

Atheism's Best Arguments? (Part 1 of 2): Victor Stenger

Source URL: <https://closerotruth.com/interviews/3037>



Transcript - Long

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Victor, I'm not revealing any family secrets to say that you are an atheist, correct?

Victor Stenger:

Well, I prefer to be known as a humanist, which I think is more positive, but yes, I have to admit the fact that I don't believe in God.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Okay. You have been well known for criticizing many of the so-called proofs for God's existence, but I want to put you in the other chair and ask you which of the arguments for atheism you find most compelling.

Victor Stenger:

All right. Well, there are a whole class of logical arguments that I have not had much to do with personally, but which I find pretty compelling, and that is the certain arguments that make the whole argument of God logically incoherent. For example, there's the argument of evil that theists have struggled with for centuries, and never really come to a solution to; most of the religions that we talk about believe in a God who has what I have the three "O's"—omnibenevolence, omniscience, omnipotence—and there's no way you can make all three together ...

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

All good, all knowing, all powerful ...

Victor Stenger:

Yes. No way you can make all three of those compatible with the undeniable existence of gratuitous suffering in the world. Now, there's going to have to be some suffering—we're going to have to feel pain if we're going to recognize that we're ill, but the amount is so huge that you can't justify it unless you relax one of those. You can relax omnipotence, ah, you could relax omnibenevolence, and just say, well, God isn't that good after all, but then that's not the God most people believe in. So that's one, and there are a number of others like that. Another one I like is that people will say how do you know that God isn't just hiding himself from us? And this is called the argument from the hiddenness of God, and also what's related to another argument called the argument from nonbelief, and basically it is that if God is a moral God, that God would not hide himself from any believers—from any person who is seriously seeking God, seriously interested in finding evidence for God. He might hide himself from bad people, but what about good people who really want to know and are really open to the possibility. Yet there are such people. There are many nonbelievers in the world who are open to evidence for God and I claim ...

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

You're open to evidence ...

Victor Stenger:

I claim all throughout my book, that you show me the evidence and I'll believe, I mean, I'll have to believe. A good scientist has to go where the data leads.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

So that argument would say that I, Victor Stenger, really want to know whether God exists, and I'm open to—and if this God exists—and is deliberately hiding from me, Victor, then that God is an immoral God, and that's an internal contradiction, and that's the logical argument.

Victor Stenger:

So that's two examples I think are two of the strongest logical arguments against God.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Okay, right. So that's the logical arguments.

Victor Stenger:

Then you have a class of evidentiary arguments—just the ones that are based on the fact that the evidence—there's not only no evidence for God, but the evidence points to the nonexistence of God.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

So, affirmative facts from the physical world you think can be utilized to affirmatively demonstrate the nonexistence of God.

Victor Stenger:

That's right.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Let's talk about this.

Victor Stenger:

Yeah. Well, the point is this. That if this God has such an important role to play in the universe and in human life, then that God should have observable consequences, and you – you know, we could go into some examples, but the basic idea, the general idea first of all, is if you follow the procedure of hypothesis testing that you use in science for any phenomenon, any extraordinary phenomenon that you're trying to test, you follow the same procedures—I'm not asking for anything outside of the normal methodology of science—if you apply these: you make a hypothesis that a God exists who has certain observable consequences, and then you look for those consequences, if you find them you've verified the hypothesis and you have a good reason to believe in God. If you don't find them then that's an argument against God because the God that we're talking about should have produced such phenomena.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Now, there are two ways you can look at that. One, you could look for evidence that could prove God's existence, or you can look for evidence that affirmatively proves that God doesn't exist – certain things that work together that you would expect if God didn't exist.

Victor Stenger:

I think the two of them are basically the same. For example, suppose that you hypothesize a God who answers prayers. Now, that doesn't mean he answers every prayer, but there are billions of prayers being said every day; obviously the leaders of the world do pray a lot; they think if they do, they must think that there's some chance the prayer might do some good, so if you found evidence for such a prayer—that such prayers work—then you would have to believe. But it would have to be pretty specific evidence. I like to use the example of doing very carefully controlled experiments. There are some experiments being done that are good experiments by reputable scientists and reputable institutions such as Harvard and Duke, and Mayo Clinic, where they're looking for the efficacy of prayer as a means to help people heal, help people get better. Suppose they did such experiments—this is hypothetical now, this is not the case—but suppose they did such experiments and they found that Catholic prayers really did help heal the sick, whereas Protestant prayers, Hindu prayers, Muslim prayers, Jewish prayers—didn't work. Now, you might say well, you could still search for a natural explanation for that, but I can't see what possible way we could explain that naturally, and that's—so this would be an example of evidence—scientific evidence—done in a scientific laboratory for the existence of God; God who answers prayers, a particular kind of God—a God who answers prayers. I wouldn't rule out a God who doesn't answer prayers, but at least that particular God would be ruled out—or observed.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

The fundamental assumption I wrestle with in situations like that is can we expect on an a priori basis from fundamental principles that, if there is a God who created the universe and is outside of space and time, and all the other things that God would be, whether that a God is subjected to the same kinds of scientific testing. On the prayer example. There are billions of prayers. We don't have to have more than half of them be answered, you know, frankly, to prove that God exists, you have to have one answered. You have to have one. And if trillions of prayers that have all been – you just have to have one. Obviously a lot of people think they're prayers are answered. You and I might not see the independent evidence for that, but a lot of people do.

Victor Stenger:

And just because that kind of evidence is anecdotal, and you can't rely on anecdotal evidence because you have to, you have to have controlled testing. But that's possible. It's conceivable to do such experiments.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

I mean, I can conceive of the experiments that you're talking about but, but you know, there's a certain—I mean, I don't want to be um, blasphemous, there's some ridiculous quality to them, you know, you pray for people on the left wing of the hospital, but you know, the control group is in the right wing, so you direct your prayers to the left wing, I mean. There are some things that just seem very difficult to subject to the normal statistical scientific double blind kind of studies. It just, it just seems difficult to imagine those studies with any degree of scientific realism.

Victor Stenger:

Well, I don't know. I mean, I've looked at – I mean there were a number of experiments that reported positive effects that you look at and you find they're full of those types of flaws, but the most recent ones that have been done have been done, I think very well. I think they've managed to follow the rules of scientific process very well to make sure that the biases are minimized, and understand what their biases are and these are now published and they show no effect.