitter-based scientific argument with a user by the name of @Adam4004. His name, which consists of a reference to both the bible's first man and the year (BCE) literalists claim is when the earth was created, was my first clue to his being a young earth creationist (or "moron" for short). The second was that he offered not a single scrap of evidence for *any* of his frequently asinine claims, choosing instead simply to assert the truth of his statements whilst ignoring all requests to provide references and citations for the many studies and peer-reviewed papers that undoubtedly support them. The reason we had to go through such a frustrating dance is that evidence to a theist is like a backbone to Nick Clegg; they can't show any, because they ain't got any.

If I'm being completely honest, I'd have to say that I *may* have lost the argument on a technicality, insofar as I surrendered the high ground by calling him a "fucking idiot". As you all know, the rules of a proper, reasoned debate (such as they are) essentially state that, regardless of whether or not you're 100% right in everything you say (I wasn't, incidentally, but I wasn't that far off), resorting to ad hominem attacks is pretty much an instant fail because you're criticising the claimant rather than the claim itself. While I wholeheartedly agree with this rule (theists are forever breaking it by trying to dismiss evolution on the nonsensical grounds that Darwin was a Nazi, or something like that), I would question whether it actually applies in this instance. Specifically, I **was**, in fact, attacking his claim; I just happened to follow it with a comma and the words, "you fucking idiot" – does that make it an ad hominem? And, even if it does, that doesn't in any way alter the fact that he was, to be fair, a fucking idiot.

One other aspect of the argument about which I should be absolutely open (if only because you could examine my Twitter timeline and find out for yourselves anyway) is that at no point did I offer any links, citations, or references in support of my refutations of his argument. Again, I would ordinarily agree that one should **always** be prepared to supply the evidence necessary to back up one's claims (this post, this blog, and my entire position as a sceptic all hinge on this notion) but, in fairness once again, it wasn't *my* burden; they were *his* claims, and it is therefore not for me to provide the evidence that refutes them but for him to provide evidence that supports them. Scepticism *by definition* is the rejection of claims on the basis of insufficient evidence having been provided by the claimant. It's not making claims to the contrary (although it can be) ... it is simply saying, "prove it".

I have said before that one of my principles is, "evidence: bring some with your claim or fuck off" and, while it may be phrased in a particularly blunt or aggressive-sounding way, it is probably one of the single most reasonable demands that anyone could ever make, and we dismiss it at our peril. Insisting that someone provide, at the very least, the teeniest, tiniest justification for the claims they make (although hopefully they will offer so much more than that) has been essential, not just for the development of our species, but for its continuing *survival*. How many more lives would have been lost, or significantly shortened, had we simply continued to *believe* the assertions of apothecaries and surgeons of the past rather than subject them to the rigour of scientific testing? What would our current life expectancy be if we hadn't asked for actual proof that, for example, using red lead as a food colouring was, you know, *safe*?

Without the demand for evidence, you and I almost certainly wouldn't be here. The progress made by science, particularly in the field of medicine, has only been possible thanks to the scientific method's absolute insistence that, if you come up with an idea, you had damned well better be prepared to back that shit up when someone calls you out. It's not enough to say, "Trust me, it works!", especially when it comes to something like medicine where individual lives, or even the

health of an entire nation, could hang on your theory; you can't expect people to simply *believe* you when you announce that you have come up with a method for treating cancer which involves carefully swallowing an entire grand piano once a fortnight (to be taken instead of meals, and washed down with a bucket of hot beef lard). Had it not been for the constant demands of science that theories prove themselves, both with supporting evidence, and self-correcting mechanisms like the peer-review process (where bad ideas go to die), our ancestors would likely have not survived long enough to reproduce.

This is the major stumbling block encountered by theists and proponents of the supernatural, and it's one that invariably sends them flying arse over tit, flailing like a toddler who's desperately trying to get its head through a sweater with an impossibly small neck-hole. No matter how strong the argument, or how passionately it is expressed, and regardless of the absolute conviction of the person making it, the request for evidence will **always** trip up those who don't have it, just as it did with @Adam4004 (sadly, on top of not being able to carry out the primary request of bringing evidence, he either couldn't, or wouldn't, carry out the secondary request of fucking off instead). When the facts aren't on your side, you have no choice but to make appeals to authority, emotion, and special pleading when presenting your case; the encyclopaedia of logical fallacies suddenly becomes your best friend and play-book, and you will run through every last fallacy in it just to avoid offering anything tangible.

A big part of the problem is that many people don't understand what actually constitutes valid evidence, and a sizeable number of those who do will be willing to dishonestly modify the definition or feign complete ignorance of it if they think it'll let them get away with brushing aside any questions or criticisms as they push their side of the debate. Theists are probably more guilty of this than almost anyone, frequently choosing, in defence of their god, to redefine evidence to the extent that warm, fuzzy feelings about how there *must* be a god because they can't explain how clouds work *somehow* now counts as cast-iron, undeniable proof that a sky-based Dumbledore-alike is responsible for the invention of everything. Whether this rewriting of the rules is unconscious ignorance, or wilful dishonesty, a theist's approach to evidence is usually to load it into a catapult made of out bibles, and use the big, rubber band (constructed from the finest, flexible morality) to launch it at full speed over the nearest rainbow before adopting faux-innocence and asking, "what evidence?"

For something to qualify as evidence it must first be *objective*, that is it must be totally independent of the observer. It must be possible for *anyone* to be able to examine whatever is, to measure it, to test it, and for it to be the same for everyone; opinions, emotions, and beliefs are all worthless in this regard, being utterly subjective and, therefore, beyond quantifying in a sense that can be in any way meaningful to anyone but the person who holds them. Last week I talked about the idea of offence, and how what is offensive to you may not be offensive to someone else – the same applies here; *you* might be of the opinion that a god exists, *you* might feel that his presence is undeniable, but that doesn't mean that the rest of us feel the same way. Even if we did, it still wouldn't matter because our feelings and opinions are no indicator of reality as it is outside of our tiny human heads; they are merely our *perception* of it, and perception is entirely subjective.

It is amazing how many supporters of the "magic man done it with magic" theory of existence subscribe to the notion that a god *must* exist because billions of people throughout history have believed in one, as if the difference between objective and subjective comes down solely to the numbers involved. If this were even remotely true, it would mean that the opinion of more than 15 million people on Twitter that Justin Bieber is somehow NOT an irritating, pube-dodging, vapid, talent-eschewing waste of DNA is, by sheer virtue of how many people hold this view, an objective **fact**, when independent scientific experiments carried out in my flat conclusively show that that is *exactly* what Justin Bieber is. Yes, I'm being facetious and sarcastic, and my anti-Bieber agenda is on display yet again, but I'm doing it to make the important point that beliefs, opinions, and emotions are *not* evidence because they cannot, by definition, be true for everyone, and neither can they be publicly measured or verified.

The "argumentum ad populum" is one of the more common logical fallacies to be committed by those attempting to present evidence, and is sometimes expressed using the phrase, "the plural of 'anecdote' is not 'data'". Personal testimony and anecdotes are also often employed as the basis for an appeal to authority (the idea that, "so-and-so said it, therefore it must be true"), and this is unquestionably the theist's all-time favourite fallacy; they defer to the authority of the bible so often that it starts to sound like that annoying kid at school who begins every sentence with the words "Yeah, well, my dad says ..." as a way of declaring by fiat that he is always right about everything

ever, and that your point of view is stupid and wrong because you don't know who your dad is, and anyway your mum was seen wandering around the town centre in her bra and flowery pants. Appeals to authority are, for the most part, kind of childish when you think about it ...

In spite of all this, there *is* a place for introducing authority into an argument; when supporting evidence has been presented it is often quite acceptable to offer the source of the evidence as an appropriate reinforcement of its veracity (assuming, of course, the source has relevance to the evidence). At the weekend I was fortunate enough to see the Uncaged Monkeys live at the Plymouth Pavillions; an evening of extreme nerdiness, science plus comedy, featuring Robin Ince, Professor Brian Cox, Simon Singh, Dr. Ben Goldacre, and the awesome and wonderful Tim Minchin. Heading home, my friend Matt (who had bought the ticket for me as an early christmas present) said that his approach to some of the "heavier" aspects that went over his head was to simply just accept it; since Brian Cox had absolutely established his credentials when it came to particle physics, he was happy to recognise him as an authority on the subject and take whatever he said as a given.

There is a million miles of difference between accepting the word of the world's foremost keyboard-playing, sky-pointing, Mancunian particle physicist when it comes to dealing with quantum mechanics, and taking as gospel (pun intended) the claims of a book, cobbled together by multiple authors (many of whom history has verified as having social or political agendas), translated, mistranslated, edited, interpreted, re-edited, translated again, misinterpreted, and dishonestly misrepresented when it comes to *any* of the claims that it has ever made. Brian Cox has proven himself within his chosen field (he also uses the field to stand in and point at the sky a lot); the bible has proven fuck all but its cheerleaders' ability to perform the most extraordinary logical gymnastics in a desperate effort to spin the words of desert-dwelling ignorants so that allegory and fable could be falsely presented as scientific or historical fact.

Theistic claims have never been able to present anything that can truly be considered evidence because everything offered thus far has always fallen short when it comes to the three most important qualities a claim must possess in order that it can produce *viable* evidence. Firstly, it must be testable; we've dealt with this already, but it's worth reiterating – *opinions, emotions, or beliefs don't count because they cannot be tested*. Seriously, how do you quantify anything as nebulous as "happiness" in a way that is meaningful for everyone? Even if you could observe and measure brain activity insofar as it pertains to varying emotional states (and we can), how do you correlate that precisely with how a person *feels*? How do you rate feelings? How do you *measure* happiness? Whether you like it or not (and, believe me, theists *don't* like it), feelings, beliefs, and opinions cannot be quantified and so cannot therefore be proven wrong, which brings us to the next quality a claim needs to have: falsifiability.

When a scientist develops a theory to explain observed phenomena, they set about testing it through experimentation and analysis in an attempt not to validate the theory, but to falsify it; to prove it *wrong*. The reason for this is because it's far *easier* to prove your theory is correct – you simply ignore everything that has the potential to refute it (this is called confirmation bias, and is another crime against reason favoured strongly by theists; if it disagrees with you, get rid of it). Scientific theories intrinsically lay out the conditions for which they are satisfied, and so the object is to modify every variable, tweak every setting, and test it again and again until you find a scenario where the conditions **fail**. A person's beliefs or feelings cannot ever be shown to be wrong, just as they cannot ever be shown to be right either; they're not quantifiable, they cannot be represented on a discrete scale of 1 to 10, positive or negative, black and white, right or wrong.

Crucially, because the feelings and beliefs of an individual are, by their very nature, that of an *individual*, they are entirely subjective and beyond the final pre-requisite quality for viable claims, repeatability. Many's the theist whose belief is founded solely on having a religious "experience"; sometimes this will be a claim to have witnessed a miracle, but usually it is, again, a *feeling*, deep-down, profound, something that they suddenly felt one day, a sense that the "love of god had entered them" (filthy bitches, honestly!), or perhaps that they were spiritually overwhelmed with emotion at the inherent beauty of whatever supernatural force they believe is responsible for everything. I'm sure this is all very lovely for the person concerned, but it's worthless to the rest of us because we cannot possibly hope to reliably recreate these experiences for ourselves. Evidence needs to be tested *repeatedly* to ensure that the application of a given theory yields the same result *every time* in accordance with its predictions.

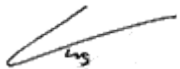
Miracles are, by definition, something of a rarity, otherwise they wouldn't be miracles. Not only that but, since they also involve the suspension of fundamental laws of the universe, there's absolutely no

way we can possibly “induce” a miracle into happening in order that it can be tested as evidence for whatever claim has been made for it. It’s all very well saying your grandma’s cancer was cured by praying to a god who then performed a miracle to remove it, but we can’t *repeat* that (at least not without shuffling a few thousand grannies on a conveyor belt through the core of a nuclear reactor and then praying en masse for god to save them – even then you’ll find that pretty much every last granny will die without so much as a whisper from the almighty). As for profound religious “feelings”, they’re even less replicable than nuking a few old ladies – besides, I get overwhelmed with emotion every time Sam picks up Frodo and carries him up Mount Doom, and the only thing that is evidence of is me being a big soppy git.

My argument with @Adam4004 was not the first run in I, or anyone else, has ever had with a theist who made spurious claims to have tangible evidence and then singularly failed to provide any, and it certainly won’t be the last. While, as I said, it was not my burden to prove him wrong (but his burden to prove himself right), I could easily have supplied him with links to the necessary refutations of his arguments, but why bother? His was a view so entrenched that he either wouldn’t read them, wouldn’t understand them, or would simply dismiss them in a display of petulant confirmation bias. And besides, since when has it been *my* job to fill in the massive, gaping chasms left in someone’s education by a religion desperate to prevent its adherents from learning? Sure, I will do my best to explain to you exactly why I think you’re wrong, but never forget you have a role in this too: to meet me halfway. The trouble is, I’m afraid, that one ultimately cannot reason with those who refuse to see reason ...

Nonetheless, I feel compelled to carry on trying regardless. Why? Probably because I’m a stubborn bastard with an unshakable desire to have things fixed that I perceive to be broken, and there’s a **lot** to fix when it comes to people’s attitude towards evidence; specifically, when you say you have evidence, don’t start offering logical fallacies, excuses, arguments that have already been refuted or debunked, or warm feelings before sitting back smugly as if that counts for anything. It doesn’t, and it will explain why no-one feels compelled to take your claims at all seriously.

At the end of the day, if you’ve got evidence, **bring it** ...

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Lus' or similar, with a stylized flourish.