

Zoheir

20 June 2020

Z

13:00

Zoheir

1. Protagoras has said

"Of the Gods I can say nothing – neither that they are, nor that they are not, nor what they are. too many things prevent me from knowing: firstly the vagueness of the question and secondly the brevity of human life".

Yet many people have spoken about God, have argued either for or against his existence. We are going to talk about God in this conversation, so before we start, please respond to Protagoras. Do you think we can speak about God(s) and his (non)existence and whether the conception of God can be formulated with clarity for the purposes of a philosophical discussion?

21 June 2020

T

07:53

Tom

Protagoras is here expressing a form of agnosticism and you question picks up on his first reason: vagueness. I want to focus on one particular way of raising that problem. Protagoras might have said to his contemporaries: 'Even the most pious of you would never consider worshipping the Egyptian gods, and in future your gods will also be ignored. So when we ask if theism is true, which version do we mean?' We might add that even in the most long-lived religions, the theology is contested and changes over time.

In response to this worry, philosophers arguing about the existence of god usually start with a very minimal definition of the supernatural being. One of the first western philosophers to do this was Edward Herbert, who in 1625 argued for five 'common notions' which he claimed were universal features of all religions. Even these were a little specific and could be contested: for example one of his five is that we will be punished for our sins however it is possible to conceive a a god who is indifferent to human morality.

Oppy goes for an even more minimal definition but he still builds in a major commitment: God is the cause of the natural world. While most religions make this claim, even it could be contested.

So we do have a problem: the atheist may only ever be arguing ad hominem against the god of a specific religion or group of religions. Which is why most alleged arguments *for* atheism turn out to actually just be objections to arguments for theism.

Z

08:32

Zoheir

How can the atheist be sure that he is actually offering arguments against God himself and not just against the arguments for theism? do you think a precise definition of God can be offered? Given that we do not have access to God, and all we have seems to be definitions and arguments that theists offer, even if they are precise and adequate, can we even be atheists?

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10:11

Tom

As I suggested above, definitions of god tend to be quite specific, even when they are trying to be minimal. This makes it almost impossible to have a universal argument for atheism, at least one which proves that nothing god-like exists.

One option for the atheist is to note that in many cases it is quite rational to believe something is not the case when you have put a significant amount of effort into finding out if it is the case and failed. Perhaps we don't need a *proof* that there is no god, but merely so many attempts to show that there is a god have failed that we are now in a position for atheism to be the rational belief. This is not agnosticism, but defeasible atheism.

The atheist should also pay attention to the connection between gods and religions. A religion is a system of beliefs and practices which presupposes the existence of a god or gods which should be worshipped or venerated. The crucial word here is 'should' – religions need gods that merit worship. So it might be possible to argue against all religions. And that would be an achievement.

Z

11:38

Zoheir

1. Would you please compare the strengths and weaknesses of agnosticism and (feasible) atheism? Which one do you find all in all more rational?

2. Is it possible to offer an argument against all religions?

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18:33

Tom

(1) The atheist I have in mind argues like this: for thousands of years the greatest minds humanity can produce have tried to find reasons to believe in the existence of god and failed – it must be time to give up and just accept god does not exist. This is the same sort of inference we use when we stop searching for the missing explorer and conclude he is dead.

The agnostic might block this conclusion in two ways (setting aside the irrelevant 'you can never prove a negative' since we are not looking for proof any more. They might argue that we haven't yet reached the point that it is rational to give up trying to find evidence for or against the existence of god. Given the weight of failed attempts, this sort of argument would probably need to be backed up by a value judgement, namely that the question of the existence of god is just so important that we should keep on going for a few more millennia. While that value judgement may once have seemed compelling, it seems that 21st century humans have discovered that believing in god or not doesn't make much difference to whether someone is good or happy. So it isn't really that important after all.

The second way of blocking the conclusion would be to point to the possibility of an unknowable god. The doctrine of divine hiddenness is quite popular at the moment, but that is not the agnostic's point. Rather they are drawing attention to the fact that humans, as knowers, are part of the natural world and god is not. This point is traditionally made by saying we are finite and god is infinite, but the natural/supernatural distinction serves the agnostic's purpose better. They just want to say that the search for god actually looks impossible: it is the attempt to know the unknowable. At this point the agnostic just shrugs. Of course we don't know whether unknowable things exist or not, but that is just

cheating: if being unknowable is part of the concept of god, then we can have no interest in whether god exists or not; but if it isn't, then we have a good but defeasible reason to think god doesn't exist. One of the defeaters for that reason would be that god is unknowable, but since we can never know that god is unknowable, our reason stands undefeated.

18:38

(2) Here is a very quick argument: all religions have some element of worship of their god or gods; but any being that requires, expects or even wants to be worshipped doesn't deserve our respect let alone worship. [I like to think of this as the Trump Argument: the very way he wants you to think of him gives you a pretty compelling reason not to think that of him.]

18:43

Of course I know that there are many subtle and sophisticated theologies that try to avoid this argument, but I find it such a powerful argument precisely because once you have seen the point it is making, religions suddenly seem very silly. I have also examined a few PhD theses which have argued that god doesn't want worship from humans but mutual love. Again, that doesn't strike me as a nice personality trait: it feels arrogant or even creepy to not accept that some people just may not feel love for you.

Z

19:09

Zoheir

some religious people argue that although nature of God is unknown to us – because of our cognitive limitations– but there are signs which are available to us and point to his existence . For example, given that there is order in the world, we can infer that God has certain characteristics. Can such arguments weaken the atheist's position?

22 June 2020

T

07:28

Tom

You can only infer from a property of the world – such as order – to a property of its creator – such as wisdom – if you already have reason to believe that there is a creator. Similarly, if you think certain phenomena are 'signs' from god, attempts to communicate, then you need a reason to believe that there is a god to regard these phenomena as signs.

(Compare with SETI – the search for extra-terrestrial intelligence – which analysis information from deep space looking for signals from alien species. Whether it is reasonable to believe a candidate 'signal' is a message from an alien depends upon thinking it likely that there are aliens.)

Sometimes the argument goes slightly differently: god is the best explanation of these properties of the world such as order.

07:39

But then we are back in the territory of arguments for god, and this isn't a particularly good one. For a start, there is also lots of disorder and evil in the world. While you may be able to develop a theology that explains that once you have accepted the existence of god, it presents an obstacle for the claim that only god can explain the order.

But the biggest problem for this sort of argument is that it presupposes the principle of sufficient reason: everything has an explanation. More subtle versions of the argument will appeal to a weaker principle, namely that we should (rationally) try to explain very unlikely events. Perhaps that is correct, but then we get into a difficult argument about whether – given intelligent life exists to observe the phenomena, there

is a selection effect distorting the probabilities. It is an interesting piece of philosophy, but highly contested.

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08:01

Zoheir

Can the theist use 'the big bang' to argue that the world came into existence and therefore it must have a creator and then go on to argue for the traits of God?

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14:48

Tom

That is a very specific argument which requires three premises: (1) The Big Bang really is a singularity and physics cannot intelligibly ask what came 'before' it, i.e. from the perspective of physics this is a moment of creation; (2) it must have a cause, i.e. the Principle of Sufficient Reason holds; (3) that cause is necessarily supernatural or divine.

(1) is a matter for the physicists, but it is worth noting that not all physicists agree.

(2) is widely held but philosophically contestable. We should be careful not to slip from the strong intuitive resistance to the thought that the Big Bang just happened for no reason, it was just a random event, to the conclusion that there must be an explanation. We may feel very uncomfortable without an explanation, but perhaps we just have to live with that.

There is also a sleight of hand here. From the perspective of physics, (1) tells us that the Big Bang is effectively self-caused. If that is not acceptable, as (2) implies, then we should ask why an uncaused god is any better than an uncaused Big Bang? We often fail to notice that the PSR entails that the cause of the Big Bang also needs a cause by telling ourselves that God is infinite, omnipotent etc. But we cannot allow that move because we haven't yet established there is a creator let alone what its properties are.

Which takes us to premise (3). Suppose we agree that there has to be a cause of the Big Bang (2) and it isn't to be found in physics (1), it is still a huge leap to conclude it is a god-like cause. All we could conclude is that there is some unknown cause using an unknown causal mechanism. In particular, there is no reason to assume it is intelligent or even powerful. This cause is outside the laws of physics, but that does mean it is not part of a wider natural order governed by different scientific laws. And it certainly does not mean it is intelligent, that it knows what it is doing in creating our universe.

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16:48

Zoheir

You have argued against God being the best explanation for physical features like order, What about moral features like 'good', can one argue that the best possible explanation for 'good' is God?

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16:54

Tom

Can we clarify the question? Are we trying to explain why good acts happen, why people do good things? Or are we trying to explain why somethings which people do (for whatever reason) are good things to do and others bad things to do?

Z

16:59

Zoheir

I mean "goodness" (because for many people in Iran good is understood in some kind of platonic sense, maybe it's a good idea to criticize this perception as well)

17:00

And they tend to perceive evil in privation terms

17:00

Similar to Augustine

17:01

(So for example they argue that order and beauty and goodness are best explained by God)

17:03

(Something like objective moral truths, some Christians also argue that without god all we can have is moral relativism)

23 June 2020

T

07:25

Tom

So let us concentrate on the property of goodness – which seems well-suited to sustain objective moral truths. And let's think of human goodness: good people and the things they do.

And to make things clear, I am not going to consider all human goodness but the limit, what is sometimes called moral sainthood. Such a person has a sustained pattern of behaviour, over most of their adult life, of putting the interests of other people in general (so not just certain other people) before their own.

This is different from a single dramatic act of self-sacrifice, such as the policeman who dies saving five people by facing down the gunman. It is also different from a selective act of self-sacrifice, such as the parent who works two jobs so that their children can have a good education, or the child who gives up their career and relationships to care for a disabled parent. These are all good acts, but it seems like they can be explained by the duties and obligations inherent in human society.

So the sort of goodness I want to consider is the person who gives up their life to helping strangers, perhaps in small, undramatic ways, but always systematically putting their needs first. (Well, of course such a person will have to see to their own basic needs – mental and physical health – but they put others' needs ahead of their wants.) There are and always have been such people.

This sort of goodness is the polar opposite of evil. And theists are often challenged with explaining the existence of evil, so shouldn't atheists be challenged with explaining the existence of good?

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07:47

Tom

I think the answer to this is simply 'No'. When the theist is challenged with the problem of evil, it is because the theist has an overall conception of the nature of reality which makes the existence of evil seem problematic, but the atheist does not. But a world with evil is just as much a world with moral features as a world with goodness, so there is nothing within atheism that rules out moral features in the world.

If the atheist simply says 'It is a feature of human nature that some people are good and that is no more surprising than any other feature of human nature' have they failed to explain something? Well suppose there was no good or evil, that humans just sometimes did selfish things, sometimes kind ones, but it was all just a bit random. Would that need explaining? I think that in challenging us to explain the existence of goodness, the theist is presupposing that goodness, as I have defined it above, needs more explanation than selfishness (or – a more plausible option – unreflective behaviour).

What has happened here is a switch. Goodness, beauty, the amazing order of the natural world are all things we value. The atheist can explain scientifically how the things which are good or beautiful or intricate came into existence. The theist then asks for an explanation of their being good or beautiful or intricate. But the atheist can refuse and instead say that what needs explaining is rather why we value these things, why we find them good or beautiful or intricate (other creatures may not).

This is a version of Euthyphro's problem: Do we find them good because they are good, or are they good because we find them so?

The important lesson that Plato was teaching us there is: whichever option you take, you have an explanation.

07:49

[By the way, you haven't commented on my answers. Are they suitable/useful? It is a bit difficult to work out the right way to pitch these things.]

Z

07:50

Zoheir

Yes so far they are Great, thanks

07:50

I hope the questions are good

I'm incorporating some of the questions which we have been asked

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07:51

Tom

I could tell that. I realise my answers are quite 'philosophical' in that I am not being direct, but trying to bring out some of the complexities in the debate. Is that working?

Z

07:51

Zoheir

Yes in fact this is what we are looking for

07:57

You mentioned problem of evil, how strong is the problem of evil (or argument from evil)? And what can it achieve? Can we say that evil can successfully establish God's non-existence? And given that there are various versions of it (problem of hell, unreasonable pain and suffering and ...) which one do you think is the strongest?

24 June 2020

T

08:05

Tom

A lot of people think the problem of evil is a strong objection to theism, but it seems to me that it is a stronger objection to specific *theologies*, accounts of god's nature.

We can see this clearly with the most general form of the argument: why is evil even possible? Why did god create this world in which bad things can and do happen? Surely, if he is a good god, he wants all people to go to heaven, but then why not just create heaven with everyone happy and no evil?

While such an argument is superficially very persuasive, it does not in fact work because it depends upon attributing specific, anthropomorphic intentions to god. It is effectively saying: If I was god, then I would do such-and-such. And we know that sort of argument works pretty badly when trying to understand other humans, let alone gods.

A similar mistake is made by forms of the argument from evil which focus on specific evil events and ask 'How could a good god allow that to happen?' While we might understand bad things happening to people as punishments, as consequences of their actions, there are some terrible things which happen to young and innocent children which we simply cannot imagine being justified by any divine purpose.

This is again superficially very powerful, but makes the same mistake: it limits the motives of a good god to the motives of a good human. So it leaves space for the theist to say that god's motives are not like that, since he is divine. Perhaps we cannot understand them.

The third form of the argument looks at the overall balance of good and evil in the created world. Let's do this as if we were utilitarians and look at the balance of pleasure and pain (this is a simplification, of course). Suppose we think that the balance of pleasure and pain in the world tips in favour of pain. There is more pain than pleasure. This means that the average human life will have more pain than pleasure, though the distribution is not equal. Now while we might not understand god's motives for allowing specific evil events or for the unequal distribution of pleasure and pain, surely it is a bad thing by any standards to create a whole universe where there is more pain than pleasure?

But this argument is also easy for the theist to rebut by appeal to theology: if we believe in an afterlife, this universe is merely one stage in god's plan for humans. So what would matter is what the balance of pleasure and pain is when we take heaven into account.

However, there is a 'meta' problem of evil: the theist's responses to the problem of evil have to make evil somehow inevitable – it flows from god's intentions in creating the world, whatever they may be. But this seems to contradict our moral belief that we should try to get rid of the evil in the world. We may not succeed, but we morally ought to try to make the world better and better until there is no evil.

This moral belief seems to require us to act against god's plans. How can it be the case that we ought to try to stop god's plans for us? This isn't a purely theoretical problem because the tension between religion and morality we find here often underlies the atrocities performed in the name of religion.

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08:30

Zoheir

[I will ask further questions about the answers you have given at the end, to clarify some points you have made to the readers. Now I will ask the main questions]

08:32

How about “meaning of life”? Can life have any meaning without god? What is the difference between a meaningful life with god and a meaningful life without god?

25 June 2020

T

11:16

Tom

This is a tough question because the idea of the meaning of life has very different significance to different people. In particular, for many the very idea that life has a meaning is nonsense. What we should look at then is something less controversial, namely whether one can live a meaningful life, in the sense of one which, on reflection, was a life worth living.

Let’s agree that some people find that their religious beliefs make their life meaningful to them, and that other people find other things – loving relationships, bringing up children, achieving their personal goals etc. – make their life meaningful to them. Both groups might reflect back on their deathbeds and think they had a life worth living.

The theist you have in mind in this question is then suggesting that the person who finds their life meaningful without god is under some sort of illusion: it isn’t really meaningful after all.

One ancient version of this thought is that if you seek meaningfulness in contingent matters, such as your children doing well or your personal goals being achieved, then there is always the risk that these things will fail and you will be left with nothing. This is what Solon seems to have been thinking when he allegedly said ‘Call no man happy until he dies’: all your successes and achievements may crumble before your eyes.

In contrast, the theist will claim that god is eternal and immutable, so if you find meaning in god, then you are guaranteed not to lose it.

There are two responses to this. The first is to note that what in fact gives meaning to the theist’s life is not god but beliefs and practices focussed on god. The theist’s claim is that their life is made meaningful by god, but the atheist’s life is not. If the mere existence of god made human lives meaningful, then the atheist would have an equally meaningful life. So what matters is that the theist believes in god and practices some form of religion.

However, those religious beliefs and practices are just as contingent as anything which makes the atheist’s life meaningful. Faith can be lost and all believers go through periods of doubt. But equally religious practices can be misguided: what if god exists but you have the wrong religion? Furthermore the options for religion change over time. After all, both Christianity and Islam have precise and relatively recent inception dates. So the immutability of god does not after all translate into immutable meaningfulness for the theist, since the meaningfulness they find is mediated by human beliefs and practices.

The second response is to note that the sort of meaningfulness religion offers is not very inspiring: my life is made meaningful by being part of god’s (possibly inscrutable) plan for humanity. That is derivative or instrumental meaningfulness: god creates the meaning by having the plans and projects and we help deliver them. Contrast this with the atheist’s meaningful life where the meaning derives from each person’s choices, plans and projects.

For the theist, then, it is fairly easy to make one’s life meaningful: just do what the religious leaders tell

you. In contrast, making a meaningful life for the atheist is hard work, takes reflection, needs continual revision. But which is better? There is an undeniable sense that religion provides meaningfulness by infantilizing humans; and the language of humans being 'God's children' is surprisingly common in much religion.

So along with the effort and uncertainty the atheist faces in making their life meaningful comes a much higher standard of meaningfulness: we are responsible for the choices which determine whether our life is meaningful. If the atheist makes those choices badly, they may end up regretting them and finding their life to be meaningless. But if they make them well, then there is much greater satisfaction to be had, and their life is more meaningful. With responsibility comes reward.

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12:39

Zoheir

There are also phenomena which some theists argue are best explained by God. For example, Plantinga has argued that our cognitive faculties and reasoning cannot be trusted if we accept naturalism and evolution. In addition to this question, do you think there is anything for which God is the best explanation – in comparison to atheistic explanations?

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15:51

Tom

[I really don't like Plantinga's argument – it has so many holes in it. But I will have ago.]

15:52

Rather than discuss Plantinga's argument in detail – the 1993 version has been conclusively refuted and the 2008 version only addresses a very specific form of naturalism (taken to be the denial of theism) which has trouble explaining most things about human life – I would like to consider the more general approach of arguments to the best explanation. A crucial feature of these arguments is that they do not claim that the atheist cannot explain the phenomena, only that god is a better explanation. That means that the details really matter.

Plantinga rightly uses Bayes Theorem to argue that the probability that god exists given certain features of human cognition is greater than the probability god does not exist given those features. And that conclusion is reached by looking at the probability that those features exist given god exists and given god does not exist. Now the probability of human cognition given evolutionary naturalism (the conjunction of evolutionary theory and the denial of god) can be worked out using empirical methods. It may be really quite low, but it is something we know how to assess. What about the probability of human cognition given god exists? That is the same as the question of the probability that god chose to create human minds like this. And now we have the problem: how do we even start working out that probability? There are an infinite number of possible worlds without human cognition, or with radically different human cognition, which god could have chosen to create. In fact, he could have chosen to create a world in which human cognitive faculties were really, really unreliable – the way that Plantinga thinks the evolutionary naturalist has to think they actually are.

What is the probability god chose to create this world? Well, if we followed Leibniz and claimed this was the best of all possible worlds, then that would make it highly likely to have been chosen by a good god, and almost certainly not chosen by a bad god. Furthermore, we don't have any evidence that this is the best of all possible worlds and plenty that it isn't (see the Problem of Evil), and we still haven't addressed the probability that god chooses to create any world at all. If by 'god' we just mean 'some supernatural

being' then we have to consider the possibility that some supernatural created the world as a joke or to annoy his wife.

So in order to get the result that Plantinga, and others who appeal to god as an explanation, need, we have to attribute some really quite specific properties to god. In Plantinga's case, that one of god's purposes in creating the world was that humans should have reliable cognitive faculties. Now, of course the probability that humans have reliable cognitive faculties given the existence of an omnipotent god who wanted to create a world where humans have reliable cognitive faculties is very high, probably 1. But the prior probability of such a god is low: it takes a particular arrogance to think that, of all the possible supernatural beings who might have created the universe for all their different reasons, the one who cares about humans is most likely. (To be fair, I suspect the theist is not being arrogant but depending upon another source of knowledge: revelation. But that is question begging in the current dialectic.)

So here is the general problem: the more specific properties you attribute to god in order to raise the conditional probability that if god existed this phenomenon would exist (i.e. make god a strong explanation), the more you lower the prior probability of god's existence (i.e. make god an unlikely explanation).

In other words, the existence of god isn't really the right sort of fact to *explain* anything.

Z

16:18

Zoheir

How did you become an atheist? What has been the most convincing argument for atheism for you?

Was there an argument which convinced you that atheism is rational?

26 June 2020

T

07:41

Tom

As I said earlier in the interview, I don't think that there is an argument for atheism in the sense that people have offered arguments for the existence of god. Rather, atheism is the rational conclusion when you have investigated the question to the appropriate extent (given the seriousness of the matter) and not found any reason to believe in the existence of god.

I had a fairly religious upbringing but when I was 16 I realised that – despite some clear role models – there was no correlation between religious belief and being a better, kinder, wiser person. As I would now say: I saw that religious belief was neither necessary nor sufficient to be a good person or live a good life.

Then as I studied more philosophy I paid attention to arguments for the existence of god and discovered that each and every one was flawed in some way or another.

During this time – and to this date – I still enjoy attending religious services. I like the rituals, the language, the art, the tradition. But I also take them as opportunities to reflect on human nature and what motivates people to accept religions. There seem to be three drivers:

1. People want morality to be externalised and connected to rewards and punishments. That way the difficult responsibility to find the right thing to do in a messy world is taken away and replaced by rules

and sanctions.

2. People want there to be an afterlife. Partly because they cannot grieve well for those they have lost, instead preferring to think they are still there in more than just memory (this also explains the related belief in ghosts). Partly because imagining a world without oneself forces one to shift perspective from an egocentric one where everything revolves around yourself to one where you do not matter at all. This last point is under-explored but it is also relevant to the common theme in many religions that the world will end: even when we imagine ourselves in heaven, we struggle with imagining the world going on indefinitely without us, as if we didn't matter to it.

3. People want there to be Divine Providence, they want a sense that their own powerlessness, their own inability to guarantee the safety and happiness of their loved ones, doesn't matter because god will make sure it is all going to work out well in the end.

Rationally, those desires are not reasons to believe in the existence of god, but reasons to not yet conclude atheism, reasons to keep the enquiry going. If you have these desires, especially if you feel them strongly, then the issue of whether god exists or not will matter a great deal to you. So the failure of existing attempts to prove god's existence will not lead you to become an atheist.

So it was my reflection on those desires which was crucial. And as I thought more about them, I realised that in so far as I felt those desires, they were not desires I wanted to have, not ones which I could be proud of. Rather they were desires which seemed to make me a weaker, less honourable person. (Again, notice that many religions emphasise human weakness and frailty precisely to make us more comfortable with these motivations.) At that point I thought it was reasonable to conclude that, given there was no reason to believe in the existence of god despite thousands of years of trying to find one, nor any good reason to care enough to keep enquiring further, god does not exist.

Z

12:07

Zoheir

Based on your explanation, can we call you a "friendly atheist"? What do you think about militant atheism? Should atheists try to eradicate religion and theism? (Please keep in mind that Iran has a religious government, so basically what is your suggestion for Iranian atheists?)

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14:10

Tom

That's a good way of putting it. I do not think religion is necessarily bad – or at least no worse than any other false belief and there are enough of those! Furthermore, religious practices and art can be intensely beautiful and moving. For example, I personally find the call to prayer – Allahu Akbar – to be one of the most beautiful and inspiring pieces of music I have come across. Every time I hear it, I have to stop and listen. (During this pandemic we are all working from home and one of my colleagues is in Turkey – sometimes I hear the call during our Zoom meetings and have to stop talking. She is not religious and finds it rather strange that I like the call so much.)

What we do need to avoid is the use of religion in other spheres of discourse: morality, politics, education, science. These are all complex areas where we need careful and balanced approaches to make good decisions. We need a marketplace of ideas, we need discussion, we need collaboration across disagreement. Religious belief can hinder all those things: if your views on morality or politics or climate

change or public health, to name a few, are based on your religious beliefs, then it will be harder for you to recognize that someone who disagrees with you may do so with good reasons. And that makes respectful debate problematic and consensus – so necessary for societies to survive – almost impossible.

There is one other feature of religious thinking we need to avoid. This is not intrinsic to religion but is very common amongst religious people (the USA is a clear example). Suppose a religious person thinks that something I want to do is morally wrong – gay marriage for example – then they are entitled to that opinion and to try to persuade me to stop. But they are not entitled to force me to stop, either through violence or through enacting laws (which is just state sanctioned violence). Trying to stop other people from 'sinning' is the most unpleasant feature of many forms of religion.

If you are a theist you may well think that god is offended or hurt by my sinning, but it doesn't follow that he wants you to stop me. After all, if he wanted to stop me sinning, he could do it himself. (See the discussion of the problem of evil.) If we could eradicate the misplaced desire to interfere in other people's lives, religion would be pretty much harmless.

Z

15:12

Zoheir

Some would say that death is too frightening – as the end of everything– and they cannot face a life that ends in death that's why they cannot abandon belief in god. How can such people learn to face reality and abandon belief in God?

27 June 2020

T

08:01

Tom

Dying can be painful and unpleasant in many ways, but we rarely get to choose how we die and this is not made any better by a belief in god. So that fear is not what is at stake here.

So the relevant fear is directed not at dying but being dead, no longer existing. Most philosophers think this is an irrational fear and I agree. The traditional reason for this comes from Epicurus: when you are dead you feel nothing (and think nothing) so there is nothing good or bad for you. knowing you are dead would be frightening, but that is impossible so not something to be feared.

Your question suggests another explanation for some people's fear of death, namely that it is 'the end of everything'. If that is why someone fears death, there are a couple of things to point out. Firstly, it is most definitely not the end of everything: your friends and family, the things of beauty that you love so much, these things may all continue after your death. That is why humans have the convention of writing (and huge respect for) wills: we want to be able to continue to influence the world, to do good, after our deaths. That desire shows that really we do not believe that death is the end of everything.

Secondly, even when we focus on our subjective experiences, which will certainly end when we die, it is not clear that this is something to fear. One reason is that death will end the bad experiences as well as the good ones, and there are a lot of bad experiences! Another is that what makes so many of our experiences valuable to us is the fact that life is limited. Suppose you were immortal, then you would have time to do everything, which would make doing those things less of an achievement. For example, I would like to write a novel, go night running on the Maasai Mara, visit Shiraz, learn Chinese, cross the Atlantic by ship etc. It is impossible for me to do all those things – there just isn't enough time – so the ones I do

manage to achieve are even more special to me. If I was immortal, then it would become boring.

But by the same reasoning, an early death is something to be feared, for then we don't have enough time to achieve very much. And if our bodies could keep going, it might be nice to live a bit longer (though in many countries there is a clear sense in which many people live too long: medicine keeps their bodies going past the time they can enjoy life). But it does not follow that we should fear all death. On the contrary, there can be good deaths, deaths where the person is satisfied with what they have achieved, that they have lived a good life, and is happy for it to come to an end.

So if you fear death, the best thing to ask yourself is: at what point would I be satisfied that I have done enough with my life? What is it I want to achieve by being alive and when will I have achieved it?

Z

09:44

Zoheir

Some would argue that God as a bodiless person with certain traits is meaningless. Do you find this line of reasoning (not lack of evidence for god, but meaninglessness of god and certain religious concepts) persuasive?

Would one count as an atheist if he said (existing) definitions of god are meaningless?

28 June 2020

T

08:47

Tom

The theist has always had a problem specifying the attributes of god. The fact that god is by definition supernatural isn't the problem: a deist might claim that there is some sort of supernatural being but that it is impossible for us to know or even imagine what it is like. But such a deist will think all religions are misguided and based on errors.

The theist must find a way for us to know enough about god to justify religion. And this is where you problems arrive, because it looks like god has to have inconsistent properties. God is supernatural but intervenes in the natural world (e.g. through miracles or answering prayers), god is everywhere but also cares about each person, god knows what we are going to do but gives us freedom, god loves sinners as much as pious people but will send them to hell, god is eternal but also historical (e.g.. let's his will unfold over time through a sequence of prophets). The list goes on and on and Christianity has its own special problems.

These theological claims are either: (1) within reason; (2) above reason; (3) against reason. It is almost universal for theists to deny (1): the key features of god are known not through reason but revelation. They might argue that we can infer that god is good or wise from the nature of creation, but only good enough or wise enough to have made this messy, complex and flawed world. So to get to stronger claims, they will have to appeal to revelation at some point. God must speak to humans, sometimes directly but usually through prophets.

09:00

This creates two problems: the first is to establish the veracity of the source. There are many false prophets! And many crazy people who believe that god is talking to them. The usual method for proving it is genuine revelation is for it to be associated with a miracle. But miracles are hard (maybe impossible) to prove and conflicting religions all claim miracles. So it is always rational to be sceptical of any purported

revelation.

The second problem is to do with the content of the revelation. Revelation is a form of testimony, gaining knowledge from other people. Whether one should accept testimony depends in part on the reliability of the source (just noted) but also on the plausibility of what they are saying. If what someone tells you goes against reason, then you have reason to reject what they are saying, however apparently reliable they are. At least until they can show it does not really go against reason. Thus we might accept the paradoxes of quantum mechanics on testimony because the physicist is only saying it appears to go against reason, not that it actually does. If an alleged revelation openly goes against reason, then we should reject it.

That means that the theist is in the tricky position of trying to make the attributes of god above or beyond reason but not against reason. They must not be internally contradictory but also must not contradict something reason demands we accept (an example here is the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, which contradicts the transitivity of identity).

I don't think the atheist can show that this is impossible and many theologians are very clever. But if the most fundamental doctrines of a specific religion are against reason, that is a very strong objection to it.

Z

09:18

Zoheir

1. Would you elaborate on the differences between agnosticism and deism? (to make both of them clearer for those who read the interview)

2. Can suspension of judgment on god (as a skeptical strategy) – given the existing evidence – and looking for further evidence be rational?

29 June 2020

T

07:59

Tom

1. Deism is the simple one to understand: a deist thinks there is evidence to believe in some kind of supernatural being – often because they accept the Principle of Sufficient Reason and think we need such a being to explain the existence of the natural world – but they think that there is no evidence to think that this being pays any attention to the world let alone cares about human beings. So a deist might say: there are no miracles, there is no divine providence, there is no will of god, it is pointless to pray or follow any religion. Thus the deist and the atheist agree *in practice*. They agree how we should behave, they just disagree on whether there is something else outside the natural world.

The agnostic is a little harder to understand. The agnostic thinks that there is no reason to believe in the existence of god, but nor is there any reason to deny it. They are not sceptical – they do not deny that there might be reasons – they just think we are in a position where we don't know one way or another.

Agnostics fall into two groups: the lazy and the concerned. The lazy agnostic simply doesn't want to take sides or get into an argument. They see that the arguments for god fail and that there is no decisive argument for atheism, so think it is simplest to shrug their shoulders and move on. In my view, a lazy agnostic is really an atheist – if they had the courage to admit it, they should accept that we have reached a point where it is rational to deny that god exists. And their behaviour is like that of the atheist.

A concerned agnostic still thinks it really matters whether god exists or not, they care about the question. They just haven't made up their minds yet. A concerned agnostic will be tempted to follow religious practices 'just in case'. And they will keep seeking arguments for god's existence.

T

08:16

Tom

2. Sceptical suspension of judgement is a very distinctive thing. It should only really happen when you are convinced that for every argument there is an opposing one and thus it is impossible to know. This may look very like lazy agnosticism, but there is a difference: the agnostic claims that we haven't answered the question yet but the sceptic claims we cannot.

The thing about scepticism is that it is not meant to make a practical difference: even though we cannot know the truth, we should still accept the appearances. The great 16th century French essayist Montaigne was the first to realise that if you are a sceptic about god, it does not follow that you should give up religion like the lazy atheist, but nor should you practice religion 'just in case' like the concerned atheist. Both of those are attempts to base your behaviour on the unknowable truth rather than the appearances. And if you are brought up in and live in a society where religion is practiced, then the appearances are that god exists and religion is necessary – those were the very appearances which led you to ask if god really exists. The genuine sceptic starts by questioning the appearances and ends up by accepting them. Thus a sceptic who is brought up in and lives in a largely secular society should ignore religion but one who is brought up in a largely religious society should accept it.

I am sure my explanation of scepticism will puzzle many because I have had to do it so briefly. Many think of the sceptic as challenging widely accepted beliefs and that is right, the sceptic does challenge them, but they conclude that it is impossible to know the truth. So what is the sceptic left with? The very things that were there before the challenge. Scepticism does not change society, it reinforces it. [A similar argument could be made about relativism – the rational relativist should accept the common beliefs of their society.]

Z

09:46

Zoheir

(Thanks this is very illuminating. Two follow ups to the fear of death):

1. If we are going to die anyway, and that's that, why shouldn't we commit suicide and finish it off? Should atheists refrain from suicide?

2. Does being an atheist have any implications for anti-Natalism?

T

10:32

Tom

1. Suicide is an interesting one. Some religions have a prohibition on suicide – it is a great sin – precisely to stop people taking a shortcut to heaven. But what should the atheist do? Well, if he has decided his life is no longer worth living (perhaps he has an incurable disease and is in great pain that cannot be relieved) then he should commit suicide. But if he has something to live for, person things in the future he will enjoy, or children to support, or people who rely on him for their jobs, then he should not. It is a simple decision about whether his continuing to live is going to make the world better or not.

So for a fully rational atheist, suicide is always an option, always one of the alternatives. But if you have people who love you, people who depend on you, plans for things you want to do with your life, then it is probably the wrong choice.

10:41

2. Anti-natalism is an extreme view, holding that it is never right to have children. Some religions seem to hold the opposite position, namely that everyone has a duty to have children.

It is hard to see how, without religion, it could be true that everyone has a duty to (try to) have children. So the atheist thinks it is a decision each person has to make for themselves (or as a couple). They may come to accept anti-natalism and decide not to have children for that reason. But they may decide to not have children because they can't afford to bring them up well, or because they live in an overpopulated country, or because they think they will not be good parents, or simply because they would rather live a life without children. Some people think it is selfish to not have children because it would interfere with your life, but that only makes sense against a background assumption that there is some sort of duty to procreate. And the atheist will deny that duty.

Equally though an atheist may decide to have children. They may think there is a good chance that their children will be happy people, or people who make a contribution to society. They may think that the pleasure of having children is something they want and is worth the risk that the child will be unhappy.

Each person has to make these decisions for themselves and with great care.

Z

10:49

Zoheir

So how do you assess Albert Camus' claim that there is only serious philosophical problem and that's suicide: deciding whether or not our life is worth living.

T

11:07

Tom

That seems correct. The problem is that most people who read Camus think he is implying it is a difficult problem, that finding reasons not to commit suicide is hard. But that is simply not true: our lives are full of little reasons not to commit suicide. There doesn't need to be one big reason which is always there, just an accumulation of small reasons on a day to day basis.

11:12

It is probably worth saying that these reasons will differ for everyone. Perhaps you have dependents or loving relationships. But equally a good meal, a bottle of fine wine, going for a run, playing sport, having sex, these can all be reasons not to commit suicide.

Z

11:14

Zoheir

Suppose that there is a god and you will face him on the day of judgment. If he on that day asks you, what kind of evidence would have convinced you to believe in me, what would you say?

T

11:16

Tom
Nice question!

Z
11:17
Zoheir
Thnx :)
30 June 2020

T
08:05
Tom

This is a really interesting question and not one I had thought about before. My first response, as an atheist, is 'Nothing' because I have come to the conclusion god doesn't exist so apparent evidence for his existence would be misleading. I could reinforce this assertion by pointing out that if god exists he is a necessary existent, so, given I believe he does not exist, the supposition in your question is impossible. You are in effect asking: if the impossible were true, what evidence would I accept for it?

While these responses are correct, they fail to do justice to the subtlety of the question. If I want to answer that no evidence would suffice, I need to show that god is – for me – epistemically impossible, which roughly equates to unimaginable or inconceivable. Now it looks implausible to say that god is unimaginable or inconceivable because religions provide precisely that: rich and detailed conceptions of god. We would have to show that each of those conceptions was self-contradictory in a way that could not be fixed (was against reason as I described it earlier) and by and large theologians are far too clever for that to be feasible.

However, there are examples of necessary propositions which are such that both their truth and their falsity is conceivable, but we cannot answer the question: what evidence would make us believe they are true? Goldbach's Conjecture is one such example. It says that every even integer greater than 4 is the sum of two odd primes. According to Wikipedia, it has been tested up to 4×10^{18} . But there are still an infinite number of even numbers to be checked. So Goldbach's Conjecture is like atheism: we have reached a point where it is reasonable to believe it is true but we don't have a proof for it. Now we can easily imagine a counterexample to Goldbach's Conjecture, an even integer which turns out not to be the sum of two primes. And we can imagine a counterexample to atheism, in fact that is precisely what your question does by imagining me standing in judgement before god.

Therefore the simplest answer to god's question is: you have just given it to me. But that wasn't the point of the question, which was asking what evidence I would need to believe in god *before death*. And that is equivalent to asking 'What evidence would I need to deny Goldbach's Conjecture before finding a counterexample?' The answer 'A proof' is not good enough because we have no idea what a proof of the truth or falsity of Goldbach's Conjecture would look like.

So my answer to god's question would be; 'I really don't know – it would have to be something completely different to any proof for the existence of god that anyone has ever offered and I cannot imagine that.'

Z
08:22
Zoheir

Would you please tell us when did atheism become a real option for European intellectuals? And what paved the path for it ? (Scientific progress, politics art...)

T

11:45

Tom

[btw did you say this was going out on a Telegram channel? May I have the link? I'm just curious.]

Z

11:49

Zoheir

No we asked in a telegram channel what questions they have about god. Most questions I asked you were asked by the members of this channel.

<https://t.me/philosopherin>

I am translating them and will publish them along with Graham Oppy's book.

By the way I will add an English title for it in the footnote

Is this good?👉

"Atheism" in conversation with Tom Stoneham (Professor of philosophy, university of York).

11:49

We will upload a pdf copy of the book on this and other channels

T

11:53

As to title, how about 'Conversation about atheism'. I am enjoying it so much that I am thinking about editing and publishing in English

Z

11:53

Zoheir

Ok great

11:53

Good idea

Z

15:46

Zoheir

In reply to [this message](#)

2. (A follow up on deism and agnosticism)

What are your arguments against deism? Is deism a rational position to be held today?

1 July 2020

T

17:11

Tom

In reply to [this message](#)

It was around the beginning of the 18th century that intellectuals started to publicly argue against religion in all its forms. (There were one or two exceptions in the previous century but most philosophers who were accused of atheism – like Hobbes and Spinoza – were quite cautious in print. Being believed to be an atheist seriously affect your social position and career as late as 1776 – when Hume died having withheld some things from publication.) Few of these were atheists in our sense – many more were deists. They liked to call themselves ‘freethinkers’ and while most were quite socially and morally respectable, a few were libertines who rejected all moral norms which put duty ahead of pleasure.

The cause of the change was a mixture of things. The explanatory power of materialistic science was becoming widely accepted. The political power of the church was weakening after almost two centuries of religious warfare. Censorship was relaxed in many countries making publication easier and cheaper. Europeans travelled to and traded with more of the world, learning about the varieties of cultures and religions.

One factor that is often underestimated was the improvement in biblical scholarship. As well as science, historical methods were improving and historians learned how to work out which texts were authentic and which reliable, how to piece together an accurate picture of the past from multiple sources. These skills were then applied to biblical texts and it became rapidly apparent to scholars that these were not the simple, factual historical records of events that the church wanted us to believe they were. And once you question the historical accuracy of the bible, the main source of religious authority collapsed. If the bible is not reliable on who said and did what and when, then how can it be reliable on other matters?

Most religions depend upon the authority of a sacred text. If the sacred text doesn't purport to be a historical record of events which are meant to demonstrate the truth and power of god, then it will survive scholarly critique like this. But that was not the situation in Europe.

For Christianity the crucial historical event is the resurrection of Jesus. If that didn't happen, then the religion collapses. But it turned out that while there is some confirmatory evidence that Jesus lived and was crucified, the only evidence for the resurrection comes from the gospels written by his disciples. Even worse: not even all the gospels say he was resurrected, just the ones in the official bible. There were others but they were excluded, not on grounds of historical inaccuracy but because they didn't support the picture of Christianity that the Roman Emperor Constantine selected more than a thousand years before.

17:14

In reply to [this message](#)

I think I can answer this one quite quickly. Yes, deism is a rational position to hold if you accept the Principle of Sufficient Reason and the contingency of the natural world. With those two premises you can easily argue that the natural world needs some non-natural (a deist will avoid ‘supernatural’ because it implies better than natural) cause or causes, which is all a deist believes: there is something else.

But it is important to remember that a deist *behaves* just like an atheist, for the deist's non-natural being does not care about humanity or intervene in our lives. It doesn't even support a life after death.

Z

17:25

Zoheir

There is another position which we have not yet touched upon, namely pantheism. Do you think pantheism is a genuine philosophical position or is it merely a “euphemism” for atheism? If it's a genuine position how do you assess it?

17:29

2. (Follow up, scepticism): today societies are heterogeneous, so there is always possible that we live with religious and non religious people together. Sometimes even one of the parents is follower of one religion and another is an atheist. Given that the sceptic assess problems only based on appearances, what should he do if he is in a heterogeneous position?

2 July 2020

T

07:40

Tom

In reply to [this message](#)

By 'pantheism' I take it you are referring to the doctrine which takes the universe, the sum of everything, to be god. A weak form of pantheism would be pretty much indistinguishable from atheism, merely replacing the atheist's denial that we need a (non-natural) explanation of why the natural world exists with the view that the universe explains its own existence, is self-causing in the sense that god is meant to be. If all 'self-causing' amounts to is 'necessarily exists', that is not very plausible (the world is prima facie contingent) but certainly not a form of theism.

A stronger form of pantheism would claim that the universe is not merely self-explanatory but also has some supernatural property such as a spirit or soul. It might even go so far as to claim that the universe has intentions or purposes. This would certainly be a form of theism, but it is not any easier to argue for than traditional theism.

T

07:58

Tom

In reply to [this message](#)

Yes, you are right that societies are much less homogenous than in the 16th century when Montaigne was writing. But when the sceptic tells you to follow the appearances, he can relativize those appearances to quite specific circumstances. The appearances for someone brought up in a religious household will be different from those brought up in a secular one. But equally, they may differ for siblings brought up in a mixed household because neither will have exactly the same experiences: perhaps one gets on better with their mother and the other with their father. But equally the appearances for someone are not fully determined by their social context – there are also the people.

I think that if Montaigne was writing now, he would probably be very interested in why some young people rebel against their family and upbringing whereas others conform. I am sure he would find examples which suggest that it is often to do with your role models. Young people look at those around them and make decisions on the basis of whose life they would like to emulate.

Z

11:10

Zoheir

David Hume argued in his dialogues that mysticism isn't distinguishable from atheism or agnosticism. How much emphasis on human ignorance would enable a demarcation between the theist and the atheist?

3 July 2020

T

11:37

Tom

Hume defines mystics as those 'who maintain the absolute incomprehensibility of the Deity' and his point is that this doctrine has exactly the same consequences for how you should live your life as atheism or what I have called 'lazy agnosticism' and he calls 'scepticism'. The point is a good one: if god is entirely incomprehensible, then we cannot draw any conclusions at all from his existence other than he exists. He also ridicules the claim that god's incomprehensibility explains the 'strange mixture of phenomena', i.e. the blend of good and bad in the world. Something incomprehensible cannot explain anything.

11:44

These are good points. And they point to a deeper issue: there is only any point in being a theist if it has consequences for your behaviour. So the sharp divide is between the religious (in a broad sense) and the irreligious. Now irreligion might be rational because you have a rational belief that god does not exist, or it might be rational because you do not know anything about god which would affect your behaviour.

The problem here is that thousands of years of religion have made the inference from 'There is or might be some god (i.e. supernatural being / creator)' to 'We should respect and worship that god' seem obvious. But it is a fallacy – religious practices do not follow from the existence of god but the attributes of god.

Z

11:45

Zoheir

Would you please briefly explain what is your argument against principle of sufficient reason? (Follow up on deism)

5 July 2020

Z

07:18

Zoheir

How do you assess the following argument as an argument to refute the God of religion? Religious worldview consists of angels, demons, jinns, satan and so on and the scientific worldview consists of physical particles, mathematical equations, cells and so on. It seems like the scientific worldview is way better (even by Quine's pragmatic standard for choosing between Homer's gods and physical particles) and religion has a false metaphysical baggage. Some may argue that the scientific worldview does not include demons and jinns but it can include God. Now whatever god the theist scientist may postulate (first cause or whatever), it is not the god of religion (the god of demons and jinns) and therefore not suitable for worship.

T

08:39

Tom

In reply to [this message](#)

That is a good objection to a religion which fills the natural world with supernatural beings – good and bad spirits and people with magical powers are simply not needed to explain events in the natural world. And when you look at those alleged explanations, they aren't very good (actually, they are often inconsistent relying on arbitrary assignments of powers and limitations to these spirits).

However, religions do not need these beings. Religions can accept the primacy of science in explaining the natural world and European Christianity has done so since the 18th century. In 1958 the Pope officially accepted evolution. And in 1992 a different Pope gave a very important speech on the relation

between religion and science/philosophy, noting they have different methods and objectives which do not conflict and largely address different questions.

So in Europe, religion has largely dropped the ontology of spiritual beings to explain events. It accepts science and philosophy. What it adds is: a benevolent creator, very rare miracles, occasional direct revelation of god's will to pious individuals and the afterlife. These provide a sufficient basis for religion.

08:42

On Galileo.pdf

Not included, change data exporting settings to download.

80.9 KB

This is the Pope's speech about science and religion. It is very interesting.

08:50

In reply to [this message](#)

I don't have an argument against PSR other than that there seem to be random events: both in physics and in life. Sometimes things just happen for no reason. I find that quite easy to conceive, so it would need a very strong argument.

But also I do not think there is a good argument for PSR, or at least one which does not presuppose that the natural world is necessarily explicable, which is almost equivalent to saying it is created.

08:53

Famously, Einstein is said to have reacted to quantum mechanics by saying 'God does not play dice' – this was a metaphorical appeal to PSR but shows how closely it is tied in our thinking with god. And while that 'hidden variable' interpretation of QM is not accepted by physicists now, most accepted interpretations show that the driving assumption behind physics is that the world is explicable.

But they don't have an argument for that other than past successes. So if the world is explicable, that is a contingent truth about it.

Z

09:07

Zoheir

In reply to [this message](#)

But can religious people decide to drop or add entities from their original religion and still claim that religion contains the Truth? Especially when we keep in mind that the holy books claim to be revelations of the omniscient god (in case of Quran being the direct word of god).

09:16

In reply to [this message](#)

I will add this to the footnote, thanks

6 July 2020

T

07:41

Tom

In reply to [this message](#)

Here we need to distinguish between holy texts and their interpretation. Every holy text contains some metaphors or figurative language. Probably every text contains some, even scientific papers, but most holy books are quite poetic and use rich and evocative language.

Consequently they cannot be fully understood without an element of interpretation. And interpretation is

a human and fallible activity. That is why there are always different sects within any religion.

So a religion can claim that while the holy text contains eternal and unchanging truth, our ability to grasp that truth is not so perfect.

Z

08:20

Zoheir

Would you mention some the most important books (or articles) which argue for atheism? (In case you like to briefly say why each of them is good, please do)

10 July 2020

Z

15:41

Zoheir

Tom I have translated the interview so far it's more than 10 thousand words (the translation) in case you respond to this last question I would be grateful

28 July 2020

Z

19:24

Zoheir

Tom I Translated the interview and now it is published in the book

19:24

This is the link

19:24

http://www.salekenisti.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/%D8%B2%D9%87%DB%8C%D8%B1-%D9%86%D9%88%D8%B9-%D9%BE%D8%B1%D8%B3%D8%AA_%D8%A8%D9%87%D8%AA%D8%B1%DB%8C%D9%86-%D8%A8%D8%B1%D9%87%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%B9%D9%84%DB%8C%D9%87-%D8%AE%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%88%D9%86%D8%AF.pdf

T

13:50

Tom

Brilliant. Thanks for the link

Z

14:00

Zoheir

