



A Review of the Frank Zindler / William Lane Craig Debate

Review by Jeffrey Stueber

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A Review of the Frank Zindler/William Lane Craig debate at Willow Creek Community Church.

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In Disney's classic *The Beauty and the Beast*, the beast, who was a cursed prince, was charmed by Belle who was imprisoned by him. The beast decided to do something for her and created a whole library for Belle, an avid reader who probably couldn't go out of a bookstore without pining away after books she should have bought (much like the author of this review). Books are one of the few ways of communicating information other than oral methods or web pages. Books about controversial issues have the flaw in them of only commenting on or communicating the authors particular knowledge or world view. Hence, debates are much more impressive. It is with this in mind I purchased *Atheism vs. Christianity*, a video tape debate between Christian philosopher William Lane Craig and atheist Frank Zindler.

I must say I was most unimpressed by Zindler. The debate was supposed to decide which position is supported by the evidence. Craig defended the Christian position and gave several philosophical, historical, and scientific evidences for it while Zindler was content to criticize the Bible while tackling very few of Craig's evidences. I expected a much smarter debate by Zindler, but got very little. Fortunately the video tape contained a follow-up commentary by the Passantinos of Christian apologetic fame who refuted in greater detail some of Zindler's arguments.

Craig asked Zindler to provide evidence that God does not exist - a reasonable request when debating an atheist whose faith rests with that very proposition. Zindler did not provide such evidence, nor could he, because to provide evidence that God does not exist one would have to be omniscient - having knowledge of every location in this universe, any alternative universes, and any alternative dimensions. Zindler's dilemma is analogous to me trying to provide evidence the book *Santa is Fun* does not exist. I would have to have knowledge of every library that exists or has existed. Zindler could not provide evidence for his atheist position on this basis despite agreeing to defend the primacy of atheism.

Zindler responded to the challenge of arguing for atheism in two fallacious ways. First, Zindler argued that atheism has nothing to prove, a point Craig denied and which I deny as well. I know of no atheist who would not claim the following: there is no god nor were there any divine-initiated moral precepts imprinted in our minds; that life has arisen from natural forces acting through random processes apart from divine intervention; that most, if not all religions have truth claims that are false (Jesus did not rise from the dead, an angel did not appear to Joseph Smith, there is no reincarnation, and so forth). Such atheistic claims require empirical justification, evidence, or proof they are true. Atheists have much to defend as do the religious.

Second, Zindler chose to primarily attack the Bible's veracity without giving equal weight to providing justification for being an atheist. This, I think, is a familiar atheist tactic and an example of atheists' mindset. If atheists like him can disprove, to their satisfaction, the Bible, they don't have to, in their minds, give any evidence for their position. For Zindler, all he has to do is show the Bible is not factual, and therefore his position is the default one since, to him, only supernaturalism of any kind has to prove itself. Atheism is the best game in town since no other "game" or faith or paradigm, whatever term you use, suffices.

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This makes Zindler and his ilk secure but raises questions. If one grants the factuality of Zindler's critique of the Bible as a faulty document, a faulty critique at that, Zindler is still left with a defense of atheism as the logical choice. (Zindler's methodology also reveals an inconsistency in atheist arguments for atheists frequently point out theists argue for creation by arguing against evolution. Here Zindler argues for atheism by arguing not for atheism but against Christianity.) If the Bible is faulty and there is no evidence for supernaturalism, why believe atheism (God does not exist) instead of theism (God does exist) when theism is untrue, to Zindler, and the other cannot be proven or upheld by positive evidence. At best Zindler could be an agnostic unable to defend any position. Since Zindler takes to criticizing the Bible, he puts himself in the unenviable position of defending his view of the Bible and does indeed have something to defend, contrary to his view that atheism has nothing to defend. And, if atheism is unprovable, then Zindler must defend why we must live and behave as atheists. Why choose the atheist viewpoint over the theistic one when neither is defensible? Zindler, it seems, has backed himself into a corner by placing himself in a position to defend a position he claims he doesn't have to defend.

Zindler's friend Rob Sherman was permitted to give his opinion on how the debate impacts what he does for a living. Sherman said atheists and Christians have a difference of opinion, but that does not make either side moral, and atheists certainly aren't evil. People don't understand the differences are limited to whether theological evidence favors either position, and because of this misunderstanding, discrimination against atheists is pervasive, especially in public office. Sherman attempts to rectify this by campaigning for government neutrality with regard to religion. Watching this video again and again, I struggle to grasp what Sherman is referring to and believe he suggests bias against atheists is due to the perception they are evil - a certain mistake and misunderstanding of theistic/atheistic cultural battles. Sherman also seems to not be aware of bias against Christians, but then again one is seldom willing to track how your opponent is suffering when you are engaged in a struggle against him. Discrimination against atheists, and atheists alone, is what Sherman fights against.

Mark Mittelberg, who introduced Lane Craig (Sherman introduced Zindler) was granted a reply to Sherman and said perhaps Sherman had misunderstood the nature of the debate which was not to be about politics or political positions. It was to be about which world view best accounted for reality as we see it. To Mittelberg, Lane Craig presented a better argument than Zindler and perhaps felt, as I do, this evidence should have given Sherman pause. But it seems to not have an effect. This probably displays more of Sherman's resolve toward his own world view than his willingness to look at this issue without wearing intellectual blinders. Mittelberg also noted that Zindler's organization, the American Atheists, likes to portray itself as benign but is known for verbally mocking and ridiculing the church of Christ. The American Atheist magazine promotes items like bumper stickers that read "Jesus is Lard" instead of "Jesus is Lord," a fact indicating they are not an indifferent organization but one with a philosophical ideology to promote.

An ethicist like me finds Zindler's conception of "enlightened self-interest" interesting and dangerous. This ethical theory of Zindler's came to the forefront when a man in the audience asked Lane Craig how he would answer this question, if he were Zindler: "Would you agree that child pornography is immoral even though morality cannot be proven scientifically. If so, what is the genetic source of morality if we are descended from apes?" Craig said the question of the origin of the moral values we share is one of the most fundamental ethical questions we can debate. It's not necessarily true that atheists are immoral, but the atheist world view

provides no basis for objective values or morals. Zindler responds there are no ethical values “written in the stars” (a sarcastic reference to knowledge of divine will given to us by a god) and so there are no absolute values. We evolve as a social species and statistically this works to our benefit because we stay a social species. He says his enlightened self-interest gets us beyond undesirable evolutionary behavior which he says evolved with us, like genocide. His philosophy appears to say, in essence, that “if you follow your instincts with regard to others and care about how their behavior impacts you, you’re bound to do the right thing.” Zindler doesn’t say it this way, but this is what he means and, of course, it displays his acceptance of absolute codes of conduct. He repeats by paraphrasing something he said in *American Atheist* “As human beings, we are social animals. Our sociality is the result of evolution... Natural selection has equipped us with nervous systems which are peculiarly sensitive to the emotional status of our fellows.”¹ So if we follow our “gut,” and are wise to the results of our actions, we can’t go wrong.

The error in his logic can be exposed by a thought experiment. Suppose man evolves to hunt and gather for food and survives as best possible. Mankind has a desire to do those actions that help him accomplish the goals he feels he must undertake to survive, whether conquest or cooperation. Morality may evolve out of this as verbal expressions of desires to cooperate to improve fitness. Zindler would say we have a desire to help others and this maximizes our fitness. Yet, on an atheist account of reality, this explanation for moral feelings is descriptive, not prescriptive. It tells us only that the only moral codes we should adopt are those that help us further our own ends and those we deeply feel like doing. A totalitarian may feel like conquering and murdering large numbers of an ethnic group and all Zindler could say is that he has internal feelings of doing good to others and perhaps is ignoring them, and ought to follow them to maximize his own fitness even though he believes doing good promises nothing favorable to him. He ought to do good for selfish reasons, but is not obligated to do good under any other atheist presuppositions and certainly may find that doing evil gives him even more reward than doing good.

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Christian morality teaches us, however, we are obligated often to do what we do not feel like doing out of a higher, transcendent purpose, and this obligation extends through time such that others in different time periods can be judged by the same standard. Even the totalitarian can be judged even though cultural standards are at his beckon call. Atheist morality is bound to the time, place, and social standards while Christian morality is not.

Zindler’s essay in *American Atheist* would look different if he emphasized the ill will people are predisposed to do instead of the good they feel they should do because Zindler bases his advocacy of doing good on what people are naturally predisposed to do (doing good). Yet, people often do evil and the only way Zindler could encourage doing good as an absolute “ought” is to encourage it as a means to an end of getting what you want.

Put to the test, this ethic has disastrous results. Similarly, I might promote harmony in my marriage because of the positive results I get and the ill will I would get should I treat my wife terribly. But my marriage doesn’t run on such fuel and neither does society. The phrase “enlightened self-interest” could be a euphemism for selfishness and I submit it is this selfishness that drives much of the liberalized attitudes toward abortion and sexual libertinism. If a woman finds, via her “enlightened self-interest,” that she does not benefit from giving birth or caring for her new child, she may find it “moral” to kill it ever so much as a dictator who finds it in his

self-interest to commit genocide. A child, taught this ethic, is bound to find that learning the golden rule and following it is only a proper moral choice as long as rewards come his way. How can Zindler condemn any morally wrong actions when the only guide is one's personal feelings (which may lead you astray) and self-interest.

This video tape contends this was the "great debate," as if to put it on par with such greats as the Titanic, the Statue of Liberty, or the Egyptian pyramids. Perhaps even Belle might find it a great debate, as worthwhile to view as the books she treasures. Yet, she would find Zindler's arguments and philosophy every bit as stifling as the house where her beast had imprisoned her. *LS!*

1. *David Bender ed., Constructing a Life Philosophy: Opposing Viewpoints, (San Diego, Greenhaven Press, 1993)*