Why God Is Not Like Leprechauns and Fairies

The following is a lightly edited transcript of an informal talk I gave on the spur of the moment. "Lightly" means "lightly" - I've changed some parts but haven't cleaned it up much for style. I've added a couple of footnotes too.

This talk gives some reasons why belief in God isn’t like belief in leprechauns and fairies, but it doesn’t give the most important reasons. For those, please visit my blog, The Unfinishable Scroll, and look under the atheism category.

Beginning of Transcript

One of the favorite tricks of today's atheists is comparing belief in God with belief in fairies or leprechauns. For example, the noted atheist Richard Dawkins has compared theology with "leprechoology" [1]. Various atheists compare God to leprechauns, fairies, and similar supernatural creatures. If you say you believe in God, they say "You believe in leprechauns ha ha ha ha ha," or something of that sort.

All these comparisons are stupid. Let me explain why.

Different people have different views about whether God is imaginary or real. Whatever your view, if you think about what belief in fairies or leprechauns really is, and what belief in God is, you find that they're two totally different kinds of belief. This is the case regardless of whether these beliefs are true or false.

Fairies and leprechauns are either beings that were just invented out of whole cloth by the human imagination, or else beings that people believed they saw. These beliefs may have started when somebody thought they saw something odd in their garden or by a bridge or something - who knows how they started? Maybe the beliefs just grew through imagination, without any kind of an experience starting them. Of course, after the belief spreads, some people "see" these beings; they are expecting to see fairies, so they think they see them. But aside from these after-the-fact illusions, beliefs in fairies and leprechauns are beliefs about imagined beings that make no difference to reality. They don't have any explanatory value. They don't even purport to be an explanation of anything - except maybe alleged sightings of leprechauns and fairies, which occur after the belief is entrenched. But those beliefs don't explain anything at all in nature.

By contrast, the hypothesis of God was a hypothesis that people made up to try to explain why the natural world exists, and why that world is the way it is. Maybe there are other causes for belief in God too, but the desire to explain nature is certainly one
important cause. The God of monotheism, and the great nature gods of polytheism (not
the little local godlings, but the gods of fire, of the sea, of lightning, and so forth), may
well have begun in honest attempts to explain the origin of real phenomena in the world.
Those beliefs may have had other things feeding into them too - other things that helped
them get started; perhaps there even were some very irrational motives that helped them
get started. Who knows. But at bottom, belief in gods that control nature, or in one God
controlling all of nature, is a result of ancient humans' attempts to explain nature. Atheists
today claim it was a lousy explanation, but be that as it may, it was a serious attempt at an
explanation.

If the atheists want to argue that belief in God is outmoded and we don't need God to
explain nature, that's a significant line of argument that's worth debating about. Atheists
often do argue that way. But comparing belief in God to belief in fairies and leprechauns
is different - and preposterous. The atheists who do this just don't see the radical, sharp
asymmetry between belief in God (or even a few major gods) and belief in things like
fairies and leprechauns and so on. This is especially true of belief in one God who
allegedly created the universe. The one God represents an attempt to explain why nature
exists at all - why there is something in nature instead of nothing. The attempt to explain
that mystery shows a relatively sophisticated kind of curiosity. I'm sure that primitive
humans worried about specific natural phenomena - like what causes the rain, and can I
do anything to bring it on or stop it - long before they worried about why there is
something in nature rather than nothing. That question is a rather abstract, and much more
sophisticated, question.

God and the great nature gods arose from humans' desire to understand nature and
existence, while fairies and leprechauns are simply products of imagination, useless for
explaining anything even in a prescientific world. These two forms of belief are very
different; the belief in God or gods is belief of a much better motivated kind than belief in
fairies and leprechauns. (This is true even if you think God and gods are imaginary too.)

There is an obvious, but fallacious, counterargument to this point. This argument goes
as follows: fairies and leprechauns have alleged explanatory value too, because some
people might use fairies or leprechauns to explain natural phenomena. Some people
might use fairies to explain strange lights they see in their gardens, or use leprechauns to
explain why they suddenly found a gold coin. Thus (the objection goes) fairies and
leprechauns can be used to explain things too. But this objection (which some radical
atheist is sure to throw at me, followed by "ha ha ha") misses the point: beliefs in fairies
and leprechauns don't explain anything that isn't easy to explain some other way. They
don't explain anything that seemed utterly inexplicable to early humans. If you trip when
you're crossing a bridge, somebody who believes in leprechauns might say "Oh, a
leprechaun did it." But there are many other obvious reasons why you might have tripped.
Belief in God, or in a few great nature gods, is not just an imaginative reading of
something easily explainable. It is an attempt to explain the great mysteries of nature and
of existence itself - mysteries that boggle the mind, mysteries that early humans simply
could not imagine any other explanation for.
Even if it is wrong (as the atheists believe), this attempt to explain and understand the mysteries of nature is more than just superstition. It is nothing less than a precursor of modern science. It is an early stirring of the scientific impulse. It is not like believing in leprechauns, where there's nothing important or really mysterious that the leprechaun seems to explain. Or believing in fairies, where there's nothing important and difficult to understand that the fairy can be used to explain. Those creatures, leprechauns and fairies, can serve no useful purpose in attempts to explain nature. On the other hand, God, or the great nature gods of the polytheistic religions, whether real or not, are not creations of imagination alone. They are also creations of curiosity and the desire to understand. And although imagination plays a part - some people would say imagination creates gods, others would say that imagination discovers gods - either way, belief in gods represents an early attempt to understand the world and to explain things. In contrast, things like fairies and leprechauns are just creatures of imagination, repeated over and over again in folklore until the belief becomes common.

This, of course, is not an argument for God or gods. It doesn't settle the question of whether gods are purely imaginary. An atheist would claim that they are imaginary - and then the atheist might also say that gods are a very poor way to explain the natural world, because (as Dawkins emphasizes) if you assume that a god created something, you're assuming the existence of a very complex being to explain something simpler [2]. (This argument is subject to debate, but I won't take up that issue here [3].) But even if the atheist were right, the ancients couldn't be blamed for using such explanations. The ancients didn't know how complex intelligent beings were. They saw humans doing things, and they saw stones "doing" things, and they didn't fully understand the differences between the purposeful and the non-purposeful. They didn't know about the human brain and how terribly complex our brain is. They didn't understand the kind of terrible complexity that it takes to make an agent - an acting being - or a conscious, minded being. Belief in God, or in the great nature gods, seemed quite logical to them. These beliefs represent an attempt to explain and understand nature. But fairies and leprechauns are simply imaginary things, tacked on to nature by the human tendency to tell stories - and then to get drunk and see the creatures that the stories tell about [laugh]. Or just the tendency to imagine things - the tendency to see ghosts because you're in a dark room, and that sort of thing. And even though belief in gods might have been reinforced by that kind of inaccurate thinking, that belief also functioned as an early attempt to understand nature. Many would say it was a prescientific and flawed attempt - but still it was an effort to understand nature. A good mind, a mind that is really rational, trying to understand the origin of the universe, could easily make up gods - especially if it was an ancient mind, with only the knowledge they had at that time, and not a modern mind.

Belief in God arose, at least in part, from early attempts to understand nature. Beliefs in fairies and leprechauns arose from pure imagination. Even if atheism is right, ridiculing God by mentioning fairies and leprechauns is simply silly. It's like ridiculing the ancient Greek philosophers' views of astronomy (thoughtful ideas, but now obsolete) by
mentioning UFO hoaxes.

Whether you think God exists or not, it is clear that the comparison between God on the one hand, and things like fairies and leprechauns on the other hand, is a profoundly flawed comparison. When atheists compare theology to fairyology or leprechology, they are talking nonsense. We should recognize it as such and reject that line of argument - whether or not we are atheists.

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- Mark F. Sharlow

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