

# *Is This a Joke?*

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God, they say,  
created the world,  
put the whole thing together  
in six days,  
using nothing but an idea,  
the divine dream  
of the best of all possible worlds.  
He thought about it,  
and thought about it;  
he refined his thoughts,  
and then transformed them  
into concrete matter.

**It should have been a marvelous work,**

**this world created as a reflection**

**of the omniscient, omnipotent mind of God.**

Because God made the world " ex nihilo,"

**from sheer, unadulterated nothingness,**

**there was no need to wait for deliveries**

no need to be constrained  
by flaws in the building materials--

**no need to work around knot holes,**

no need to worry about green lumber  
or poor quality materials;

**no need to be concerned**

**about inadequate funding**

**or problems with cash-flow.**

Because God made the world "de novo,"  
from the beginning, new,  
there was no need to argue with clients,

**no need to be constrained**

**by conventional patterns,**

by prior assumptions,

**no need to rehab someone else's design,**

no need to adapt some previous pattern  
to new uses.

**God had an idea;**

**God had the ability to incarnate that idea**

**fully and completely**

**shaping reality to fit the dream.**

**Indeed, the reality was the dream.**

By all odds  
the world thus created  
should have been flawless,  
perfectly conceived in the mind of God,  
brought forth in absolute perfection,  
unquestionably the best  
of all possible  
worlds.

**This, at least,**

**is what we've always been taught.**

**God looked at his completed work,**

**and congratulated himself**

**on its quality.**

"Very good,  
very good, indeed!"

**he said to himself.**

**Whatever flaws exist in this world**

**developed later,**

**or so we have always been taught.**

**Whatever shortcomings there may be**

**resulted from a strange pride**

**which drives human beings to seek escape**

**from the necessity of God's perfectly planned**

**perfectly executed  
universe.**

Not wanting to die,  
we seek to live forever,  
or at least to put an indelible mark  
on the face of existence.

In the process  
we violate the limits  
and spoil God's perfect world.  
Whatever went wrong  
in the history of God's incarnation  
of his perfect idea  
from the death of the woolly mammoth  
and the dodo  
and the passenger pigeon  
to the development of acid rain  
and global warming  
is our clearly fault,  
our responsibility,  
our doing--  
or so we've been told..

**Lacking the power to create  
a perfect world,  
we seem strangely endowed with the power  
to spoil that perfect world.**

Oh yeah?  
Of late, I've come to doubt it.  
It seems to me there are a lot of little mistakes,  
tiny little glitches,  
in this best of all possible worlds,  
little problems you and I had nothing to do with!

**Did you know**

**it takes the earth**

**365.2422 days**

**to circle the sun?**

**Why, in the name of heaven**

**that peculiar number?**

**If it took 360 days**

**we could have 12 months of 30 days.**

**If it took 364 days,**

**we could have 13 months of 28 days**

**and the sun and moon would always be in harmony.**

**If it took 372 days,**

**we could have 12 months of 31 days.**

**If it took 365.25 days our present cumbersome calendar**

**would work.**

**But no,**

**it takes 365.2422 days**

**for the earth to circle the sun.**

**Now what kind of logic is that?**

**What kind of planning is that?**

**Do you have any idea**

**how much time and energy have been consumed**

**fiddling with calendars**

**over long centuries**

**so Christmas won't come**

**in the middle of August**

**and Easter in the middle of October?**

**If God's idea was so perfect,**

**how come he picked such a peculiar period**

**for the earth's annual cycle?**

And what about the fact  
that the daylight  
is never when we need it,  
so twice a year  
we must fiddle with the clocks  
and try to remember if its  
"spring forward and fall back,"  
or "fall forward and spring back?"

**For that matter,**

**have you thought about the numerical value  
of Pi.**

**3.14159+,**

**that's the value of Pi,**

**the ratio of the circumference of a circle  
to its diameter.**

**Can you imagine how**

**much suffering and pain,**

**how many flunked math tests**

**have resulted because**

**Pi is not 3 or 3.5**

**or even 3.15?**

**What kind of world is it**

**that's designed so that not even a computer**

**can compute an absolute value**

**for Pi?**

And what about climate?

Has there ever been a time

when some part of the globe

was not suffering severe drought

while other parts of the globe are flooded out?

One day last year, in New York City

it reached a high of 62 in Central Park

and a high of 38 along the harbor.

How in the name of heaven

is one supposed to dress

for a day like that?

Now I understand  
there are good, scientific explanations  
for the vagaries of climate--  
mountain ranges  
and ocean currents  
and ground cover  
all affect climate  
and temperature  
and rainfall.  
I understand how it works--  
in general.  
But don't you think  
if you had set out to make a perfect world--  
not rehab an old world but make a perfect world  
de novo, ex nihilo--  
that you would have structured a little justice into the plan,  
moderate heat and cold,  
rain and drought,  
storm and sun  
to reduce suffering and misery  
in this best of all possible worlds?

**And what about the creatures**

**shaped to live in this ideal, rational world?**

**Has it ever occurred to you**

**how many of them seem to be constructed**

**out of left-over parts?**

**If you were really creating a rational world**

**would you create**

**a platypus--**

**a web-footed,**

**duck-billed,**

**egg-laying mammal?**

**Or the kangaroo,**

**shaped like a giant jack rabbit**

**and equipped with a**

*pouch*

**?**

**Or the giraffe!**

**Explain to me the logic of the Giraffe!**

**Oh, I know about eating from the top of the tree,**

**as if there were not enough to eat further down,**

**and I know about being able to see enemies from afar,**

**but those seem less like reasons than rationalizations**

**for creating a creature that looks like**

**a perambulating oil derrick.**

**And what about the sloth,**

**all its life spent hanging upside down**

**in a world made for standing upright.**

And plants!

Can you explain the reasoning behind

creating a delicious fruit

like the raspberry

and causing it to grow on bushes

filled with sharp thorns?

**Or what about the coconut,**

**giving it the appearance**

**of a shrunken human head,**

**filling it with luscious meat**

**and then lacing it with cholesterol generating**

**tropical oils?**

And what, pray tell,  
is the reasoning behind  
the mosquito

**or the house fly**

or the carpenter ant

**or the termite**

or the cockroach?

**And as if to add insult to injury,**

**what about the human being?**

**What kind of sadistic reasoning**

**deliberately designed the human spine?**

**Can you imagine the hours of agony**

**and suffering  
and torture**

**occasioned by the faulty architecture**

**resulting from adapting a spine**

**designed for walking on all fours**

**to bi-pedal locomotion?**

And then there is the foot--  
designed for what?--  
if we run

we get shin splints;  
if we walk

we get callouses,  
if we stand  
we get fallen arches,  
and whatever we do  
after a long day of doing it,  
our feet ache,  
the blood pools in our ankles.  
Despite billions spent  
in pursuit of a comfortable shoe,  
still our feet hurt!  
What kind of logic designs feet  
that work perfectly  
provided don't use them?

**Have you thought about eyes--**

**a marvelous invention,**

**allowing us to see a world**

**of spectacular beauty,**

**allowing us to read**

**books and music and billboards.**

**But have you noticed**

**as your interest in the world grows,**

**the effectiveness of your eyes declines.**

**Soon you can't see the world without glasses,**

**and then it's bifocals**

**and trifocals**

**and reading glasses**

**and everything is always**

**just a little bit**

out of focus.

**In a perfectly designed world,  
wouldn't you have created adjustable eyes,  
guaranteed for the life of the user?**

The problem with human nature  
goes deeper, and is more profound  
and raises stronger questions about the planning  
that went into making this best of all possible worlds.  
Consider how we are conceived!

**Consider how we are born!**

Consider how we die!

**A competent, reasoning God  
who created the world  
from a single, perfect idea,  
cannot justify as logical  
the genetic roulette of our mating,  
the random, mindless scramble of spermatozoa  
to unite with ovum,  
the pain and the mess coincident  
upon the act of giving birth,  
the way infants are born into the world,  
totally unequipped to cope with it.**

Nor can we justify the fact  
that people are charged with responsibility

for the young before they understand  
the seriousness of the undertaking.

**They have no training,  
except vague memories of their own childhood  
and vague promises never to do it that way.**

We all end up practicing on our children,  
learning parenthood on the job  
and hoping against hope  
we will not do them lasting harm.

**And they, of course, have no understanding  
of what it means to be children  
and must learn on the job as well.**

Think, for a moment, of the pain and misunderstanding  
which result from a world full of amateur parents  
trying to rear amateur children.  
And just when each party begins to get the hang of it,  
it's over.

**I understand how the process works,  
and the meanings we given it over the years.  
We've made the best  
of an imperfect situation,  
made of suffering a means to transformation,  
transformed lust into love,  
made of birth a spiritual experience,  
indeed, a religious metaphor,  
and committed ourselves to our neo-natal infants,**

**structuring for them**

**communities of love**

**and concern**

**and support.**

**We've done a marvelous job**

**making the most of the world we've been given.**

**but that does not justify**

**the nature of existence.**

Nor does it explain death.

Now, I do not object to the fact of death.

It is rational and right that death  
be part of a perfect world.

After all, it is a means  
by which to guard against sameness  
and the boredom it generates.

Death is also a gift.

When we grow old  
and weary of life  
and have been used up in the living  
death comes to release us  
and return the essence of our beings  
to the earth.

Indeed, in many ways, death  
is one of the finer, more subtle perfections  
in this best of all possible worlds.

**No, I do not object to the fact of death.**

**But I do object to the how of death.**

**The world is full of snares and traps**

**waiting to whisk us out of life suddenly**

**and without warning.**

**That makes for a certain level of insecurity,**

**but it is acceptable, in a curious way.**

**Struck by lightning,**

**or a falling tree**

**or a tidal wave**

**or a massive coronary**

**is a little abrupt**

**but it does not leave much time**

**for worry or regret--**

**alive one moment,**

**dead the next.**

**But, increasingly,**

**that is not how it happens.**

**Increasingly**

**we die by inches,**

**of accumulating infirmities**

**and the accretions of years,**

**of growing disabilities**

**and the inescapable consequences of time,**

**of small explosions in the brain**

**stripping us of our capacities**

**one by one,  
a little at a time,  
allowing us to know  
what is happening,  
offering us just enough hope  
that we refuse to surrender gracefully.**

What kind of all-powerful, all-loving God  
would allow us to wander into a condition  
that is neither life nor death?

He might have installed an on-off switch  
so there would be no question about when  
to surrender to the quiet embrace  
of timelessness.

But no.

We struggle into life,  
we struggle through life  
and most of us struggle out of life.  
For this we should be grateful?

**I find myself wondering  
as I grow older  
and understand more  
whether this world is but a great joke  
--a joke on us,  
or an enormous cosmic blunder  
--a blunder at our expense.  
The more I ponder,  
the more convinced I become**

**that it is neither.**

**This best of all possible worlds  
was not created by a God out there  
who was fascinated by his own mental processes  
and chose to embody them in a world.**

No,  
this world and whatever gods there be  
came into being in response to necessity,  
not plan.

**This world and whatever gods there be  
came into being, unfinished.**

This world is not like a watch  
created by a master watch-maker  
and set to ticking inexorably.

**This world is more like a green shoot,  
thrusting up through the ground  
one March morning the year after  
you purchased the house in August.**

It is sleek

**and green**

and perfect for its purpose

**but only time will say for sure  
what it is to become.**

This world is new each morning,

**and we are new each morning,**

and whatever gods there be are new each morning

**and no one can say what the world is to become,**

or what we are to become

**or what will become of the gods**

**until, in the fullness of time,**

**one pattern out of many possibilities**

**takes shape.**

It is not a joke,  
this world and our lives in it;

**it is not a blunder,**

**this world and our lives in it.**

It is an adventure,  
unplanned,

**unscripted**

,  
open-ended.

We do not know where we are going  
or what we will find when we get there,

**or even if we will recognize it when the time comes.**

On such uncertain journeys  
one may tote along strange and inappropriate gear

**--eyes that are less effective with age,**

feet that hurt with use,

**backs not designed for the life we live.**

On such uncertain journeys  
one may not be quite sure where one is  
from moment to moment  
--whether there is energy and reason to struggle on

**or the time has come to settle down**

**accept the end of things.**

On such uncertain journeys  
one may not be quite clear what is required

**--whether to repeat yesterday's pattern**

**or attempt some new approach**

to teach stoic acceptance or brave rebellion.

**On such uncertain journeys**

**it is not even clear who is teacher, who student**

--whether to be guided by past experience  
or by new insight  
or some combination of both.

**A planned world**

**would circle the sun**

**in 360 days**

and the value of Pi  
would be 3.5

**and life would be built**

**on one or two or three simple models**

and the body would be designed  
to do a few, simple tasks,  
the form flowing from the function.

**But this is not a planned, rational world.**

This is an organic, evolving world.  
A world growing out of the rich soil of necessity  
is not a symmetrical world  
where everything makes sense  
and has a reason.

**This is a world of adventure,**

**growing from what once was**

**into what never was.**

It is a world of surprises

**and incongruities**

and extraordinary diversity

**and curious redundancy.**

Such a world is filled with contradictions.

Its pain and sorrow and disappointment

its delight and joy and fulfillment

alike flow from the same cause--

from the open-ended nature of the world.

**No one has ever known**

**what it is all about**

**or where it is all headed**

**or what it all means,**

**and that is a source of frustration**

**and unexpected delight.**

This Universe is a living, evolving thing

--none knows whence it came

none knows whither it is tending.

**This universe is filled with mystery**

**and we are no less mysterious.**

**We are living, evolving parts**

**of the mystery that is the universe--**

**we and all life on this planet  
and on other planets  
swinging in irregular orbits  
around stars unknown to us.**

We and whatever gods there be  
are no less mysterious.  
We change from day to day,  
build on a half understood past  
reach for an uncertain future.

**We are changing  
and growing**

**from what was**

**to what shall be.**

From moment to moment  
we are improvising ourselves  
even as the universe around us improvises.

**It is not a joke,**

**this best of all possible worlds**

**and our journey through it,**

but since we know not what the meaning may be  
of the world and our part in it,  
perhaps we ought not take it  
or ourselves  
too seriously.

**It is not a joke--**

**it is a game**

**in which we attempt to construct meaning**

**where before there was no meaning,  
in which we win and lose and begin again,  
in which the outcome is not nearly so important  
as the process.**

It is a game  
of which it may be truly said

**"It matters not if you win or lose  
but how you play the game."**