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Evidence for the Existence of God

In plain language · a series in eight chapters

Introduction: what is a “proof” anyway?

Chapter 1 of 8

In brief:

Nothing can be proved with absolute certainty, in any field. Knowledge has never depended on proof: in every field, we rely on what reason “sees.” So the question about God is not “is it proved?” but “is it reasonable?” Along the way: Anselm’s famous argument, and why it is not enough.

Introduction: what is a “proof” anyway?

Almost everyone who thinks about faith runs, sooner or later, into one demand: “Prove to me that God exists.” And whoever fails to prove it concludes that faith is a matter of feeling, or a “leap” with no basis. It is worth stopping here, because this demand hides an error, and a fundamental one.

The demand “prove it” rests on two assumptions that are usually not said out loud. The first: whatever cannot be proved is a subjective matter, “to each his own truth,” and not a fact. The second: nothing can really be proved. The second assumption is true. Every proof, even in mathematics, starts from basic assumptions that were themselves never proved. And every general scientific law is a generalization: a few thousand cases were checked, and a conclusion was drawn about all the cases that were not checked. There is no way to prove that the generalization is correct. People usually fail to notice what follows from this. If you also accept the first assumption, then not only faith is “a subjective matter,” but science too, and so is the fact that the sun will rise tomorrow.

Whoever understands this stands before three paths, and we will discuss them shortly. But we can already say which path we will take: not to give up the demand to think, and not to demand a certainty that exists in no field. The right question about God is not “is it proved?”, since nothing is proved, but “is it reasonable, by the same common sense with which we know everything else?”

Faith is a claim about the world, not a feeling

Before we set out, one thing must be clarified, because many people get it confused. Faith is not a feeling. When a person says “God exists,” he is not reporting what he feels; he is claiming something about the world, like someone who says “there is water on Mars.” It is a claim that can be true or false. How do we know it is not just a feeling? Because people do not argue about feelings. If I like pizza and you do not, there is no dispute between us. But between a believer and an atheist (someone who says there is no God) there is a real argument. And a real argument is a sign that both are talking about the world, not about themselves.

This is not to say that religious feeling does not exist or is undesirable. The claim is only that it must be distinguished from faith. Fear of a tiger is not a tiger. The fear may be a sign that a tiger is nearby, and it may be

the result of my having seen a tiger. But it is not the tiger itself. So too with religious feeling: it can lead to faith, and it can flow from it. But it is not faith.

Hence also the answer to a popular claim: “There are no atheists in foxholes.” That is, in times of danger everyone prays, so everyone secretly believes. Atheists answer with the opposite claim: this proves that faith is, at bottom, nothing but fear. The truth is that neither claim is worth much. The phenomenon fits both explanations, and therefore proves nothing. And in general, explaining why someone believes (“because of his upbringing,” “because of fear”) or why someone does not believe (“because of a crisis,” “because it is convenient”) is not an argument. It is psychology. The only question is whether the claim is true.

There are also believers who say: “My faith is an inner experience, and it does not have to answer questions of logic.” That is a comfortable position, but we need to check what it says. If faith is only an experience, and not a claim about the world, it is really atheism with a religious feeling. And if it does claim that God exists, there is no exemption from facing the objections. The same is true of someone who came to faith through a mystical experience. There is a difference between how I arrived at an idea and whether the idea is true. Even an idea that came in a dream must pass the test.

Intuition is a way of knowing

The second point: there is a way of knowing things even without proof. It is called intuition, and it can be described as “seeing with the eyes of the mind.” A gifted mathematician sometimes “sees” that the solution is 7, even before he has checked. Take an example from life. You are sure that everything has a cause. If a cup breaks, someone or something broke it. Now try to prove that. You will say: “That is how it always is.” But you have seen only a few thousand cases in your life, and you are sure it holds in the billions of cases you have not seen. Where does the confidence come from? Not from the eyes, since you have not seen everything. And not from a proof, since there is none. It comes from reason itself. David Hume, a Scottish philosopher who lived about 250 years ago, was even more precise. Even in the cases you did see, what did you actually see? You saw A, and then you saw B. You saw the ball hit the window, and then the window break. A thousand times. But the “causing” itself, the link between A and B, you never saw. There is no such thing as seeing a “cause.” We only see that one thing comes after another. And the link between them is added by reason. That is intuition. And you rely on it completely, and rightly so. What is the difference between intuition and feeling? About a feeling there is no argument. About an intuition there is an argument, and one side is right. One can check whether 7 really is the solution.

Now let us ask: what happens to someone who decides not to rely on anything that has not been proved? He is left with nothing. Take mathematics, the most “secure” field. Every proof in it starts from a few basic assumptions. In geometry, for instance, we assume that “through two points passes exactly one straight line.” No one has proved these assumptions. They simply seem true to us. If we do not rely on them, there is no mathematics. And we have already seen that science works the same way: the move from “a few thousand cases checked” to “always” is a leap that reason makes, without proof. Without that leap, there is no science.

In other words: both the mathematician and the scientist rely, without proof, on what their reason “sees.” And whoever relies on his reason in mathematics and in science has no reason to disqualify it precisely when we come to the question of God. Here something also becomes clear about the word “faith.” People say: “I don’t

know, I only believe.” But by this test, “the sun will rise tomorrow” is also “only a belief.” Faith is not the opposite of knowledge. It is a kind of knowledge: reasonable knowledge, without absolute proof, like most of what we know.

What does each field rest on?

It is worth pausing on this point, because it seems strange at first sight, and without it everything that follows seems weak. Is it really true that nothing is proved? Here is a short tour of the fields of knowledge.

Let us start with logic itself. The most basic rule of thinking is that something cannot be both true and false at the same time. Try to prove this rule. Any proof you offer will use it, because without this rule the word “proof” has no meaning at all. In other words, the foundation of all thinking is something that cannot be proved, and yet all of us are completely sure of it.

Mathematics, as we have seen, starts from basic assumptions. Sometimes one assumption can be proved from others, but then the others remain unproved. In the end, something always remains that we simply accept. And here is a point worth remembering: already in antiquity, philosophers showed that every attempt to prove everything has only three possible outcomes. Either the proof goes back without end, and then it has no beginning. Or it goes around in a circle, and in the end assumes what it wanted to prove. Or it stops at an unproved assumption. There is no fourth option. All the knowledge we have stops, in the end, at something that was not proved.

Science rests on more assumptions of this kind than people usually think. It assumes that the senses can be trusted, and no one has proved that. It assumes that the laws of nature are constant, that what was true yesterday is true today, and that a law tested here holds in another galaxy too. And that cannot be proved without first assuming it. It assumes that every phenomenon has a cause, and that, as we have seen, no one has seen with his eyes. And it assumes that the simple explanation is preferable to the complicated one, without any proof that the world “prefers” simplicity. Without these assumptions there is no science, and none of them is proved.

History rests entirely on testimony: on what people told and wrote. None of us saw the destruction of the Second Temple, nor the First World War. We rely on those who told. That is an assumption, not a proof. And the law assumes that witnesses can be believed, and that what seems probable is probably also what happened.

Everyday life too. You are sure that there is a world outside your thoughts, and that the people around you are people and not a dream. Try to prove it. Philosophers tried for centuries, and failed. And yet no sane person doubts it.

The conclusion is not that “nothing can be known.” The opposite. The conclusion is that knowledge never depended on proof. In every field, we know things because they seem true to common sense, and we go on from there. And whoever demands of faith in God precisely what he demands of no other field is not exercising judgment. He is exercising prejudice.

Three paths

Let us now return to the two assumptions from the opening: “what is not proved is not a fact,” and “nothing can be proved.” Whoever understands them stands before three paths.

The first path is skepticism: accept both assumptions. If nothing is proved, and only what is proved is admissible, then no claim is admissible, and nothing can be known. The second path is fundamentalism: accept the first assumption, and flee from the second. That is, give up on reason and adopt certainties that come “from above,” in ways beyond reason. An idea that arrived this way is not exposed to criticism, and that is exactly what makes it attractive. It is important to see that these two opposites, the skeptic and the fundamentalist, have a common root: both identify truth with certainty. In the eyes of both, only what is proved with certainty can count as true.

The third path is to give up precisely the first assumption. True, there is no way to prove anything. But it is not true that an unproved claim is inadmissible. It is enough that a claim is reasonable, by common sense, in order to accept it. This is the only path that allows us both to think and to know, and it is the path we all take in every other field. On this path, faith in God is not certain either, exactly like every other claim about the world. It is a claim built by human reason, and therefore exposed to all its limitations. Hence also a rule of honesty: the same reason that built the faith can also criticize it, qualify it, and even reject it. Someone who says “let us examine,” but knows in advance that he will accept no other conclusion, is not examining. He is a fundamentalist in disguise.

There is also an educational lesson here. An education that identifies faith with certainty does harm: someone raised on it, who one day discovers that he has no certainty, concludes that he no longer believes. That is a mistake. Faith without certainty is the only faith there is.

And what about the question “how can one live like this, and even give one’s life, without certainty?” It has two answers. The first: even if this understanding creates a difficulty, the difficulty does not change the truth. If wisdom creates problems, we deal with the problems; we do not strive to be fools. The second: it is not true that only certainty can justify self-sacrifice. A soldier who gives his life in battle is not convinced with absolute certainty that he is right, and if he is convinced that way, he is naive. A person who understands his limits functions within uncertainty. Think of the law of the “pursuer”: you see a man chasing someone in order to kill him, and you are permitted to kill the pursuer in order to save the pursued. Do you know with certainty what is going on? Perhaps some detail is hidden from you. Suppose there is a 90% chance that he really is a pursuer, and a 10% chance that he is not. If you refrain from acting because of the 10%, you take a 90% risk that the pursued will die. And yet one must decide, and decide according to the more probable possibility. So it is with every moral decision. The more probable possibility is the right basis for a decision, even when there is no certainty. True, someone who knows that there is no certainty in anything will find it harder, in practice, to live out his values. But that is a practical problem, to be dealt with on its own terms, and not a reason to change what is true.

The argument “from the definition,” and why it is not enough

Before we get to the arguments that start from the world, it is worth knowing a famous argument that tries to prove that God exists without looking at the world at all, from his definition alone. It was formulated by Anselm, a monk and theologian who lived in England about a thousand years ago, and it goes like this: God is “that than which nothing greater can be thought.” If he existed only in the imagination, then a God who really exists would be greater than him. But we said that nothing is greater than him. Therefore he must really exist. In another formulation: “a God who does not exist” is a contradiction, like “a round triangle.”

The argument is much cleverer than people usually think, and most of the famous criticisms of it do not really bring it down. One of them, by a contemporary monk named Gaunilo, goes like this: let us define “the most perfect island that can be thought of.” An island that really exists is more perfect than an island that exists only in the imagination. Therefore, by the same logic, the perfect island must exist. And that is of course ridiculous. If the argument “proves” the existence of such an island, something in it must be broken. Another, by the German philosopher Immanuel Kant, says that existence is not a property: a hundred real shekels and a hundred imaginary shekels are exactly the same sum; existence adds nothing to them. Therefore, by this criticism, “a God who exists” is not greater than “God” either. Both are possible, but not decisive. They can be answered.¹

And yet the argument has a hole. The feeling that “this thing really exists” we know only from things we have met in reality. When I think of “a God who really exists,” I am really only saying words. I do not actually experience him as existing. That is why the step “a God who really exists is greater” does not work: someone who has no perception of God as existing cannot even begin the argument. One might object: it is possible to stimulate the brain artificially and create in it the sensation that something exists. But an artificial sensation is precisely a state in which reason does not reflect reality, and from it nothing can be inferred about the world. So the argument does not stand on its own. In this sense Kant was right: existence cannot be proved from a definition alone. But he was right not because of the general rule he proclaimed, but because of this particular flaw. The argument is beautiful, and it may have value when joined to other arguments, but to reach God one must start from the world itself.

1. **On the two criticisms of Anselm.** To Gaunilo’s criticism (the perfect island) there is an answer: existence is a “perfection” only in God, who is defined as perfect in all perfections. For an island, existence is not necessarily a merit. Moreover, “the perfect island” is measured only against other islands, and perhaps there are no such islands at all. Anselm himself answered that the argument fits God alone. That answer is not entirely convincing, but the criticism is not decisive either. To Kant’s criticism (existence is not a property) there are two answers. The first: Kant compares a concept to the thing itself in reality, and there he is right: a hundred real shekels and a hundred imaginary shekels are the same sum. But Anselm compares two concepts within the mind: the concept “God” versus the concept “the existing God,” that is, God whom I perceive as existing. And between these there is indeed a difference. The second: Anselm goes on to prove that God exists necessarily, that is, that he cannot fail to exist, and necessary existence is already a better candidate to count as a property. Kant’s criticism is therefore possible, but not necessary, and the question remains open.

First argument: why is there anything at all?

Chapter 2 of 8

In brief:

Everything we know has a cause. If we go back along the chain of causes, we must reach a first cause that has no cause; otherwise there is no explanation at all. That first cause is God. And the answers to “who created God?”, “particles come from nothing,” and “the universe just is.”

Imagine you are walking in the desert, and suddenly you find a glass ball on the sand. You will immediately ask yourself: who made it? How did it get here? And if someone tells you “it is just there, for no reason,” you will think he is making fun of you. It is clear to you that everything has a cause.

Now think of the whole universe as that glass ball. Why should it, of all things, have no cause?

Here immediately comes the question every child asks: if everything has a cause, then the cause of the universe also has a cause, and that one another, and so on without end. And if we say that God is the cause, who created God? That is an excellent question, and it is precisely the one that leads to the answer.

About a thousand years ago lived a Muslim philosopher named Avicenna (Ibn Sina), who also influenced Maimonides. He distinguished between two kinds of things. There are “possible” things: they can exist, and they can also not exist. A table, a person, a star. Such things need a cause. And there is a “necessary” thing: a thing that cannot fail to exist. It needs no cause, because it did not “happen.” It simply is.

Now the argument builds itself. Everything we know is of the “possible” kind, and therefore has a cause. If the cause too is of this kind, it has a cause, and so on. But a chain without end is not an explanation. There is a well-known story about a man who claimed that the world rests on the back of a giant turtle. He was asked: “And what does the turtle stand on?” — “On another turtle.” “And that one?” — “It’s turtles all the way down!” Everyone understands that this is not an explanation, but an evasion of explanation. Reuven slaps Shimon. “Why?” — “My hand moved.” “And why did it move?” — “The muscle activated it.” “And what activated the muscle?” — “An electric current”... Whoever retreats like this without end explains nothing. An explanation exists only when we reach the end of the chain. Therefore the chain must begin with something “necessary,” which has no cause. That is what we call God.

And what about the question “who created God?” Now it is no longer hard. The argument never said that everything has a cause. It said that everything of the kind we know has a cause. God is not of that kind. This is not an evasion. It is exactly the conclusion. The question “who created God?” is really part of the proof: precisely because one cannot go on like this without end, there must be something that is not of the familiar kind.

Some say: “But God is infinite and eternal, so you have brought infinity in through the back door.” Not necessarily. The argument proves only that there is a first cause. It does not say of it that it is infinite. That is already a matter for the religious traditions. And the main point: the problem with the infinite chain is the

evasion. A chain that has a beginning is a complete explanation, even if the beginning is something we do not fully understand. As Sherlock Holmes said: when you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains is the truth, however strange it may be.

One can of course try to challenge the assumption itself: perhaps not everything has a cause? After all, no one has seen this rule with his eyes. The philosopher David Hume showed 250 years ago that we did not learn the principle of causality from experience. It is an assumption of reason. But try living without it. And as we saw in the introduction, it is an intuition that all of us rely on at every moment. Whoever gives it up only in order not to reach God gives up more than he thinks.

Some bring science itself here: in the physics of the very small, quantum theory, we see particles that suddenly appear in empty space, from nothing. But they do not appear “just like that.” They always appear in balanced pairs, a particle and an “antiparticle,” so that the total charge and energy do not change. It is a coordinated process, according to precise laws. And that “empty space” is not really empty: it contains laws and energy. An ancient Greek philosopher named Anaximander described this nicely: in the beginning there was “matter without form,” which split into opposites, hot and cold, positive and negative, that balance each other. The vacuum of modern physics is like that too. The question merely returns, in another place: where did the laws come from?

There is also a shorter and sharper answer, from Bertrand Russell: “The universe just is, and that’s all.” That is, the universe is a fact without an explanation, and there is no point asking why. But “a fact without an explanation” is not an explanation. It is an admission that there is no explanation. And to someone who says “God too is a fact without an explanation,” the answer has already been given: the difference is that the universe is made of things that can fail to exist, and therefore demands an explanation, whereas the first cause is a thing that cannot fail to exist. To say that the universe “just is” is to attribute to the universe exactly the property that the argument attributes to God, without any justification.

And perhaps the universe itself is the “necessary” thing, which always existed? First of all, science itself does not think so. According to the Big Bang theory, which has strong evidence behind it, the universe came into being about 14 billion years ago. But even without science, the proposal is hard to accept. The universe is made entirely of “possible” things, each of which needs a cause. A heap of things each of which needs a cause needs a cause too. And if someone claims that the universe is “more” than the sum of its parts, that there is something in it that connects and sustains everything, like a soul in a body, then that something is exactly what we call God. The philosopher Baruch Spinoza said “God is nature.” If the meaning is that God is just another name for matter, that is atheism in disguise. And if the meaning is that there is a “soul” in the universe that unifies it, that is exactly what we are saying.

And even if the universe had existed forever, we would still need to explain why it exists and why it is as it is. There is a difference between a “cause” and a “reason.” The cause of there being a table in the room is that a carpenter built it. The reason it is in the room is that we need something to eat on. Even a thing that has always existed may have no “cause,” and yet it must have a “reason”: why it exists, and why precisely like this. In that case God is not the one who created the universe at a certain moment, but the one who sustains it at every moment, like a soul that keeps the body alive all the time.

One more answer remains, one that atheists like: “God is not an explanation. You know nothing about him.” But the argument does not come to explain how the world came into being. It only shows that there is a cause. When you see footprints in the sand, you conclude that someone passed here, even without knowing anything about him. An argument is judged by whether the conclusion follows from the premises, and not by how much it explains.

It must be said honestly what this argument proves and what it does not. It proves that there is a “first cause.” It does not say that it is wise, good or infinite. It also leaves open the possibility that the first cause is some kind of blind “machine.” The following arguments will close that. But this too is no small beginning: the world does not rest on turtles.

Second argument: who wrote the laws?

Chapter 3 of 8

In brief:

The world runs according to precise laws, and only thanks to them can life exist. Even if science explains everything, the question remains: where do the laws come from? And along the way: why not build on the “God of the gaps,” what the monkey experiment really shows, what chance does, and why “infinitely many universes” only shifts the question.

Back to the desert. This time you find on the sand not a glass ball, but a sophisticated watch. Here you no longer ask only “where did it come from?” It is immediately clear to you that someone designed it. Something so complex and precise does not come into being by itself. Our Sages formulated this about two thousand years ago, when a heretic asked Rabbi Akiva who created the world, and he answered: just as a house testifies to the builder, so the world testifies to the one who created it.

David Hume already objected to the parable of the watch. He argued: about watches we know from experience that human beings make them. About the universe and about living creatures we have no such experience, and so no comparison can be made. But this claim does not hold. Imagine that the one who finds the watch in the sand is a tribesman who has never seen how watches are made. Will he conclude that the watch came into being by chance? Certainly not. The very precise and purposeful structure of the watch testifies to design, even without knowing who designed it and how. And if we found a technological object on Mars, it would be clear to us at once that an intelligent being made it, even though we have never seen how such things are made. There is also a lesson here from experience itself: we know complex creations that we know were designed, and complex creations that we do not know how they came to be. But we do not know even one complex creation that we know for certain came into being without design.

Our world is far more like a watch than like a glass ball. It is orderly, and it runs according to astonishingly precise laws. The previous argument asked why the world exists. This argument asks why it is like this: orderly, complex, coordinated. And therefore, by the way, it works even if the world had always existed. Even an eternal world needs an explanation for the order within it.

The mistake to beware of

Precisely here one must beware of a common mistake, into which many believers fall. They say: “Science does not yet know how to explain how life came into being, a sign that God did it.” This is called the “God of the gaps,” and one should not build on it. What science does not know today, it may know tomorrow. A gap in knowledge is a reason to investigate, not a reason to draw conclusions about God. A good argument must stand even if science succeeds in explaining everything. So let us assume, for the sake of discussion, that science really will explain everything: the origin of life, its development, everything. The argument stands even then.

There is also a “scientific” version of the argument, which uses a well-known physical law: in a closed system, disorder always increases. A flowerpot that falls shatters, but shards do not reassemble themselves into a pot. So how does order arise? Here too one must be careful. If this were a genuinely scientific proof, God would be part of physics, and all physicists would be believers. And there is a further reason. The second law speaks of the total disorder in a system, and so there is nothing to prevent order from increasing in one area at the expense of disorder in another. One can build houses in one area by quarrying stones in another: in the area of the houses order increases, in the quarry it decreases, and the law is not violated. So the law itself is not really needed for the argument. What is needed is only the simple intuition behind it: a complex thing does not come into being by itself. And that was understood long before there was thermodynamics.

The right argument: from the laws

To understand the argument, one needs to know one concept: evolution. This is the process by which, according to science, living creatures changed gradually over millions of years, from simple creatures up to human beings. The process works like this: in every generation there are small random changes, and whoever the change helped to survive reproduces more. Many think that if evolution is true, there is no further need for God.

To understand why this is not so, let us start from an old claim of believers: a monkey tapping randomly on a keyboard will never write the sentence “to be or not to be.” The chance of that is nil. So too, said the believers, a complex living creature will not come into being by chance.

The scientific magazine *Scientific American* published a reply in the form of a computer experiment. The computer types letters at random, exactly like the monkey. But there is one difference: whenever a correct letter happens to come out, it is “locked” in place and no longer changes. The result: the complete sentence is written within minutes. The magazine’s message: this is how evolution works too. A useful random change gets “locked in,” because whoever has it survives and passes it on. And therefore there is no need for a designer.

But think for a moment about what the experiment actually showed. The computer succeeded only because someone wrote it a rule: “lock every correct letter.” Without the rule, the monkey would have typed forever. In other words, the experiment did not show that randomness alone creates order. It showed that randomness creates order only when there is a rule that directs it. And who wrote the rule? So too in nature. Evolution works, but only thanks to laws of nature that allow it to work, laws that turn something utterly improbable into something that happens. Seen this way, evolution does not weaken the argument but strengthens it: a process that reaches its target again and again is precisely what looks directed.

And who wrote the laws? Imagine a factory that works in perfect coordination. Someone says: “There is no need for a manager here; on the wall hang rules that tell every worker what to do.” That is true, but the question has not disappeared. It has only moved one step back: who wrote the rules on the wall, and who makes sure they are kept? So too a washing machine: it works according to laws, and that is exactly what shows that someone designed it.

Here one must distinguish between two questions. The question “how did the process happen?” is a scientific question, within the laws, and science answers it. The question “where do the laws come from?” is a different

question, outside the laws, and science does not answer it at all. And if someone says “the laws simply always existed,” he has not answered: eternal laws also need an explanation. Why precisely these laws, and not others?

Science itself sharpens the question. The laws of physics contain constant numbers, for example how strong the force of gravity is. There is no logical reason for them to be precisely as they are. And scientists have discovered that if they were different even slightly, stars, planets and life could not exist. This is called “fine-tuning,” and it demands an explanation.

“But it’s chance”

The most common answer is that there is randomness in evolution, and so there is no need for a guiding hand. It is worth thinking for a moment about what “chance” even is. When a die is thrown, the result looks random. But in fact it is entirely determined by the laws of physics. It is simply hard for us to calculate. There may be “genuine” randomness in the world of the very small, but even that is disputed.

And the main point: randomness too operates within a framework, and the framework is what decides. Take a biased coin, whose chance of landing on “heads” is 70 percent. Every single toss is random, and one cannot know in advance what will come out. But after a million tosses, “heads” will have come out about 700,000 times. Who determined the overall result? Not chance, but the coin. The biologist Stephen Jay Gould gave the parable of a drunk walking along a narrow sidewalk. On one side a wall, on the other a ditch. Every step he takes is entirely random. But when he bumps into the wall he is pushed back, and so in the end he will always fall into the ditch. The randomness is real, but the end is known in advance, because the wall and the ditch determine it. So too in evolution. And if a “random” process reaches a particular target again and again, that actually strengthens the impression that there is intention.

“Every outcome is rare”

There is a cleverer answer, which must be understood properly. It says: “After something has happened, there is no point talking about ‘how unlikely it was.’ Every outcome of a lottery is equally rare, and yet someone always wins. So too the universe: any universe that came into being would look ‘special’ to whoever lived in it.”

The answer to this is simple. True, every lottery ticket is equally rare. But if one person wins the lottery a hundred times in a row, no one will say “that too is as rare as any other outcome.” Everyone will understand that someone rigged the draw. The same with a die that lands on 6 a hundred times in a row. Why? Because there are outcomes that are special in advance, and not only “special because they came out.” A hundred wins in a row is such an outcome.

And our universe is such an outcome, for three reasons. First, a world with life is genuinely rare. Most possible systems of laws would have created nothing, not even stars. And even in our universe, with all its billions of stars, only one star is known to have life on it. Second, “order” is not a matter of taste. Physicists know how to measure how ordered a system is, just as one measures temperature. A heap of sand is a disordered system, and a living cell is a very ordered system, and this is measured in numbers. Third, the order in the universe does not

disappear. It has been stable and developing for billions of years. On a computer one can create “complex” structures by chance, but they fall apart at once.

Incidentally, science itself thinks exactly this way. There is a large scientific project called SETI, which searches for intelligent life in space. How will it recognize it? It listens to radio signals from space, and looks in them for an order that nature does not produce: for instance, a transmission on a narrow, constant frequency, since natural sources in space transmit on broad, disordered frequencies. If such a signal arrives, the scientists will announce: there is someone intelligent out there. In other words, from order they infer intelligence. And if so for a radio signal, why not for the whole universe?

There is another atheist answer, and it sounds strong: “You say that a complex thing testifies to a maker. But a snowflake is an astonishingly complex and precise structure, and it forms by itself, from water vapor that freezes. And a baby, the most complex creature we know, forms by itself, from a single cell. No one ‘builds’ them. A sign that complexity does not testify to a maker.” That is a correct answer to someone who speaks of complexity alone. But notice how the snowflake forms. It forms because the laws of physics determine that water molecules freeze in precisely this shape. And the baby forms because the laws of biology run a complete program written in the first cell. They form “by themselves” only in the sense that no human being built them. But they form thanks to laws, and without the laws there would be no snowflake and no baby. In other words, these examples do not show that complexity arises from nothing. They show that complexity arises thanks to laws, and that is our question again: where do the laws come from?

“We wouldn’t be here to ask”

Another common answer is called the “anthropic principle”: if the world were not suited to life, we would not be here to ask. So there is nothing to wonder at. The physicist Stephen Hawking explained the principle with a parable: a man stands before a firing squad of skilled marksmen, they all miss, and he remains alive. According to Hawking, he should not be surprised, because if they had hit him, he would not be here to be surprised. But think where this leads. By this principle, no strange coincidence by which I was saved should surprise me. But if exactly the same coincidence happened to someone else, I am allowed to be surprised. That is of course absurd. The survivor must ask, exactly like any bystander, why all the marksmen missed. The fact that he remained alive does not explain it.

Then comes the sophisticated version: “There are infinitely many universes, and only in ours did it come out right.” If there had been a million executions and one failed, there would really be no wonder. But no one has seen another universe, and there is no way to check whether one exists. It is true that there are models in physics that propose multiple universes, but they are hypotheses, not observations. And the main point: even if there is a “universe generator” that produces universes without end, it itself works according to laws. Who wrote them? The question merely moves one stage back, exactly as in the parable of the factory. Atheists like to quote the philosopher Bertrand Russell, who said: if someone claims that there is a small teapot orbiting in space, and it cannot be seen, we will not believe him, and there is no need to prove that it does not exist. So too, he said, with God. But for the teapot there is no evidence at all, and for God there is: this orderly world. And it is precisely the “infinitely many universes” that are the real teapot. No one has seen them, they cannot be seen, and yet they are assumed, only in order not to reach God.

“Who designed God?”

This question is presented by Richard Dawkins, the famous atheist biologist, as his decisive answer: if complexity demands a designer, then God is more complex than all his creation, and so who designed him? Here one must understand how an explanation works. An explanation can be good even if it does not explain itself. If a sophisticated device were found on Mars, we would understand at once that intelligent beings built it, even without any idea who created them. The Big Bang theory explains well what scientists see in their telescopes, even if no one knows what caused the Big Bang itself. An explanation can be successful even if it does not explain everything. And there is a further mistake here. Dawkins assumes that God is “complex,” and so needs a designer. But long before Dawkins, philosophers and theologians argued that God is not complex at all, but simple in the highest degree. The rule “a complex thing demands a designer” is learned from the material creations we know. There is no reason to apply it to one who is neither material nor complex.

“God is not an explanation”

The physicist Elia Leibowitz argued: “A good explanation explains the unfamiliar by means of the familiar. But you explain the familiar, the world, by means of the unfamiliar, God. That is not an explanation.” The answer: Isaac Newton, the English scientist who discovered the law of gravity, also never saw a “force of attraction.” He saw that objects fall and that there are tides, and he proposed a force that no one knew, in order to explain this. It is exactly the same way of thinking. This is how great discoveries are born: not by explaining the new by means of the old, but by proposing something new that explains what we see. The only difference is that the claim about God cannot be tested by experiment, and so it is not “science.” But the form of thinking is identical.

It is worth adding a distinction here. A story: a young man fell ill with jaundice. Someone brought a “folk healer,” who placed pigeons on his body, and the next day the jaundice was gone. The parents, educated people, scoffed: “Nonsense, there is no medical explanation for it.” But notice what they did. There was a fact, which happened before their eyes, and they rejected it.² Why? Not because it did not happen, but because they had no way to explain it. A rational person does the opposite: he accepts a fact reported from a reliable source, even when it has no explanation, and then looks for an explanation. Whoever rejects every fact that does not fit his view is not rational but dogmatic, even if he calls himself a “man of science.” And that is exactly what someone does who says: “I will not conclude that God exists, because that is not scientific.” The argument shows him something, and he rejects it not because of a flaw in the argument, but because of a preconception.

What the argument proves, and what it does not

It must also be said honestly what this argument does not prove. Some atheists mock: “Why God, of all things? Maybe a flying spaghetti monster? And why one and not a thousand?” They are right about one thing: the argument proves only that there is at least one intelligent agent, powerful enough to create such a world. It says nothing more about him: no commandments, no revelation, no unity. This is the “God of the philosophers,” not yet the God of the Torah. The continuation has to be built.

And some say: “So the laws themselves are the first cause.” But laws are not things that act. They are a description of how things act. And if someone insists that the laws are an intelligent entity that runs the world, he has really said “God” in other words.

And some also say: “Better to remain in wonder and not decide.” But there are only two possibilities here: either there is an agent, or the complex world came into being by itself. The chance of the second possibility is minuscule. So “staying in the middle” is not a neutral position. It is a choice of the less probable possibility.

This argument completes the first one. The first argument left two questions open: perhaps the first cause is just a blind “machine”? And perhaps the world always existed? The second argument closes both. Whoever wrote such precise laws is intelligent. And an orderly world, even if it is eternal, needs an intelligent explanation.

2. **On the jaundice story.** There is no claim here that this cure “works” scientifically. Perhaps the jaundice would have passed anyway, and perhaps the method is nonsense. The point is different: the attitude toward a reported fact. Whoever rejects it in advance, without checking, only because he has no explanation, is not behaving as a man of science, but as someone who knows in advance what is possible and what is not.

Third argument: why can we trust our reason?

Chapter 4 of 8

In brief:

One can also think “backwards”: from what I already accept, to what it implies. We all rely on our eyes and our reason to understand the world. But if they were formed by a blind process, there is no reason to trust them. Whoever trusts them assumes, without noticing, that someone intelligent built them.

Before we go on: two directions of thought

So far we have gone in one direction: from premises to a conclusion. But one can also think in the opposite direction. Clouds cause rain; that is the usual direction. But if I see that it is raining, I can conclude that there are clouds, even without lifting my head. That is the second direction: from what I already accept, to what it implies.

There is a well-known joke: “The philosopher starts from premises and arrives at conclusions. The theologian starts from the conclusions and looks for premises.” There is something true in it, and something entirely legitimate. Logically, “if A then B” is equivalent to “if not B, then not A.” If it rains there are clouds, and therefore if there are no clouds, it is not raining. Both directions are equally valid. The difference lies only in what I already know.

It is important to stress what this is not. It is not “believing because it is convenient.” An argument of the second kind does not choose premises because they are pleasant. It only reveals what I already believe in practice, without noticing. Incidentally, this is how science works too: from the falling of objects we infer that there is a force of gravity. That is exactly the second direction, from the facts to what explains them.

The next two arguments are of this kind, and that is precisely why they are especially strong. They do not tell you “believe.” They say: “Look at what you already believe, and at what it implies.”

Third argument: why can we trust our reason?

The American philosopher Richard Taylor proposed a parable. You are traveling by train and see on a hillside white stones arranged in the words “Welcome to Scotland.” In theory, it is possible that they rolled into that arrangement by chance over hundreds of years. But if you rely on the sign and say “I have arrived in Scotland,” you are already assuming that someone arranged them. You cannot both rely on the sign and think it came about by chance. That is a contradiction.

Our eyes and our reason are “the sign.” We rely on them to know the world, and in science even to understand it in depth, from tiny particles to galaxies. And now the second parable. Give a monkey a pile of television parts, and let it connect them however it likes. The chance that a working device will come out is almost zero. And if

our brain was formed “by a monkey,” that is, by an entirely blind process, why, really, trust it? This is not skepticism for its own sake. It is a direct conclusion from the assumption that there is no God.

Notice what has happened here. In the previous argument, the atheist was forced to claim that complexity can arise by chance. Now he is caught in a vise: if so, his eyes and his reason also arose by chance, and he may not trust them. Not even his own arguments.

The wonder of the fit

This wonder is greater than it seems at first sight. How is our reason, born here on Earth, able to understand the universe at all? Great philosophers wrestled with this for centuries. David Hume showed that we do not learn the laws of nature from observation alone: we saw a few individual cases, and it is reason that generalizes a law from them. Immanuel Kant showed that we know things about the world through thinking too, and not only through the senses. But why should our thinking fit the world? The philosopher Hugo Bergmann, one of the founders of the Hebrew University, surveyed all the explanations proposed for this “miracle,” and found that all of them failed.

The wonder sharpens in mathematics. Mathematicians sometimes invent whole fields “in their heads,” with no connection to the world. And years later it turns out that they describe the laws of nature exactly. James Jeans, an important British physicist and astronomer of the early twentieth century, said of this: “The universe appears to have been designed by a mathematician.” And so too a principle that scientists use all the time: when there are several possible explanations, the simplest is usually the right one. When the car will not start, the mechanic checks the battery first, and does not assume three breakdowns that happened at once. And usually he is right. But why should the world “prefer” simple explanations? There is no explanation for this, unless someone built the world and reason so that they fit each other.

The answers

The first answer: “I do not claim that the senses are reliable. I only behave as if they were, because it works.” That is a possible escape, but a costly one. Whoever says this must admit that what he sees with his eyes is not knowledge either, but a “game” he plays. And above all, the answer does not explain the most important fact: that science succeeds. Planes fly, medicines heal, and predictions come true. If the senses and reason were only “as if,” why would it work?

The accepted answer: “Evolution selected good eyes, because they help survival.” It has several problems. The first is a circle: we discovered evolution with the help of our eyes and our reason. It cannot be used to prove that they can be trusted. It is like asking a person “can you be trusted?” and being convinced because he answered “yes.” Darwin himself relied on his eyes before he developed his theory, and people before Darwin relied on their eyes no less than we do.

And there is a further point here. Survival requires useful beliefs, not true beliefs. An animal that flees from every rustle, even when there is no predator there, will survive better than one that first checks whether it is true. In other words, evolution “selects” what helps survival, even when it is false. The second problem is the

ant. To survive, one does not need to understand the universe. An ant understands nothing about its world, and yet it survives for millions of years, far longer than we have. Compared to the universe, our brain is not much bigger than its. And yet we understand the laws of galaxies and of tiny particles. Survival does not explain this.

The third problem: evolution is a random and gradual process, which never ends, and one cannot know where we are in it. And yet we rely on our eyes absolutely, as if we were the “pinnacle of creation,” and not a temporary product on the way to something else. When our eyes deceive us, as in a mirage in the desert, we see it as a malfunction that needs explaining. That itself shows how much we rely on them.

And in any case, even if evolution is true, perhaps God acts through it. This objection at most brings down the argument. It does not prove that there is no God.

The conclusion is surprising. Whoever relies on reason and on science already believes, without noticing, that someone intelligent built them so that they fit the world. It is commonly said that “where reason ends, faith begins.” It is exactly the reverse: reason itself rests on faith. A rational person must believe in an intelligent agent, and a consistent atheist must give up his trust in his own reason.

Fourth argument: why are there good and evil?

Chapter 5 of 8

In brief:

We all feel that there are real good and evil, not just taste. But for there to be real good and evil, there must be a source that stands above all human beings: not society, not the individual for himself, and not evolution. That source is God. And along the way, the argument from meaning.

What is a moral act, anyway?

To talk about morality, it is worth first understanding what it is. A person who invests in the stock market is not doing a moral act, and not an immoral act either. A person who donates to a hospital so that his name will hang on the wall has done a useful act, but not a moral one. A moral act is an act done because it is the right thing, and not for gain. That does not mean one may not enjoy it. The satisfaction that accompanies a good deed does not spoil it, as long as it is not the reason for the deed.

The philosopher Immanuel Kant formulated it this way: an act is judged by its intention, and not by its results. And he added a rule: do only what you would want to become a law for everyone. And there is something surprising in this. It is precisely the person who does not calculate results, but does what is right, who brings about the best results. Think of tax evasion: for each person on his own, evading pays, because his sum makes no difference to the treasury. But if everyone thinks that way, the treasury will empty. Only someone who asks “and what if everyone did that?” preserves society.

Taste or fact?

If one person likes spinach and another does not, there is no argument between them. That is taste. But if someone says “slavery is fine,” we do not say “he has different taste.” We say: he is wrong. We are even prepared to go to war against evil. In other words, deep down we treat morality like a fact, not like a taste.

There is a simple test that shows this. A child says: “How lucky that I don’t like spinach, because if I liked it, I would eat it, and spinach is yuck.” That is funny, because if he liked spinach, he would not think it was yuck. His aversion is a matter of taste, and depends on him. Now another sentence: “How lucky that I don’t live in the 18th century, because then I would believe that time is absolute, and I would not know about the theory of relativity.” That is not funny, because it concerns a fact, which does not depend on what people thought. And now the test: “How lucky that I don’t live in the 18th century, because then I would think slavery is moral, and I might have kept slaves.” That is not funny either. A sign that we treat morality like a fact, and not like a taste.

But if morality is a “fact,” it is a fact of a very special kind, and it is worth understanding in what way. An ordinary fact describes what is: “the table is brown,” “most people think it is forbidden to murder.” Such a fact

demands nothing of me. Even if the whole world thinks murder is forbidden, I can answer: “So what? How does that obligate me?” By contrast, “it is forbidden to murder” does not describe what is. It says what ought to be. And whoever truly understands it cannot answer “so what?” He feels at once that it obligates him. Moral facts are facts that contain a demand. And such facts do not exist in a world of matter alone. In such a world there is only what is, and no “ought.” And there is something else that does not exist in a world of matter alone: choice. A stone that falls on someone is not “guilty.” It only obeyed the laws of physics. If a human being is only matter obeying laws, then the murderer too only “fell” on his victim. He had no choice, so there is no guilt, and no one to blame. Without choice, the words “good” and “evil” lose their meaning.

Who decides what is good?

If morality is a fact, who determines it? Society? No. After the Second World War, the Nazi leaders were put on trial in the city of Nuremberg, in Germany, for the crimes they had committed. They said: “We acted according to the law of the state.” The claim was rejected. In other words, the state and the law are themselves judged by morality, and so they cannot be its source. Perhaps all of humanity? That is an invention. When and where did humanity decide anything? And what if all human beings agreed that murder is permitted?

Perhaps each person for himself? The writer Ari Elon wrote about the “sovereign Jew,” who determines his own values for himself. But whoever is his own ruler has no ruler. Freedom of choice is a condition of morality, not its source.

And perhaps evolution? It can explain why we tend to behave well, because it helps survival. But three problems. It explains behavior, not conscience and not judgment. It explains a tendency, and a tendency is not an obligation. The tendency to eat is natural too. And “this is how we evolved” does not mean “this is how it ought to be.” From a fact one cannot infer a duty.

Some also say: “Morality is an instinct.” But instinctive behavior is not morality. A sheep does not harm other sheep, and no one calls it “moral.” A robot that issues a “verdict” is not a judge. Instinct, conscience, has its place as a guide. But the decision belongs to reason. And incidentally, not every feeling is morality. The psychologist Jonathan Haidt showed that there are things that arouse disgust in us, and we think they are “immoral,” even when no one is harmed. It is worth distinguishing disgust from morality.

Two common objections

The first: “But there are very moral atheists!” True, and that is not what the argument is about. An atheist can be a very good person. The question is different: according to his worldview, what makes the good good? If there is no source above us, he has no way to say that the murderer is wrong, only that he does not like what the murderer does. In a certain sense, a moral atheist is a believer without knowing it.

There are also serious atheist philosophers, like David Enoch, who accept that morality is objective and try to ground it without God: there simply are “moral facts” that exist on their own, like the laws of mathematics. But this position has two difficulties. The first: facts that float in the air, with no source, do not explain why they obligate me. The second: how do we even have access to such facts? If our brain was formed by a blind process,

and there is no connection between the moral facts and that process, it is a wondrous coincidence that we identify them correctly. Without a God who created both the good and our ability to see it, this remains a wonder without an explanation.

The second: “Every society has a different morality.” It is true that there are disagreements. But on questions of fact too there are disagreements, and that does not mean there is no truth. It means that some of the sides are simply wrong.

Only two possibilities

And so only two possibilities remain. The first: there is no real good and evil, everything is personal taste. But then one cannot say that a murderer is wicked. One can only say “he likes different things than I do.” Very few people are willing to really live that way. The second: there are real good and evil. But in a world in which there is only matter and blind laws of nature, they have no place. They can come only from the one who stands above the world, God, who created the laws of nature and created good and evil too, and gave us the ability to recognize them.

Interestingly, even Kant, regarded as the father of secular morality, himself wrote that morality obliges us to assume that God exists. And in Jewish thought this idea is ancient. The Gemara says that whoever practices idolatry (bowing to an idol) out of love for the person who asked it, or out of fear, and not because he truly accepts the idol as a god, is not considered an idolater. In other words, the true service of God too is a response to the commandment out of recognition of the one who commands, and not out of feeling or interest. Exactly like the moral act.

An ancient question

There is an ancient question here, worth answering. Is something good because God commanded it? If so, the good is arbitrary: had he commanded murder, murder would be good. Or did God command it because it is good? If so, the good exists even without God. The answer is that God chose to create a particular world, with human beings who can suffer, love and choose. In such a world it is self-evident that harming an innocent person is evil. God did not “decide” this separately. It follows from the world he chose to create. Thus the good is not arbitrary, and yet its source is in God. Morality depends on God’s will, on his choice to create precisely such a world, and not on a separate command.

This argument too goes in the second direction. It addresses whoever feels that there are real good and evil, and shows him that this feeling of his already commits him to belief in God.

And what about meaning?

The argument from morality has a little brother: the argument from meaning. Almost every person feels that his life has meaning, or at least seeks it. A Jewish psychiatrist who survived the Holocaust, Viktor Frankl, built an entire method of therapy on this feeling. But what is meaning, anyway? Meaning is always a measurement

against something that lies outside us. A meaning that we “invent” for ourselves does not really help, because one cannot lie to oneself. Meaning is sought, not invented. And therefore whoever feels that his life has real meaning assumes, without noticing, that it has a source above him.

What next? From the God of the philosophers to the God of the Torah

Chapter 6 of 8

In brief:

The arguments lead to a wise and good God who expects something of us, but not to Shabbat and tefillin. For that, revelation is needed, and it is to be expected. The tradition of Sinai, Hume's objection about miracles, the prophecies, and the question of the other religions.

We have come a long way. There is a first cause. There is someone who wrote the laws. There is someone who built us so that we understand the world. And there is a source of the good. The first three arguments established a philosophical God: a creator, a designer. It is not certain that this is the same entity, but it is reasonable. And the last two arguments added something important: God saw to it that we could understand the world, and he wants us to do good. In other words, this is already a good and involved God, who expects something of us.

But something is still missing. Philosophy cannot tell us what exactly God wants, nor decide between the religions. From these arguments one cannot get to Shabbat and tefillin. For that, revelation is needed: that God “speak” with human beings and tell them what he wants.

Why expect a revelation?

One may ask: perhaps morality is all that God wants? If so, no revelation is needed. But think of it this way. Before creation there were three possibilities: not to create a world at all, to create a perfect world with no choice, or to create a world in which there is choice. God chose the third. If the goal had been only that we improve ourselves morally, it would have been better not to create us at all, and to spare all the suffering. So the goal is connected to our choices, but it lies beyond the world. There is a Chinese parable about a poor man who bought, with his last two coins, a slice of bread and a flower. “The bread, in order to live. The flower, so that there is something to live for.” Morality is the bread. There is also a flower.

And that flower, the religious goal, we cannot discover on our own. So it is to be expected that God would reveal himself and tell us. And once it is already clear that there is a God who expects something of us, revelation is something expected, not absurd. Some say “where philosophy ends, faith begins,” and Tertullian, one of the Church Fathers, said “I believe because it is absurd.” Here the move is the reverse: belief in revelation is a result of thinking, not a substitute for it.

The witness

The Jewish tradition testifies to such a revelation, to an entire people at Mount Sinai, and not to a single person. The Torah itself stresses this: “Ask now of the days of old... Has any people heard the voice of God speaking out of the midst of the fire, as you have heard, and lived?” On whom is the burden of proof? A tradition is considered reliable until proved otherwise, not the reverse. That is how we treat everything we know about history: we rely on what was told and written, unless there is good reason to suspect it. If we demanded proof for every tradition, we could know nothing about the past.

And there is a difference between someone who saw and someone who heard. Shimon looks at the clock and sees that it is two o'clock. Reuven, blind from birth, says to him: “Perhaps your eyes are deceiving you?” Shimon will not be impressed. He saw. The doubts are “the lot of the blind,” of those who did not experience it themselves. We, the later generations, are in Reuven's place. Our question is how much we trust those who saw. The stranger the thing reported, the more trust is needed. But after the philosophical arguments, revelation is no longer so strange.

“But miracles don't happen”

Here comes the most famous objection. It was formulated by David Hume, whom we already met in the introduction. Hume was one of the most famous skeptics in history and a sharp critic of religion, and he said: when someone tells you of a miracle, ask yourself what is more likely, that the miracle really happened, or that the narrator erred, exaggerated or lied? Suppose a friend tells you he saw a dead man come back to life. Clearly you will think he got confused. People err and exaggerate all the time, and the dead never come back to life. Therefore, said Hume, it is always more likely that the story of the miracle is wrong.

Often Hume is right. Believers too do not accept every story of a miracle. And there is also something right in the demand to weigh both sides. In Britain, a woman was once convicted of murdering her two babies, on the basis of a calculation that the chance of two babies dying of “cot death” is one in 64 million. But they forgot to weigh that a double murder of babies is also very rare. Both sides must be weighed. And yet there is one big problem with Hume's claim, and it is worth understanding it well.

Hume assumes what he wants to prove. “The dead do not rise” and “miracles do not happen” are true only if there is no one who can perform them. And there is a vicious circle here: we will never accept testimony of a miracle, and therefore “there has never been testimony of miracles,” and therefore we go on not accepting it. An example: thirty years ago, if someone had told you “a Black president of the United States passed a major health reform,” it would have sounded like a story about aliens, and no one would have believed it. Today, when everyone knows there was such a president, the report of the reform sounds entirely plausible. Exactly the same story, but what we already know completely changes how plausible it is. So too here. Whoever has already reached, through the previous arguments, the conclusion that there is a God who created the world and expects something of us, does not think revelation is absurd. For him, the story of Sinai is a story about something that was expected to happen.

And how does one check the reliability of testimony at all? Not by calculating probabilities. A court of appeal does not examine the credibility of witnesses. That is done by the judge who heard them, from his impression. The appellate court checks only the procedure. So too here: we cannot “calculate” the reliability of the revelation at Sinai with a formula. What we can check is the chain of transmission: was the story passed on continuously, from generation to generation, in an entire people, and not invented at some stage? That is the subject of the following paragraphs.

Why this tradition is reliable

It must be said honestly: this is the link that critics attack most. The philosophical arguments lead to God, but the move from God to a particular revelation, at Mount Sinai specifically, rests on a historical tradition, and a tradition can always be doubted. So the considerations here are considerations of plausibility, not of proof. There are several that strengthen the tradition of Sinai. None is decisive on its own, but together they are significant.

First, there are no similar stories. If an entire people could “invent” for itself a story of mass revelation, we would expect to find more such stories in history. There are none. Even Christianity and Islam accept Sinai, and do not claim a mass revelation of their own. The revelations they tell of were personal, to one person. In this sense, Sinai is the “Big Bang” of the religions, and all the others accept it. It is they who must prove that God changed his mind afterward. And what of other mass “revelations”? People mention, for example, the apparition at Fatima in Portugal, reported by crowds in 1917. But these are local and late events, with no entire people behind them bearing them as a continuous tradition of thousands of years, and with no commandment that an entire people took upon itself and passes on.

Second, the commandments themselves. A large part of the mitzvot have no clear benefit, moral or otherwise. Why would anyone invent such a system, and why would an entire people accept it?

Third, the question everyone can ask himself: if you wanted to preserve the memory of an event for thousands of years, what would you do? You would record every detail, dates, names, places, and establish rituals that reenact the event every year. That is exactly what the Torah did: Passover, the Seder night, the daily remembrance of the exodus from Egypt. And yet, skepticism can always win. There are people who deny the Holocaust, despite all the documentation.

And there is an objection from the Bible itself, which is worth anticipating. The book of Kings tells that in the days of King Josiah the book of the Torah “was found” in the Temple, and when it was read, the king tore his garments. Does this not show that the Torah had been forgotten, and perhaps was even written then? But the verses describe a different situation: there was a Temple, there was a High Priest, there were sacrifices. The people knew of the Torah; they simply did not obey it, and the copy of the book in the Temple had been lost. This is delinquency, not forgetting. And there is a further point here: a late editor who was fabricating a story of continuous tradition would not have left such an embarrassing chapter in it. He would have deleted it.

And there is more. Our Sages list the signs of a madman: he goes out alone at night, sleeps in the cemetery, tears his clothes. For each sign on its own one can say “perhaps he has another reason.” But when all the signs appear together, it is not plausible that each has a different reason. So too here. Each argument on its own can

be rejected. But all together they are stronger than the sum of the parts. This people brought to the world, in an age of idolatry and child sacrifice, belief in one God and the idea that every human being is created in God's image. It survived thousands of years of dispersion and persecution. And there are also prophecies. In the section of rebuke in Deuteronomy, the Torah describes, almost a thousand years in advance, that the people of Israel will be torn from its land and scattered "from one end of the earth to the other," that it will find no rest anywhere, and that it will be an object of mockery and hatred in all kingdoms. Such systematic and lasting hatred, without reason, is a phenomenon hard to match in the history of nations. The Torah also describes that the nation that will exile us will come "from afar... as the eagle swoops," and that we will not understand its language. The emblem of the Romans was the eagle, and their language, unlike that of all the other conquerors from Greece or the East, was not known in the region. And it adds an unexpected detail: "The Lord will bring you back to Egypt in ships... and there you will offer yourselves for sale to your enemies as slaves." What is the connection between the Roman exile and Egypt? But that is exactly what happened: the Romans exiled Jews to Egypt in ships and sold them as slaves. And further: "The stranger who is among you will rise higher and higher above you." In the Roman period, kings descended from converts, the Herodian dynasty, ruled over Israel. These are exceptional and rare events, and all were foreseen in advance.

Here one must be careful about honesty, and not everyone is careful about it on this subject. For a prophecy to be the basis of an argument, several things must be checked. First, what counts as "rare"? Exile, for example, happened to other peoples too, though not on this scale and without a return to the land after thousands of years. Second, how unambiguous is the wording? There are general expressions that can be interpreted after the fact according to what happened, and that is how the oracles of ancient Greece and the "mediums" of our day operated as well. Third, how many prophecies are there in the Torah, and how many of them were fulfilled? Some are phrased as conditions ("if you do not listen, this will happen"), and not as certain prophecy, which reduces the risk of their being refuted. And there are promises of which it is not clear that they were fulfilled.

So the conclusion is balanced. There is no prophecy in the Torah that is known for certain not to have been fulfilled, but there are vague prophecies whose degree of fulfillment is unclear. On the other hand, there are prophecies that were fulfilled, and some of them are singular and rare. And beyond the events themselves, there is here a prediction in advance, and that is a significant reinforcement. And another point: the very fact that the Torah wrote prophecies, and took the risk that they would be refuted, instead of "neutralizing" the risk and contenting itself with commandments, testifies to confidence in knowledge of the future. And the risk was real, since over the generations there were those who left the Torah because of prophecies they did not see fulfilled. So it is right to give the argument from prophecies significant weight, but not crushing weight, as many do. It joins the other considerations, strengthens them and is strengthened by them.

And what about the other religions?

Here comes the question almost everyone asks: "This whole description is subjective. It is colored by the education you received. Had you been born in a village in Poland, you would find the same charm in Christianity."

The answer comes in two stages. First, the impressions presented here are not merely subjective. They rest on arguments, and they are far stronger than a personal feeling. There is also a consideration of priority. All the

monotheistic religions (belief in one God) accept the revelation at Sinai. Christianity and Islam do not deny it. They claim that God revealed himself again, later, and changed the requirements. But the revelations they tell of were personal, to one person, and not to an entire people. And the burden of proof lies on whoever claims that God changed his mind. Sinai is the “Big Bang” of the religions, and all of them start from it.

But the second stage is no less important, and here we will say something that departs from what is usually said. Even if we and our faith are right, a reasonable person born and raised in Poland, in Ukraine or in the Sahara believes with the same degree of devotion and the same good faith in the faith he was raised in. And had any of us been born there, he would probably have grown up to be a believing Christian, convinced that he holds the truth. This is neither skepticism nor relativism: the Pole is wrong. But on the assumption that God does not hold it against someone who acts reasonably and according to the best of his common sense, the conclusion is that this Pole will receive fitting treatment from God, exactly like us.

Hence the conclusion about what may be called the “exclusive discourse” (the discourse of exclusivity), on which we all grew up: as if we held the pure and only truth, and all the others were mistaken, misleading, and would even be punished for their heresy. This is a discourse for internal purposes. It is meant mainly to nurture the self-confidence of believers, and not to express a theological conception in its own right. And let us ask: is it reasonable that God determines a person’s fate only by the place where he was born? His conception is to a large extent forced on him, and each of us in his place would have acted similarly. It is not reasonable to punish a person who acts in good faith for something that does not depend on him. And a God who acted so arbitrarily is not the God our tradition describes.

So two possibilities remain, and neither of them is relativistic: either different revelations are possible, with different requirements for each society, and each society received what is expected of it; or there is one religious truth, and we are the ones who are right, and yet it is clear that others must receive reasonable treatment, from us and from God. And what about the harsh attitude of halakha and of the Sages toward other beliefs and toward those who hold them? The explanation is that this attitude was born in a different world, in which the other beliefs were of a lower human level, and perhaps there was also an assumption that everyone understood in his heart that the God of Sinai is the truth. Today the situation is different: these are normative people, who from their point of view have no reason to think their faith is mistaken, and so their holding of another faith comes from a genuine place. Such a situation calls for a different attitude.

And finally, a word about the streams within Judaism. Reform does not believe in revelation and in the obligation to halakha as it was handed down in the tradition, and so engaging with it is engaging with a secular conception, not with another religion. Conservative Judaism is not fundamentally different from Orthodoxy, since both are committed to halakha, and the dispute between them is about interpretation. Karaism does not recognize the Oral Torah, and it is a relatively late stream, so it is not reasonable to see it as an alternative tradition. What matters for the discussion here is only that each person must choose one of them as the authentic continuation of the revelation.

The two hard questions: evil and God's hiddenness

Chapter 7 of 8

In brief:

If there is a good God, why is there evil? And why does he not reveal himself? Human evil flows from free will, and natural evil is the price of constant laws of nature. And God's withdrawal is a maturing, like a parent who lets a child stand on his own feet.

Before we get to obligation, we must stop at two questions that every reader asks, and without which the picture is not complete. If there is a good God, why is there so much evil in the world? And if he exists, why does he not reveal himself?

The problem of evil

It is worth distinguishing two kinds of evil. There is evil that human beings do: murder, robbery, the Holocaust. And there is evil that nature does: diseases, earthquakes, a child who dies.

For human evil, the answer follows from what we have already seen. God created a human being who has free will, and we saw that without choice there is no good and evil at all. But real choice means that one can choose evil. And God, according to the conception presented here, does not “bring about” the deeds of human beings. Our deeds are in our hands, and so is the responsibility for them. “Everything is in the hands of Heaven except the fear of Heaven,” said the Sages, and Rashi explains: what depends on a person's moral and religious choice is given into his hands and not into the hands of Heaven. Whoever wants a world in which murder is impossible is asking for a world of puppets.

For natural evil, the answer is different, and it follows from the second argument. God created a world that runs according to constant laws. We saw that this is exactly what testifies to him. But constant laws are also a price. A law of nature does not check who is standing in front of it. Fire burns the righteous too. And if nature changed according to who was in the vicinity, we would live in a world that could not be understood: you jump out of the window and fly upward, because a righteous man is standing below. In such a world there is no science, no medicine, no planning, and no choice either, since one cannot know what will follow from one's actions. In other words, natural evil is not a “punishment” and not arbitrariness. It is a necessary consequence of the decision to create a world with laws, and with creatures who choose within it. In this sense, God's hands are “tied”: not out of weakness, but because of logic and because of what he himself wanted.

Hence also the answer to the ancient question of “the righteous who suffers”: why do the righteous suffer? Because the laws of nature do not distinguish between righteous and wicked, and the deeds of human beings are given over to their choice. The question was hard only for someone who assumed that God intervenes in every detail. According to the picture presented here, this is not an objection but an expected consequence.

God's hiddenness

And now to the second question: why does God not reveal himself?

Think of a parent. When the child is small, the parent is involved in every step: feeding, lifting, preventing falls. As the child grows, the parent deliberately steps back. Not because he loves less, but because he wants the child to stand on his own feet. So too in the relationship between God and humanity. In the biblical period he was involved: miracles, prophecy, open intervention. Over the generations this intervention diminished, and in our day it hardly exists. That is a fact the believer too must admit. But it is not abandonment. It is maturing. The Torah itself describes this transition: in the desert, manna came down from heaven, and in the Land of Israel one must plow and sow and wait for rain.

And where is God now? In everything we look at. In the laws of nature, in the order of the world, in our ability to understand it. He does not need to reveal himself in miracles, because he reveals himself all the time through the world itself. And whoever has studied the previous arguments sees it.

There is also something liberating in this picture. The believer does not have to live with the feeling that everything that happens to him is a message from heaven, and does not have to fear that science is “hiding” God. He can understand that usually no miracle will happen, that what will happen is the result of the laws of nature and of his own deeds, and that this is exactly the world God wanted.

And why does it obligate me?

Chapter 8 of 8

In brief:

Even if God commanded, why obey? Because he is the one who created us, and there is an obligation of a creature toward its creator that does not depend on how well off we are. And then the summary: no argument on its own is a proof; the power is in the combination.

And why does it obligate me?

One question remains, and it may be the most important of all. Suppose God really did command. That is a fact. But from a fact no “ought” follows. Why does it obligate me?

The answer is that there are facts which whoever understands them feels at once that they obligate. We saw this in morality. Whoever truly understands that harming an innocent person is evil needs no further reason not to do it. So too here. Whoever stands before the command of the one who created him understands on his own that he is obligated. Whoever looks for a further reason is like the blind man in the parable: he lacks the sense to see it.

Some say: “It is just upbringing. Most religious people grew up in a religious home, and most secular people in a secular home.” True, but this claim hits the secular exactly as it hits the religious. It is a general skepticism, not an argument for atheism. And more than that: religious intuition is like moral intuition. A delicate instrument that must be developed. Education is development, not programming.

Gratitude

And now to the foundation itself. The Jewish tradition says that we serve God out of gratitude, for all the good he gives us. So says the Torah: “Is he not your father, who acquired you? He made you and established you.” But about this there are hard questions, and they must be stated honestly. Rabbi Yehuda Amital, head of Yeshivat Har Etzion and a Holocaust survivor, asked: can a Jew who was forced to pull corpses out of the crematoria at Auschwitz serve God out of gratitude? And he answered: “In no way, no.” And our Sages themselves said that “it would have been better for man not to have been created.” There are also logical questions: the needs that God fulfills, he himself created in us, both the disease and the cure. And whoever created a creature is in any case obligated to care for it.

The answer is that there are two kinds of gratitude. There is “ordinary” gratitude: thanks for something I received. It depends on what I received, and if I received suffering, it is damaged. And there is another, deeper gratitude: obligation toward the one thanks to whom I exist at all, regardless of what I received. Like a branch toward the tree from which it grew. That is not thanks, and it is not a feeling. It is a duty.

The test of parents clarifies the difference. Toward an adoptive parent who gave much, there is ordinary gratitude. Toward biological parents who abandoned, there is no ordinary gratitude. And yet most people feel that they still have a certain claim. That is gratitude of the second kind. And toward parents who both gave birth and raised, both together. Toward God this is true all the more. He did not give us “something.” He gave us existence itself. “He made you and established you.”

And precisely because of this, this obligation does not depend on how well off we are. It does not flow from the favors we received, but from the very fact that we were created. Therefore it does not disappear even in hard times, when the suffering in the world makes it hard to feel gratitude. And that same feeling is also the right intention in keeping the mitzvot: not fear, not benefit, not even only love, but doing because it is right. Exactly like the moral act.

What faith gives

It is worth saying also what faith gives, provided one remembers that this is not the reason to believe. It gives meaning. It gives identity: whoever is committed becomes a link in a long chain of generations. And there is richness in it: a world full of values gives more room for personal expression than a world in which there are only moral values. But there is also a warning here. Whoever persuades people to return to observance because of “the pleasant atmosphere of a Shabbat table” is offering therapy, not faith. One must be committed because it is true. And precisely because it is true, it gives meaning.

Summary

No argument on its own is an absolute proof. The power is in the combination. One can see the arguments as a series of surprising “leaps” in the world: from nothing to something, that is the first argument. From chaos to precise laws that make life possible, that is the second. From matter to a mind that understands the universe, that is the third. And from mind to the sense that there are real good and evil, that is the fourth. And from there, to a God who speaks with human beings, and to the obligation to what he asked.

Imagine we asked someone who has no idea about our universe: what do you think a universe created by design should look like, and what would a universe that arose by chance look like? He would presumably answer that in a designed universe there would be laws, complexity, varied creatures, consciousness and constant progress. Whereas in a random universe, if such a thing is even possible, there would be a chaos that leads nowhere, and if by chance something formed in it, it would quickly be destroyed. Certainly there would be no consciousness, morality or reports of revelation in it. And then we would show him our universe: the precise laws of nature, the variety of creatures, humanity with all its creations. Which of the two possibilities does it resemble more?

The atheist must believe that all this happened by chance. And more than that: if he is consistent, he must give up his trust in reason and in science, and the belief that there are good and evil. That is the real price.

There is no certainty here, but there are very good reasons. And that is how we live in every field: not by absolute proofs, which do not exist on any subject, but by what is reasonable and logical. This is neither blind faith nor an “imaginary friend,” but a logical conclusion.

