



DOES THE SUPERNATURAL EXIST?

A Question of Moral Atheism

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When people talk about the supernatural, they aren't talking about things with these kinds of limit. They are talking about things that can have real-world impact. The imaginary ball does not help their case. Imagine that a supernatural thing — a poltergeist, for example — exists. How would we know it? We have no sense that can detect the supernatural. All we can do is wait for the supernatural thing to interact with our world in a way that we *can* detect, and once it does that, it's acting in the natural world and is subject to testing by science. At that point, we wouldn't be investigating the supernatural, we'd be investigating the paranormal — something in the natural world that we do not yet have a scientific explanation for. Could a paranormal thing have a supernatural explanation? Perhaps, but there's no way we can know because the supernatural is beyond our ability to investigate. We can either choose to investigate the paranormal in the hopes of finding a natural explanation, or speculate on supernatural causes, knowing that they can never be proven.

IS IT POSSIBLE that supernatural things exist? Such things would, by definition, be beyond the reach of science, so it is difficult to see how you could prove that nothing supernatural is (in some sense) "out there." Regarding the supernatural, some people argue this way: Imagine a ball. You can see the ball in your mind, spin it, bounce it. The ball exists. But the ball is not a physical thing. You can't point to its location. Even the most talented surgeon could not find it within your mind. The ball exists but is not part of the physical world, therefore things outside the physical world exist, therefore at least some supernatural things exist. But is the ball really not a physical thing? Is it really a ball at all, or just a brain activity representing a ball? Is it any more real than an airplane in a computer simulation? Let's say that we grant that the ball exists. Aside from your being able to manipulate it inside your mind, it is unable to interact with anything in the physical world. You can't show it to someone. Your mom won't mind if you play with it in the house.

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QUESTIONS OF MORAL ATHEISM: INSTRUCTIONS

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1. Print pages one and two of this document, one on each side of the same piece of paper (if you don't have access to a duplex printer, print page one, put the page back in the paper tray upside down, and print page two — depending on the type of printer, you may have to experiment a bit).
2. Cut the printout in two, using the thin rules across the middle of the page as a guide.
3. Fold the two pieces of paper in half, making a pair of small pamphlets.
4. Keep one of the pamphlets to read, and give the other away to an interested friend or stranger.

That's it! If you have any questions, suggestions, or comments, we invite you to share them by leaving a comment on blog.iamanatheist.org. Thanks!
