



# THE GOD OF THE GAPS: HOW SMALL CAN GOD GET?

Our distant ancestors relied on supernatural forces to explain their world. They personified these forces into superhuman deities. It was all they knew, their first, last and only resort.

It took an extraordinary insight – by, it seems, one ancient Greek, Thales of Miletus (c. 624 – c. 546 BCE) – to realize that the workings of nature could be made sense of by looking at those workings directly. But there was a taint of impiety in such efforts. Christian Europe overcame this by supposing that studying nature was a way of learning about the divine. Muslims, who also felt the influence of Greek philosophy, were not so fortunate.✍

Two thousand years after Thales, Isaac Newton (1642-1726/7 CE), “standing on the shoulders of giants,” as he put it, formulated the laws of motion and classical mechanics. A scientific revolution and the Age of Reason followed, paving the way for “natural religion.” In particular, Deism conceived of “God” as having set the world in motion and then leaving it to itself. But by the time Laplace (1749-1827) proposed his nebular theory of the formation of the solar system he was able to say that “I had no need of that hypothesis [divine intervention].”

The apparent gulf between living and non-living things remained a stumbling block. But this, too, crumbled when in 1828 the German chemist Friedrich Wöhler synthesized urea, an organic substance, from inorganic ingredients. When Darwin’s The Origin of Species appeared in 1859, it “made it possible to be an intellectually fulfilled atheist” as Richard Dawkins put it. Soon, the basis of heredity was found to be DNA. When its molecular structure was proposed by Watson and Crick in 1953 they noted “a possible copying mechanism.”

Now by this time the physics and astronomy of Newton had been immensely improved. Instead of thousands of years, existence became billions of years. And the universe had expanded to billions of

light-years, each being 6 trillion miles. But even all that could be observed, it was realized, was still only a small portion of what must exist, to say nothing of what cannot yet be detected.

Thus have the broad outlines of objective reality been drawn: from the very small to the very large, from the long ago to an indeterminate future, from the non-living to the living, and from phenomena quite unlike everyday experience to speculative possibilities that it is difficult to say can even be imagined. Yet none of it requires “that hypothesis” of supernatural intervention.

At the same time, it must be admitted that scientific knowledge – or any kind of knowledge! – is not about understanding “the way things really are” or what some call “ultimate truth.” Rather, what we “know” is really just how we have organized and made sense of a dizzying variety of innumerable observations. This leaves all knowledge uncertain and therefore provisional, because new and better observations are continually being made and better ways of thinking about prior experience can cause revisions in what had been thought was known.

At any given point, despite much progress, there have remained many questions. Even more come steadily into view. Indeed, we have many more questions than our ancestors could have ever wondered to ask. Some consider this ignorance and uncertainty to be a failure of science. In fact, so long as unanswered questions can continue to be pursued this is “not a bug but a feature.” That is, it is a strength of science, not a weakness or failing, that it highlights our ignorance and points to new questions and problems. It allows us to be human.

But this inability of science to supply easy, complete and final answers to every question prompts many people to turn to that first, last and only resort of our distant ancestors: “God did it!” That this is today referred to as “the god of the gaps”

is instructive. For it shows that supernatural forces do not offer real explanatory power but only serve to fill in the gaps for what is not yet understood. "God" is another word for ignorance. And since there will always be gaps in our knowledge, and science is showing us more all the time, "God" can live on indefinitely in this way. Those who turn to this, though, will fail to be motivated to seriously ponder how to make sense of things. They depend on those who are so motivated to continue the task of progress much as those who pray in foxholes depend on others working to preserve their lives.

Today in our service we consider that "The Argument From Reason" is essentially an elaborate version of "the god of gaps." But now the gaps are not even scientific but philosophical. These include the Problem of Knowledge, the Problem of Other Minds and "the hard problem" of consciousness and perhaps even Hume's problem of "the is-ought."

✍ Abû Hâmîd Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-Ghazâlî (1058-1111), perhaps the most important and influential theologian of Sunni Islam, attacked falasifa. These were Muslim philosophers following an Arab Aristotelian tradition. Similar lines of thought in Christianity culminated in the teachings of Thomas Aquinas(1225-1274). But al-Ghazali objected even to the scientific principle of causality, writing:

"According to us the connection between what is actually believed to be a cause and what is believed to be an effect is not a necessary connection ... the satisfaction of thirst does not imply drinking nor satiety eating, nor burning contact with fire, nor light sunrise, nor decapitation death, nor recovery the drinking of medicine, nor evacuation the taking of a purgative and so on for all the empirical connections existing in medicine, astronomy, the sciences and the crafts. ... on the contrary, it is in God's power to create satiety without eating and decapitation without death and so on with respect to all connections." [van den Berg, trans, 1954, Taha-fat al-Tahfah by Averroes]

Now of course it may induce a greater measure of religious devotion to see in everything the immediate and direct intervention of the divine. But it is disastrous from the standpoint of scientific progress. Why look for regularities of nature when they are moment-to-moment decisions of Allah?

**All NTCOF events can be found through our website calendar , or our meetup page, from which you can RSVP, at:**

**- [www.meetup.com/church-of-freethought](http://www.meetup.com/church-of-freethought) - JOIN THE NTCOF MEETUP GROUP !!!**

**Social Luncheon:** Today, immediately after our Service, join us for lunch and discussion at the Jason's Deli on MacArthur Blvd just south of 635, at 7707 N MacArthur Blvd, phone (972) 432-0555.

**Freethought Salon:** Discuss today's service topic or other conundrums of interest. It happens most non-first Sundays of the month, over breakfast, at the Hilton DFW Lakes Hotel restaurant "The Vineyard" - inside the hotel - in Grapevine beginning 10:30 AM.

**Game Night:** Nearly every Friday night at the IHOP on 2310 Stemmons Trail (I-35), near Northwest Highway (Loop 12). Plan to arrive at about 7:30 PM, and stay late playing Le Havre, Carcassonne, and other fun games!

**Have Another Idea?** Email or call! Read bulletins & presentations and post on the FORUM at [www.churchoffreethought.org](http://www.churchoffreethought.org) LIKE US at [www.facebook.com/northtexaschurchoffreethought/](http://www.facebook.com/northtexaschurchoffreethought/) and sign up for our Twitter feed at [twitter.com/ntcof](https://twitter.com/ntcof) !

**PLANNED FOR NEXT MONTH:  
"RELIGIOUS LIBERTY"  
> Sunday, July 2, 2017 <**

**COMFORT INN DFW AIRPORT NORTH  
(Take the Freeport Parkway exit, then the frontage road east just past Best Western; service starts at 10:30 but come early for coffee, snacks - you can bring some! -**

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