Commentaries/Commentaires/Comentários

A SCIENTIFIC PROOF OF THE EXISTENCE OF GOD

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In his most recent article for the Journal of Bahá’í Studies, William S. Hatcher advances the argument that it is scientifically rational to suppose that God exists. The argument proceeds in three steps. First, the author reproduces in summary form the account of scientific method he had previously worked out in “The Science of Religion” 1 and Logic and Logos.2 Second, he reformulates ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s argument from evolution to establish the existence of a hidden “force.” Finally, he equates this “force” with God. I wish to address each part of the argument in turn.

The author’s fundamental thesis vis-à-vis the scientific method is that according to this method, “a proposition may be said to be scientifically proved when we have rendered that proposition considerably more plausible (meaning probably true) than all known, logically possible alternatives” (6). Furthermore, Hatcher adopts Popper’s position that scientific theories are never absolutely verifiable, only falsifiable. It seems to me that Hatcher’s cogent and lucid presentation of his arguments might be further clarified given a slight shift in terminology. The author claims, as he always has, that his perspective implies that scientific truth is relative (6). Two points bear making here. First, the force of what the author seems to be saying might be better captured by saying that scientific knowledge is relative. Second, it would seem that what he means by “relative” is what philosophers of science normally refer to as “fallible,” following Pierce and the pragmatists’ doctrine of fallibilism, which holds that human knowledge must always be held to be open to revision. When epistemologists normally use the word relativity, as when postmodernists such as Lyotard3 are charged with relativism, what is usually being said is that they are questioning the possibility for universally acceptable criteria for truth. They might hold, for example, that hypotheses may be judged relative to the criteria provided by a particular conceptual scheme or world-pictures, but that there are no overarching criteria for judging between those conceptual schemes themselves. The author, however, does not seem to deny that universally acceptable criteria for truth are possible; rather, he is denying that the application of these criteria will produce absolutely certain knowledge. In other words, in this article, he does

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1 I would like to thank William S. Hatcher, Seema Fazel, and Roger Martini for their comments on an earlier draft of this commentary. I am particularly grateful to Professor Hatcher for his stimulating e-mail exchange with me on issues arising from the same.
not seem to deny the possibility of foundational metanarratives for scientific truth, a possibility that seems to be presupposed by Hatcher’s concept of “plausibility.” Hence, I would suggest a shift to the language of fallibilism rather than relativity given the author’s apparent commitments.4

The article’s most intriguing discussion involves the second step of the argument, in which the author reformulates ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s argument from evolution. Essentially, Hatcher appeals to the second law of thermodynamics, which holds that order is improbable, disorder probable. Order, in other words, requires explanation. He wants to argue that it is most plausible to assume that there is a hidden “force” which explains or accounts for the fact of evolution, rather than assuming, implausibly, that evolution, and most specifically the evolution of the human brain, has been the result of a “fortunate coincidence of two random phenomena,” namely, natural selection and random mutations (13, n. 7).

Let us assume that step two of the argument has been successfully carried through and that the author has shown it is scientifically plausible to posit a force, akin to gravity, as providing the explanation for the evolutionary process—and the argument for that conclusion is the strongest part of the article. The third step of the argument involves the issue of whether we are warranted to equate that force with “God.” Even granting step two, does step three of the author’s argument succeed?

In the final section of the article, the author argues for equating the force, initially defined as that which produces evolution (13), with God. What is required to carry the argument through is to show that any force defined as “that which produces evolution” must necessarily also be the same entity that possesses all the divine attributes, i.e., saying “that which produces evolution,” necessarily implies “God,” where by “God” we mean everything we normally mean (i.e., the divine attributes).

His argument begins with the claim that it is reasonable to assume that “a force capable of producing an effect such as the human being is at least as subtle as humans” (14). And, he continues, reminiscent of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s discussion,5 this superior force must be God. Despite its brevity, the argument leading to that conclusion is complex, and we would do well to break it down into its component parts. Hatcher argues along the following lines:

(1) There exists a force that is responsible for the creation of the human being through evolution.
(2) This creator-force must be superior to its creation.

4. The relevance of this point becomes apparent if we consider, for example, how different Nader Safiei’s use of the expression “relativity of truth” is from that of Hatcher (“A Dialogue with Marxism,” Circle of Unity: Baha’i Approaches to Current Social Issues, ed. A. A. Lee, Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1984).
(3) Human beings possess free will and a conscious intellect. 
(4) Therefore, the creator-force that is responsible for the creation of human beings through evolution possesses free will and conscious intellect superior to human beings.
(5) This creator-force (with its superior will and intellect) is God.
(6) Therefore, there exists a God. (14–15)

Now, this argument is deeply problematic. Premise (1) was the conclusion of step two of the argument (which we have granted for the sake of argument). Premise (2) is problematic because of the ambiguity of the term “superior.” Premise (2) would be (analytically) true if by “x is superior to y,” we meant “x is capable of creating y.” On any other aspect of comparison, however, it is not clear why the creator need be superior to the creation; for example, in terms of, say, computational speed, there is no reason a priori why we need assume that a human being would be superior to the computer she has created. Or again, airplanes are vastly superior in flight than are their human creators. (Perhaps there is something special about creating consciousness or will; I will take this up below.) But the true (and limited) construal of (2) that I have given is too limited to lead to conclusion (4). All that could be concluded would be: (4') Therefore, the creator-force that is responsible for the creation of human beings through evolution is capable of producing free will and conscious intellect (and is in that sense superior to human beings). Perhaps we could try to salvage the argument by adding an additional premise:

(1) There exists a force that is responsible for the creation of the human being through evolution.
(2') This creator-force must be capable of creating its creation.
(3) Human beings possess free will and a conscious intellect.
(3a) Free will and conscious intellect in particular are such that they can only be created by one possessing these faculties in superior form.
(4) Therefore, the creator-force that is responsible for the creation of human beings through evolution possesses free will and conscious intellect superior to human beings.
(5) This creator-force (with its superior will and intellect) is God.
(6) Therefore, there exists a God.

The revised argument is more subtle, but nonetheless problematic. We have granted (1), and (2) is analytically true. Let us for the moment grant (3a); i.e., let us assume, for the sake of argument, that the faculties of will and consciousness are such that they can only be created by a superior will/consciousness. Even so, granting (3) may make the argument circular. It is not clear that one can assert the existence of free will, for example, in human beings, or give any comprehensible account of what that assertion means, without the prior premise that God exists; and if it is not possible, then we
cannot prove the existence of God using a premise which already presupposes the conclusion (that God exists).

Now, even if we were to grant (3) and to waive the circularity of the argument, the argument suffers. In that case the argument to (4) would be valid, but the argument to (5) is not, unless by “God” all that we mean is any creator-force whose will/consciousness is superior to human beings. This gets the logical arrow backwards: it is true that “God” implies, by definition, a will/consciousness superior to human will/consciousness; but it is false that a will/consciousness superior to humans implies God. It might just point to smart aliens. The point is that God is not just any will/consciousness that is superior to humans; it is infinitely superior, and it is singular on the monotheist account. And if we apply Occam’s razor, then having no reason to complicate the nature of the “force” the author’s argument requires, means that we should not complicate it—how much less are we warranted to posit a God, with all the complexity which that entails. What, in any event, is the argument in support of the additional premise (3a) in the first place?

In conclusion, then, it seems to me that Hatcher’s argument does not succeed in reaching the intended conclusion (6) that God exists, and certainly not if by God we intend to indicate all of God’s names and attributes—the All-Merciful, the All-Powerful, the All-Knowing, and so on. At most (if we grant step two of his argument), he has shown that something exists that produces evolution. Though I shall not argue for the position here, I believe that the concept of God cannot play an epistemological role similar to that of other theoretical concepts (such as gravity) posited in scientific theory to aid explanation—“God-reliant” explanations involve a different sort of language game than “God-independent” explanations. I further believe that it may be impossible for philosophical analysis to reach the author’s conclusion that God exists without reference to the particularity of a Manifestation of God and that Manifestation’s concrete historical revelation.

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6. For example, it is not that sometimes objects fall because of gravity, while sometimes they fall because it was God’s Will; rather, it is that the force of gravity which “causes” the objects to fall is itself an “expression” of that Will (Bahá’u’lláh, Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Áqdas, trans. H. Taherzadeh et al., comp. Research Dept. of the Universal House of Justice, rev. ed. [Wilmette, Ill: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1988] 142). To cite the divine Will as an explanation for events is not to engage in the same kind of explanatory activity as when we cite gravity, as Hatcher seems to assume.