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Intelligence Squared U.S.

The More We Evolve, The Less We Need God

For the Motion: Heather Berlin, Michael Shermer

Against the Motion: Deepak Chopra, Anoop Kumar

Moderator: John Donovan

AUDIENCE RESULTS	
Before the debate:	After the debate:
50% FOR	67% FOR
31% AGAINST	27% AGAINST
20% UNDECIDED	7% UNDECIDED

Start Time: (00:00:00)

[applause]

John Donovan:

I am sure you have heard it said that God is love. You've heard it said that God is life. You've heard it said, sometimes, God is dead. Challenging propositions, all. But what about this one: "God is necessary." Necessary in the sense that He is demanded by human nature itself if we are fully to make sense of the world we live in, to know good from bad, to touch on the meaning of our own existence, whether for you it's God of the Bible or a God that is a more abstract spirituality or shared consciousness. In ages past, before there was science, this necessity of God was, in this regard, unassailable. But what about today, with all we know, and how far we have come? Well, we think this has the makings of a debate. So, let's have it. Yes or no to this statement: The More We Evolve, The Less We Need God. I'm John Donovan. I am onstage with four superbly qualified debaters who will argue for and against that resolution.

00:01:03

We are at the Kaye Playhouse at Hunter College in New York, where our live audience will choose the winner. As always, our debate goes in three rounds. And if all goes well -- and I'm sure it will -- civil discourse will win as well. Our motion is this: The More We Evolve, The Less We Need God. Let's meet our debaters, ladies and gentlemen. Welcome them again to the stage.

[applause]

And I want to start with an introduction pairing two of the opponents, actually, Michael Shermer and Deepak Chopra, because they have something of a history of friendly rivalry. Michael Shermer, you're arguing for the motion. You're a New York Times best-selling author, the publisher of Skeptic Magazine. You teach Skepticism 101 at Chapman University. Your second time on our stage. Welcome back.

Michael Shermer:
Thank you.

John Donovan:
Thanks very much. And --

Michael Shermer:
Returning champion.

John Donovan:
And --

[laughter]

-- and --

Michael Shermer:
Well, we did last time.

John Donovan:
Deepak Chopra, you are arguing against the motion. You are an advocate for integrative medicine. You have been described as one of the top 100 heroes and icons of the century by Time Magazine.

00:02:04

You have written more than 85 books -- 85 books -- translated into 43 languages, many, many of them best-sellers. And Deepak, you too, when you have faced off before onstage, it's been -- it's happened before, but the very first time that you were physically on a stage, you said that this was not your first meeting. What did you say to Michael at the time?

Deepak Chopra:
We have met in many incarnations.

[laughter]

When I first met Michael, I was an atheist. But then I realized I was God.

John Donovan:

Oh.

[laughter]

So, it worked out for -- and Michael, going back to you on the other side, we heard that the two of you actually got together and meditated together. So, where did that -- where did you go on that?

Michael Shermer:

Yes. Well, this was at the urging of my wife, to give Deepak's world view a first-world try. And I have to say, I did feel much better after the weekend of meditating. Of course, it doesn't hurt to be in Carlsbad, California at the beach of a five-star resort, getting massages, and drinking tea, and doing yoga every day.

00:03:02

If you're not feeling better, you're doing something wrong.

[laughter]

John Donovan:

All right. All right. So, the two of you are not here by any means alone. You each have very strong partners on your side. Michael, please tell us, who is your teammate on the for side?

Michael Shermer:

Well, Dr. Heather Berlin is the perfect debate partner for me tonight because she studies consciousness from a neuroscience perspective. And of course, Deepak's whole interest is in consciousness, and they have very radically different views. So, I thought it'd be good to have somebody who not only studies this professionally from a purely -- a neuroscience perspective, but also does some clinical work.

John Donovan:

All right. Ladies and gentlemen, Heather Berlin.

[applause]

Heather, Michael just covered that you're a cognitive neuroscientist. You're also Assistant Professor of Psychiatry at Mt. Sinai. We've got to thank you for something. You only signed on to do this debate last week. That was incredibly professional and incredibly daring on your part. We are thrilled to have you with us. Thank you --

Heather Berlin:

Thanks for having me.

John Donovan:

-- for being in that seat.

00:04:00

[applause]

Heather, we also heard that your interest in neuroscience began when you were really little.

Heather Berlin:

Yeah, no. That's true. I was 5 years old when I first came to the realization that I was going to die, which kind of freaked me out a bit. So, I asked my dad, "Where -- dad, you know, where do my thoughts come from and can I keep them when I die?" And he said, "They come from your brain." And I said, "Okay. How?" And he said, "Actually, we don't know." And I said, "Well, what can I be when I grow up to figure that out?" And he said, "Well, I guess, a psychiatrist?" And so, that sort of -- from that moment on, it became my mission to try to understand where my thoughts come from, how my brain produces my consciousness, with the ultimate idea that perhaps I can keep my thoughts when I die. I still haven't found the answer for that, but it's been a quest my entire life.

John Donovan:

Maybe it'll happen tonight.

Heather Berlin:

Maybe tonight. Maybe tonight.

John Donovan:

All right. And Deepak Chopra, on the opposing side, please tell us who your partner is in this debate.

Deepak Chopra:

I am still trying to figure out who I am, so I [unintelligible] don't know who he is.

[laughter]

John Donovan:

Okay. Who he is --

Deepak Chopra:

So --

John Donovan:

-- ladies and gentlemen, Anoop Kumar.

00:05:00

[applause]

Anoop, thank you so much for joining us at Intelligence Squared. You are a Board-certified emergency physician. You are author of the book, "Michelangelo's Medicine: How Redefining the Human Body Will Transform Health and Healthcare." Anoop, I'm curious about this. As an ER doctor -- and your title almost refers to this -- you get an opportunity -- more opportunity than most of us -- to see the human body in a unique way. You get to see its functioning and its form, and its fragility. What do you take away? What insight do you take away from that experience?

Anoop Kumar:

I take away that what we call life really doesn't have an opposite. The opposite of birth is death, and the opposite of death is birth. But life doesn't have an opposite.

John Donovan:

Wow, fantastic. The room is held silent by that -- sitting down. But I want to provide one more round of applause for you --

[applause]

-- and for all of our debaters. And so, to the debate, we move on to Round 1.

00:06:00

Round 1 are opening statements by each debater in turn. They will be six minutes each. Speaking, first, for the motion -- The More We Evolve, The Less We Need God -- here is cognitive neuroscientist Heather Berlin.

[applause]

Heather Berlin:

Okay. So, I'm going to argue in support of the motion from several different angles. But first I'm going to put my cards on the table and say that I am not an atheist. I was raised Jewish, culturally more than religiously, but I still remain open to the possibility that there's some higher creative power in the universe, some benevolence that I can't quite comprehend that might deserve the name God. But remember, we're not here to debate whether God exists. We're here to debate whether God is becoming less needed as humanity evolves. And however, we measure that need -- whether it's a need for explanations, a need for comfort, or a feeling of belonging, or just to give us a higher sense of meaning or purpose, the answer is clear. The more we evolve, the less we need God.

00:07:00

Now, I'm going to go through these various forms of need one by one. But first, we should be clear what we mean by "evolve." We're not talking about biological evolution or changes in gene frequency. We're talking about cultural evolution, or just the development of humanity. And scientific progress over the past several hundred years has completely transformed our knowledge of how the world works. And each major scientific breakthrough has had to overturn some religious dogma, right? So, we've gone from believing in special creation to an understanding of how all living things descend from a single common ancestor by blind trial and error process -- natural selection. We've gone from believing that God placed the earth in the center of creation to an understanding that we inhabit a tiny blue dot in a vast cosmos with 100 billion galaxies. We've gone from believing that diseases were curses caused by evil spirits and bad karma to an understanding of the deep mechanisms of disease at the cellular and molecular level.

00:08:01

But we still live in a world where people reject life-saving medicine on religious grounds. Just the other day, there was a news story about a 2-year-old boy who died because his parents chose prayer over medical treatment. So, the more our understanding evolves, the less we need God. Now, using God to explain natural phenomenon is an argument known as "God of the Gaps." Throughout history, if there was a gap in our understanding, it was by default to say God must explain it. But the more science illuminates our world, and gives us a real understanding, the fewer gaps are left for God to inhabit -- inhabit. So, when you hear from our opponents, be vigilant. They might tell you that the materialistic science can only explain so much. But we still need God beyond the limits of our understanding. That's a God of the Gaps argument. Just because science can't explain something yet, it doesn't logically follow that God wins by default. And if God is just another name for scientific ignorance, that's hardly a god worth celebrating.

00:09:05

Now, my own field, neuroscience -- 350 years ago, Rene Descartes had argued that our perceptions had to be accurate because God would never deceive us. And our brains were made of physical mechanisms, but our conscious minds are an immaterial essence, a spirit that interacts with the physical brain through the pineal gland. But today, neuroscience is revealing that Descartes was wrong. Our perceptions are biased and inaccurate, which may explain the persistence of supernatural beliefs. And consciousness doesn't interact with the brain. Consciousness is what the brain does. And there's no reason to believe that consciousness existed before brains existed. Now, some people think they've experienced God directly, with or without drugs. But --

[laughter]

-- neuroscientists can now induce religious or transcendental experiences by stimulating specific brain areas with powerful magnets, giving people out of body experiences and sensation with oneness with the universe, not to mention hallucinations that would rival the Book of Revelations.

00:10:05

So, the more our understanding of the brain evolves, the less we need God. And evolutionary and cognitive psychology are also helping to explain the origins of our need for God, for comfort, morality, sense of belonging, and why that need is diminishing. Religions traditionally provided a space for communal activities, a sense of trust among in-group members, and a disincentive to free-riders. So, belief in God has done a lot of good throughout history. But our modern societies now provide laws and social safety nets to help us when we fall, and to disincentivize bad behavior. And our social reputations are online now. I mean, when it comes to people like Harvey Weinstein, I'd say that public shaming, social rejection, and criminal charges carry a lot more weight than the fear of hell. I mean, after all, he didn't hire priests for redemption; he hired lawyers and publicists.

[laughter]

00:11:00

And the very existence of countries like Denmark and Sweden -- majority atheist countries that are high-functioning and relatively free from suffering -- tells us that living without God is fully compatible with human psychology, as long as the need make sense of the world is satisfied by science and our need to

belong is satisfied by our social networks and communities. So, the more our societies evolve, the less we need God. Of course, for many people, life is not as comfortable as it is for those Scandinavians, and God is a source of comfort for those who are suffering, or who have lost loved ones, or who are stricken by poverty or disease, and I get that. But if we're determined to work together to alleviate poverty, disease, and suffering, and make people happier in this world. And if we're aware of the fact that people tend, on average, to turn to God less often when they feel safer, happier, healthier, and more stable, then we have to admit that the motion is correct: The More We Evolve, The Less We Need God. Thank you.

[applause]

John Donvan:
Thank you, Heather Berlin.

00:12:00

And that is the resolution: The More We Evolve, The Less We Need God. And here to make his opening statement against the motion, Deepak Chopra, integrative medicine advocate and founder of the Chopra Foundation. Deepak Chopra.

[applause]

Deepak Chopra:
Thank you. Thank you. So, I of course request you to vote against the motion. When I use the word "God" -- or all of us who are in practices like meditation, self-reflection, awareness of body, awareness of mind, awareness of mental space, awareness of the web of relationship -- when we speak or practice yoga -- when we speak of God, we are not talking about an imagined deity. We're talking about the consciousness in which all experience occurs.

00:13:00

And we're defining consciousness in very precise ways. So, one way to think of consciousness is that which makes any experience possible -- the experience of sensations, images, feelings, thoughts, perceptions, the experience of your body, the experience of your mind, this experience. So, consciousness is that in which all experience occurs. Consciousness is that in which all experience is known. And consciousness is that out of which all experience is made. All experience is made out of consciousness. In the wisdom traditions that I come from, therefore, consciousness is the imaginable potential for every mode of knowing and experience in all living beings. So, right now, we are having a human experience. This is a human experience.

00:14:00

This is not the experience of a crocodile, or an insect with multiple eyes, or a snake that knows only infrared, or a bat that moves or navigates through the echo of ultrasound. This is a human experience in human consciousness. But consciousness is more than human consciousness. Consciousness is the basis of experience in every sentient being, in every living species. What their subjective experience is unknown to us, subjectively probably unknowable. So, consciousness -- or God -- is all knowers, all

modes of knowing, and all experiences known. Consciousness is invisible. Why? Because it has no form. But without consciousness, there is no experience of that which we call visible.

00:15:02

Consciousness is beyond perception. Why again? Because it's formless. It's boundless. It has no boundaries. It has no material structure to it. So, it's inconceivable. And yet, without it, there's no possibility of any concept. You cannot imagine consciousness. You can't imagine God, because if you imagine God, then it's not God. The infinite cannot be imagined. But without consciousness, there is no imagination. So, my dear friends, in every act of perception, right now, as you see, as you hear, as you sense your body -- in every act of perception, consciousness as God is creating the experience of the universe for you right this moment. Right this moment. Consciousness and God -- similar; I'm using the words synonymously -- consciousness is the only invariant in every changing experience.

00:16:09

If you think you are your body, then you have to question that, because your body is not a noun. It's a verb. It's been changing since the time you were a zygote, an embryo, a baby, a toddler, and who you are right now. So, in every act of perception -- including that of your body, including that and every act of cognition, including the experience of your mind, God is creating the experience of the universe through you. When we transcend to this level -- which is the source of [unintelligible] through contemplative practices, through yoga -- when we transcend to this level of existence, then automatically, automatically -- because we feel the unity of existence, the inseparability of existence, automatically there's the emergence of platonic values, like truth, goodness, beauty, harmony, love, compassion, joy, equanimity.

00:17:11

There is also the loss of the fear of death, because consciousness being formless, it's not subject to birth and death -- exactly what you said. Birth and death are opposite, but life is the continuum of birth and death. So, by knowing ourselves as consciousness, we get to the source of all experience in every species that we call God. Right now, in this awareness we are having this particular experience. If consciousness is God, then we need consciousness to evolve. Why? Because, as Heather said, right now we're not talking about biological evolution. We are talking about what I would call metabiological evolution -- the evolution of our consciousness and ultimately the evolution of the consciousness of our consciousness.

00:18:08

Because the key to consciousness, is self-awareness. God is our highest instinct to know ourselves. Thank you very much.

[applause]

John Donovan:

Thank you, Deepak Chopra. And a reminder of what's going on. We are halfway through the opening round of this Intelligence Squared U.S. debate. I'm John Donovan. We have four debaters -- two teams of two -- fighting it out over this motion -- The More We Evolve, The Less We Need God. You've heard the first two opening statements, and now onto the third. Making his way to the lectern and to debate

for the motion, here is Michael Shermer, publisher of Skeptic Magazine. Ladies and gentlemen, Michael Shermer.

[applause]

Michael Shermer:

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you so much. The resolution, that The More We Evolve, The Less We Need God, I think is supported overwhelmingly by evidence from three lines of inquiry: evolutionary theory, history, and the social sciences.

00:19:03

Now -- so first, John mentioned a synonym for "need" or -- necessary; God is necessary. Necessary for what? I contend that our starting point is the survival and flourishing of sentient beings -- that's us and other animals -- and the central problem with group living -- we're a social primate species -- the central problem with group living is trying to figure out how to get selfish genes that build these survival machines that just want to have -- maximize their own utility or benefits to cooperate with other survival machines built by selfish genes. And the problem is -- is figuring out how we tilt the incentives or create a choice architecture to get people to be nudged toward increasing or attenuating -- I'm sorry -- - extenuating their better angels and squashing down or lowering our inner demons. So, it's this constant conflict between our inner demons and our better angels.

00:20:03

And so, when we began to coalesce from these tiny bands and tribes of hunter gatherers into these giant chieftains and states around 10,000 years ago, this was the central tension: how do we do this? So, the two tools or technologies that evolved to do this were God and government. So, government basically gives everybody a copy of the rules and says, "These are the dos and don'ts, and here's the penalties if you violate them." Of course, there's not sophisticated police systems at the time. So, people got away with it. But you don't really get away with it, because there's an eye in the sky that sees and knows all that you're doing and can impose punishments in the next life. So, this is God or religion. So, for thousands of years, it was kind of a toss-up between anarchy of having no state or government organization, and tyranny -- having either oppressive governments or religions oppressing their people. And -- but something -- history -- then evolved about four centuries ago.

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The Scientific Revolution discovered that the universe is knowable and that it's governed by natural laws that we can discover and understand, beginning with the physical sciences -- Galileo and Newton -- into the biological sciences and medicine, all the way to the social sciences. And so, in the Enlightenment, there developed a number of theories about how best we should live with one another. So, there was [unintelligible] essentially to create -- to find the Newton of the social sciences. How best should we live? And that led to pretty much most of the moral progress we've made over the last several centuries. That is to say -- the abolition of slavery, and torture, the death penalty, the death increase in civil liberties and civil rights, the expansion of the moral sphere, the bending of the moral arc, if you will, toward greater justice for more people in more places, more of the time, I argue, has primarily been the result of science, and reason, and these Enlightenment values like natural rights -- not the function of religion or belief in God.

00:22:05

In fact, I would argue that with a few exceptions, that almost all the progress has been the result of secular forces -- that is justifying why you're making certain social changes or passing laws based on reasons, good reasons, and evidence, rather than appealing to a higher supernatural power. The problem with religion is that the creator of the universe has set down many different rules of how we should live together. And there's no means to determine which is the right one. There's nothing in religion -- there's no methodology in religion comparable to science, in which we say, "We're going to -- let's run an experiment and see which one is the best, which one most closely matches reality." And I'm not just talking about physics and biology; I'm talking about social sciences. We have 50 different states with 50 different state constitutions and 50 different sets of laws -- say, gun control laws, or tax laws. You can study those and determine which is the best set of methods we should use.

00:23:01

Religion has nothing like that. The problem with religion is that it's more of a sort of group cohesiveness method that drives people to be more tribal and xenophobic. And then, finally, in my third line of inquiry on the social sciences, I'll cite just one study -- among many -- by Gregory Paul [spelled phonetically] of -- correlating the differences between rates of religiosity, belief in God, Biblical literalism, belief in the afterlife, and heaven and hell -- in 20 different leading democracies in the Western world. As a function of their societal health, societal health is measured by rate of homicide, suicides, STDs, abortions, teen births, marriage, divorce, alcohol consumption, life satisfaction, corruption indices -- adjusted per capita income, income inequality, poverty, employment levels, incarceration, life expectancy and so on. Well, you can't believe this, but it turns out that the higher the rates of religiosity in a nation, the more people believe in God in a nation, the worse they score on these indices of societal health.

00:24:11

And America stands out by far, with no one even a close second, as the most religious of the Western democracies and the worst on all of these. We have the highest homicide rates, suicide rates, teen STD rates, pregnancy rates, and so on. Income inequality, and alcohol consumption, life satisfaction, employment levels, and on, and on, and on. Now, I'm not saying that those things have -- are caused by religion. But if religion and belief in God is such a great force for driving moral progress, how come it fails so abysmally here and every other nation where religiosity and belief in God is high? Therefore, I urge you to vote for our side, that The More We Evolve, The Less We Need God. Thank you.

[applause]

John Donovan:

Thank you, Michael Shermer. Again, that is the resolution: The More We Evolve, The Less We Need God. And our final debater, who will be speaking against the motion, Anoop Kumar.

00:25:02

He is an emergency physician and author of "Michelangelo's Medicine." Ladies and gentlemen, Anoop Kumar.

[applause]

Anoop Kumar:

What if this world we're experiencing is a mental experience and not primarily physical? What if what we call the mind isn't just in here, but it's all this? And what if you and I are experiences in this vast mind? What I'd like to do is challenge the story we've all been taught since we were kids. I'd like to challenge the notion of what we are, what all of us are, and what this world is, what it's made of. Max Plank [spelled phonetically], a Nobel Prize winning physicist, said, "I regard consciousness as fundamental.

00:26:05

I regard matter as derivative from consciousness." He didn't mince words. And what he's saying is something all of us experience when we dream -- that the universe is entirely mental. Now, I'm not saying that this is a dream. What I'm saying is that whatever this is made of, whatever this is made of, it's the same stuff that a dream is made of -- namely, consciousness. And when we look at it through different frames of mind, we perceive it differently -- as mental, or physical, or however we may describe it: information, energy -- you've heard all of these descriptions. Consciousness is primary. And what we call matter is an experience in our consciousness. So, this hand feels really firm and solid, and physical.

00:27:04

I would describe it as physical -- and if this were a dream, it would still feel firm, and solid, and I would still call it physical. And yet, we know that it would be made entirely out of consciousness. Now, if consciousness is primary, it's also infinite, simply because all experiences would be in consciousness. So, the space that appears to separate us right now is an experience. It's a projection. In a dream, I can take a space shuttle from Cape Canaveral all the way to the moon, and come back home, and I would cover half a million miles of vast space. And yet, with the shift in consciousness -- that's what we call waking up in the morning, a shift in consciousness -- with that shift, the very same space is re-conceived as a projection. I submit to you the same is happening right now.

00:28:01

Nobody has ever perceived anything outside of consciousness. That means every experience, including space and time, is in consciousness. So, history, philosophy, music, art, literature, you name it, it's in consciousness. With that context, let's attend to the motion specifically. Not only is consciousness infinite, but the infinite has always been the ultimate description of what we call God. The more common notions, the more familiar notions, and all the notions that were spoken about by the opposing team, they are aspects of God. So, there's infinity, but then we talk about infinite wisdom, infinite compassion, infinite mercy, infinite understanding. These are aspects of infinity. And this infinity shows up, not only in religion, but it shows up in mathematics, and philosophy as different aspects, different approaches.

00:29:06

So, the ultimate god of religion -- not the different forms of God; it's not the particular names of gods -- which are the varieties we see that depend on the human mind that conceives them, but the ultimate God, the [unintelligible] infinity, that shows up in mathematics as infinity. It shows up in philosophy as truth. It shows up in science as the reality behind science. It shows up in all experience, in every experience, as consciousness. Each of these is a unique perspective. And therefore, each has unique data to contribute about something that's beyond all concepts. The more we evolve, the more we see the infinite underlying nature of all things. Call it religious, call it spiritual, call it secular, or simply the practical experience of knowing ourselves and each other more deeply.

00:30:04

So, let me ask you -- do we need to understand ourselves more deeply? Do we need to understand each other a little better? And do we need to understand this crazy, inexplicable world better? If your answer is yes, then I urge you to vote against the motion, because the more we evolve, the more we need to understand the infinite.

[applause]

John Donovan:
Thank you, Anoop Kumar.

[applause]

And that concludes Round 1 of this Intelligence Squared U.S. debate, where our motion is The More We Evolve, The Less We Need God. Now, we move on to Round 2. And in Round 2, the debaters take questions from me and from you, our live audience here at the Kaye Playhouse in New York City. In Round 1, we heard the two teams lay out arguments. Michael Shermer and Heather Berlin, who are arguing for the motion -- they made the point right off that they are not debating for or against the existence of God.

00:31:05

That's not what this debate is about. And they are correct about that. Rather, we are arguing whether God is necessary. Michael Shermer lays out, "Necessary for what?" Necessary, he says, for the flourishing of sentient beings. His partner, Heather Berlin, talking about necessary for endowing humans with comfort, with meaning, with purpose, but they point out that belief in God -- while it has eroded in general, and particularly in Western society -- that scientific breakthroughs have overturned religious dogma -- that while that's been happening, the course of justice has been -- the course of morality has been bending more towards justice. They explain the use of God to explain things that cannot be seen, including the infinite as God of the gaps. And as they say, the gaps are getting smaller and smaller the more that science learns. The team arguing against the motion -- Deepak Chopra and Anoop Kumar -- they laid out a kind of physics or metaphysics that may not be familiar to everyone in our audience and in our listening audience, in which they made a clear case that they are not arguing for any -- as Deepak said, any of the imagined deities.

00:32:12

Rather, they are arguing for a sense of consciousness. And this consciousness, as they describe it, is that in which all experience occurs, including potential experience. Consciousness is all modes of knowing and all that might be known. As for the question of necessity, Anoop pointed out that the more we evolve, the more we need to understand the sense of the infinite because the -- our sense of the infinite is growing more and more all of the time. So, I think there might be a little bit of a sense between the two teams that they talk -- they're going like this. I don't actually think that that's entirely the case, because what we're trying to land is this question of necessity: when is God necessary or not. God is defined by both sides. And I think we can proceed on that basis.

00:33:01

But I wanted to -- I want to start with you, Deepak, because I heard from Anoop -- I heard him use the word "necessity" and needed in the -- towards the latter part of his opening statement. I didn't hear it from you. So, your sense of this consciousness -- needed how? And keeping in light, also, your opponents' very clear-cut material and -- you might say finite -- descriptions of what necessity is.

Deepak Chopra:

So, my friend Michael, whom I refer to as Angel Michael -- [laughs] -- the apostle for scientism -- cites science --

Michael Shermer:

Proud of it.

Deepak Chopra:

-- all the time -- [laughs] -- cites science. But science is an activity in consciousness. Experiments are conceived in consciousness.

John Donovan:

I just want to encourage you, actually, to speak out to the --

Deepak Chopra:

Experiments are designed in consciousness. Theories are conceived in consciousness. Observations are made in consciousness. You can't do science without consciousness. Even the -- trying to understand consciousness is in consciousness, as Max Plank said.

00:34:06

You can't get behind consciousness. To create artificial intelligence, augmented reality -- you name it -- to understand the microbiome, to understand your own biology -- you need consciousness. To do science, to create technologies, to do philosophy -- all systems of thought, all systems of thought, whether they're religion, or philosophy, or science, or theology, require consciousness. So, consciousness gives rise to systems of thought which then give us a certain interpretation of reality.

John Donovan:

Okay. Let me --

Deepak Chopra:

That reality is impossible without consciousness.

John Donovan:

Okay. So, you've laid out the necessity. And I want to take it to Heather Berlin. Interestingly, I heard your opponents say that the human brain exists in consciousness, and you are arguing that consciousness exists in the human brain, which --

Heather Berlin:

Yes.

John Donovan:

-- certainly flips things in the other direction.

00:35:04

But your response to the argument that Deepak just made -- that without consciousness, there's nothing?

Heather Berlin:

So, I mean, the way we experience the world that we find ourselves in is via first-person subjective experience, which we'll call consciousness, right? That's how -- yes -- we come up with the laws of science. And it's subjective, right? Only I know my own consciousness. I don't know anybody else's. We know that we can knock it out in patients. [unintelligible] lesions from parts of the brain, they can experience nothing. When you're in a deep dreamless sleep, you're not experiencing anything. And we can map out -- we can make correlation between consciousness and the brain. However -- and this is something, since I was 5, I've wanted there to be consciousness outside of the brain. I've been looking for it. I've been trying to find any bit of evidence for it, okay? And you can't trust your own experience because it's subjective, right? The way that we can understand reality in the most objective way that we have discovered is through the scientific method. But -- so what I'm really curious, and I can't get my mind around, is where they're coming up with these proclamations of knowing that consciousness exists outside of the material world, and then calling that God.

00:36:09

I mean, to me, it seems a bit just like a fairytale. I can say -- I can also make a proclamation about consciousness and what it is. But without any evidence, I don't understand how they're coming to these conclusions.

John Donovan:

Well, let's bring it to Anoop, then. Where is your proof?

Anoop Kumar:

So, you say --

[laughter]

-- on one hand, you say you can't trust your experience. But let me ask anybody -- is there anything you know more than you are aware? You exist. You can say, "I exist. I am here." That's consciousness, right? Before I create a theory, a conceptual theory -- that no, actually the brain produces

consciousness; that's theoretical. But the first thing I know is I am here or I am alive. Consciousness is the first thing we know, and everything else is secondary to that.

00:37:00

When we say that the brain produces consciousness, we're already implying dualism, because we're saying as if there's something physical first, and then in that, we're experiencing something that's mental -- whereas, in fact, even the experience of physicality is already mental. In other words, the mind is the primary organ of experience, and the brain is a representation of the mind. To know that, you don't have to go any further than your own experience. I am exist. I am here. I am consciousness. Okay. And now I experience a brain. The brain is an experience in consciousness. To even say that the brain comes first still requires consciousness first, whether you say it or not.

John Donovan:
Heather?

Heather Berlin:
To say that consciousness is God is also just a subjective kind of thing that you're creating by your experience, right? You're using your subjectivity to make the claim that consciousness is God. So, I don't understand where the evidence for that is.

Anoop Kumar:
Well -- so --

John Donovan:
Go ahead.

Anoop Kumar:
So, what I'm saying is that there are many different definitions of God.

00:38:03

So, if you look at the different religions, everybody will have a different name, or a different idol, or a different concept. What we are defining as God -- and we've made this clear -- is we're speaking of that which is infinite, of which the parts are the different names. So, I'm -- we're defining as that to begin with, as God is that ultimate, which -- toward which we're always evolving by the mind becoming more and more subtle, and thereby going beyond our progressive boundaries.

John Donovan:
Normally I like to go to the back and forth, but I actually want to hear from Deepak on this. I have a question for you. Are you asserting that this infinite that you're speaking of at this point is larger than can be known by science at this point?

Deepak Chopra:
Science is, as I said, is an activity in conscious. What Heather calls the objective world is an intersubjective experience in human consciousness. Before I can call this an object, it's a shape.

00:39:02

It's a color. It's a form -- as an experience. When I call it an object, I reify [spelled phonetically] that experience in consciousness and create a human construct that this is a glass and this is water. That's the interpretation of experience. Before you can name something as an object, you first have to experience it. So, you know, Descartes said, "I think, I am." He was wrong. "I am, therefore I think." "I am, therefore I perceive." And when I say "perceive," I mean also perceive this -- this body, those bodies, and all these bodies. So, before you can name an object, it has to be an experience -- a subjective experience.

John Donovan:

And that's where the necessity -- the issue of necessity of consciousness?

Deepak Chopra:

That's the necessity.

John Donovan:

Okay. Now, I [inaudible] --

Deepak Chopra:

And without having the experience, how can you call anything an object?

John Donovan:

Michael, I don't have a specific question for you, though a lot has been said. I'd like you to just respond to it.

Michael Shermer:

Yeah. I think I figured out what was going on here after the --

[laughter]

Deepak Chopra:

Mike, after all these [unintelligible]. Thank you.

00:40:03

Michael Shermer:

After my experiences at Deepak Center, and there was no illegal drugs -- or even legal drugs involved -- so, I've wrote a chapter in my latest book about Deepak. And so, I made a distinction there between the weak consciousness principle and the strong consciousness principle. So, the weak consciousness principle is that in order to experience consciousness, you have to be conscious. In order to experience something, you have to be alive and experiencing. And it's something that's, well -- it's what [unintelligible] calls a deepity [spelled phonetically]. It's like, it sounds deep until you think about it for a second. You go, "Well, yeah, obviously."

[laughter]

You know, it's like imagining -- imagine being dead. You can't do it, because to imagine something, you have to be alive, okay? So -- the -- but what they're arguing is something stronger than that, the strong consciousness principle -- that consciousness brings about -- if I understand you correctly, Deepak -- brings about the physical instantiation of our brains and bodies, that the consciousness is primary -- it's already there. And we're just a temporary hold or instantiation of consciousness in the physical body.

John Donovan:

Could you just pause one second?

00:41:03

And I just want a yes or no so he can continue. Does he -- is he kind of nailing what it is you're describing?

Deepak Chopra:

No. No.

John Donovan:

Okay. I'll come back.

[laughter]

Okay. Keep going, Michael. Keep going.

Michael Shermer:

Well -- I mean, we -- to get the ultimate answer, "Which worldview is correct," we need to have some way to test it, to experiment with it. How do we know? I mean, if you just say, "It was my internal experience and your internal experience, and we'll never get anywhere," then it's a late-night conversation that's fun, but that's it. Can we do better than that? And yes; we know from neuroscience, for example, that you can -- as Heather mentioned -- knock out parts of the brain. And the function, the mind, the consciousness, whatever word you want to use -- that was doing whatever it was doing there -- is gone. And it's gone forever. Alzheimer's -- when Aunt Millie's brain dies from Alzheimer's, the memories disappear -- they're not going anywhere. They're just gone, because the brain tissue is gone. So, no brain, no mind. The mind isn't anywhere without the brain.

00:42:00

John Donovan:

All right. Anoop, I want to -- so, I'm -- I think we stipulate that your definition of God is -- your claim to necessity is somewhat definitional, that there can't be anything unless this consciousness you're talking about is real and exists. But I want to go beyond definitional to some of the more pragmatic points that your opponents made. And they're saying, for example, you don't need a concept of God -- however defined -- as much as ones -- one once did. This is where the evolution part comes in -- evolving as a society and as a species. Thanks to science, and reason, and enlightenment, we're getting away from superstitious, wrong practices, and how -- and discovering, through the use of reason, and logic, and research a better sense of what's right and wrong. You don't need God. You don't need your god to know right and wrong. What's your response to that?

Anoop Kumar:

Two responses. One is that, even to differentiate right and wrong -- remember, we're talking about God as consciousness.

00:43:01

How are you going to know what's right and wrong if you're not conscious? Without consciousness, how do you --

John Donovan:

But that's not the question --

Anoop Kumar:

-- know whether that's wrong?

John Donovan:

We're conceding -- for the moment, we're going to with your explanation of consciousness.

Anoop Kumar:

[affirmative]

John Donovan:

Their point is, you don't need that to know right and wrong.

Anoop Kumar:

So, we're defining evolution here as a particular understanding of right and a particular understanding --

John Donovan:

Yeah.

Anoop Kumar:

-- of wrong. What I am saying is that as our minds become more subtle, we become more fine-tuned in differentiating what is right? After all, do we really know what's right and wrong. And if so, why isn't it manifesting in the world today? Well, the answer to that is because it depends on each of our minds. So, as the mind becomes more subtle, as it becomes more perceptive, then our very notions of right and wrong become more refined. And that way, that's -- that mind becoming more subtle is a process in consciousness. So, by becoming aware of that more and more, our ideas of right and wrong become refined, and that's exactly what we need that.

John Donovan:

Yeah. Heather.

00:44:00

Heather Berlin:

So, there's lots of experiments which show that morality -- in babies, even -- they're more likely to choose a good puppet over a bad puppet if they watch it do something bad or good. And we can also see that if you get a huge lesion to the prefrontal cortex. People can become unethical and lose their

sense of morality. We know it's tied to brain development and brain function. You know, and they talk a lot about this deep understanding, and the infinite, and you know, places where we can get to via meditation or spiritual practices. You don't need god for that, or traditional God. You can get to deep understanding -- they're all different brain states. We can manipulate them in the lab. We can talk to people and have them get an appreciation and a deep understanding. That doesn't mean that you then get to call that God. So, I still don't -- you know, I don't see that connection. And so, all these needs -- we have need -- compassion, and love, and understanding, and morality. But again -- of course we don't experience them without consciousness. That's how we experience the world. But I think what you're saying is that if we didn't have consciousness, if we didn't exist, the world wouldn't exist, because matter only exists via consciousness.

00:45:07

So, is that true? If none of us were here, if none of us were experiencing the world, it wouldn't exist?

John Donovan:
Deepak.

Deepak Chopra:
That which we call mind, that which we call body, that which we call brain, that which we call the universe are human constructs, human ideas for modes of knowing and experience in human consciousness. Does that make sense to you guys? In the deeper reality --

[laughter]

-- there is no body. There is no mind --

John Donovan:
Can we do a show of hands? I just -- I'm just -- it was a rhetorical question, but --

Deepak Chopra:
Okay. How many people understand what I just said --

John Donovan:
-- those who understand, raise your hands -- or clap so that the audience listening can hear you.

[applause]

Deepak Chopra:
So --

John Donovan:
And those who need a little -- a little more explanation --

Deepak Chopra:
-- what we call --

John Donovan:

Well, I just want to hear the other side.

[applause]

Okay.

00:46:00

Heather Berlin:

[laughs]

John Donovan:

Okay.

Deepak Chopra:

All there is, is God. All there is is consciousness, experiencing -- itself -- in infinite modes of knowing and experience, through every sentient being. As humans, we create constructs. Mind, body, brain, universe. The -- you know, if I asked you this: what's a glass of water? You'd say, "What's this?" It's a hand. "What's this?" It's a shirt. Well, does a baby know that? A baby experiences shape, color, sound, texture, smell, which are activities of consciousness in consciousness. And then you say, "Okay. There's a God. This is you. This -- you're an American. You're male. You're Catholic, or Jewish, or Hindu. You're screwed for the rest of your life."

[laughter]

You don't need --

John Donovan:

[inaudible] Michael.

Deepak Chopra:

-- belief for God. Belief is a cover-up for insecurity. All belief is a cover-up for insecurity.

Michael Shermer:

Well, and I have a lot of insecurities --

Deepak Chopra:

Okay?

Michael Shermer:

-- apparently. [laughs]

Deepak Chopra:

So, what you have to do is go beyond all mental constructs.

00:47:03

You know, I found this beautiful quote by Freeman Dyson [spelled phonetically]. He -- because you know, I was thinking, atheism, theism is just mental ideas in human consciousness, okay? Atheism, theism are mental ideas. Freeman Dyson says, "God is what mind becomes when it crosses the scale of our comprehension."

John Donovan:

Let's let Michael Shermer respond.

Michael Shermer:

That's the God of the Gaps argument. That's just --

Deepak Chopra:

There is only a gap --

Michael Shermer:

-- [unintelligible] understand -- here it is --

Deepak Chopra:

-- Michael. This is the interruption in the gap.

Michael Shermer:

Yeah. Well, okay, so?

[laughter]

But --

[speaking simultaneously]

Deepak Chopra:

-- you have to go through the gap to --

Michael Shermer:

[inaudible] or not.

Deepak Chopra:

You have to go to the gap to experience a thought.

Michael Shermer:

Deepak, Deepak --

John Donovan:

Wait, let me --

Michael Shermer:

Let me just ask you --

John Donovan:

Let me sort this out, because Deepak, I gave you a long run. Let --

Michael Shermer:

Okay. So, let's just do our thought experiment, okay? So -- the asteroid hits the earth and all sentient beings, all conscious life is wiped out on earth. Does -- is the moon still there? Is the [unintelligible] galaxy still there? Is stuff still in the universe?

Deepak Chopra:

The moon, as we know it, is a human experience in human consciousness.

00:48:03

Michael Shermer:

I rest my case.

Heather Berlin:

[laughs]

[laughter]

[applause]

Anoop Kumar:

Well, let me answer that.

John Donvan:

Let me -- let -- I want to hear from Anoop.

Anoop Kumar:

Let me answer that. So, there's a misinterpretation happening here. And that's that when we're saying that consciousness is fundamental, I think the interpretation -- and you guys let me know if it's right or wrong -- is that it's my consciousness that's fundamental. I'm not saying that. I'm not saying that it's mine, or Deepak's, or Heather's, or Michael's or any one person's consciousness that's fundamental. I am saying that the very nature of this is consciousness -- meaning that it's not limited to me. I have a very limited understanding, right? I'm an individual human being. So, what I know is limited. But what I'm saying is whatever this is made of, the very stuff this is made of -- just like in a dream -- in a dream, a character can die. Does the world go away? No. But that doesn't mean that that world is not made of consciousness. It's an impersonal consciousness. And the separation between that personal consciousness -- of the character in the dream -- and the rest of the dream -- like, for example, this hall - - is in the mind.

00:49:04

That's the difference. It's not mine or your consciousness. I'm saying that the consciousness is impersonal.

John Donvan:

Okay.

Male Speaker:

Is this --

John Donovan:

I want to --

Michael Shermer:

-- conscious. Is this conscious?

Anoop Kumar:

No.

Deepak Chopra:

It's an experience in consciousness.

Michael Shermer:

Right. Exactly. I'm not saying that --

John Donovan:

So, I want to -- we're wandering off the motion language to the degree that we're really arguing competing senses of physics and metaphysics. And I just want to get back for a moment to this issue of necessity and the argument that was made for this side that's actually proposing that the more we evolve, the less we need God. And one of their arguments was that secularization of thought and process has actually led to better human behavior over the course of time. They're talking about the ending of slavery, the civil rights movement, that the kind of thinking of things beyond what can be seen and measured and touched has been dangerous and damaging, and that the more that that has been challenged, the better we've become as a species.

00:50:05

Let me bring it to -- Deepak [unintelligible], do you -- I'm calling on Deepak because he explained he does not like to interrupt; so, he's going to raise his hand when he wants to speak, which I'm fine with. So, it's your turn. So, why don't you go for it?

Deepak Chopra:

The necessity for God is the fact that we can't do anything without experience. And all the experience is in the mind, and the mind is an activity in consciousness. What we call matter is the interpretation of an experience on consciousness. Matter is a concept.

John Donovan:

But you -- but I'm sorry to interrupt -- you've said that a bunch of times already. And I want you to address the question, and maybe Anoop will want to --

Deepak Chopra:

Well, the address is -- with -- how can we have this experience without [inaudible] --

John Donovan:

Well, maybe you can help people understand if you come to the -- to this --

Anoop Kumar:
So --

John Donovan:
-- clash of these issues?

Anoop Kumar:
One thing I would say is that I would agree that if I'm going to call religion -- if I'm going to say that "You have to believe in my version of God."

00:51:02

And I put this name -- "This is the name you have to believe in, and by the way, don't investigate that, don't figure it out yourself, don't go into the deeper aspects of religion, such as metaphysical inquiry -- but just believe it blindly," I would agree. That is bad. And any time you believe in something like that, no matter what field it's in, that's going to lead to problems. So, I think any overthrowing of that version of what God is, is good. I think that's beneficial for society, and I would agree with you there. But if you look --

[applause]

That's not what we're talking about. I'm not saying, "Believe in my God." I'm not saying, "Believe in anything." I'm saying, here's a hypothesis. Now, we can live our lives as experiments and figuring it out." So, I'm not talking about just pure belief. If you look at the core of any religion, you will come to spirituality, when they start to sound -- all sound the same. The names will go away. The blind beliefs will go away. And we'll start getting into investigation. So, we are talking about an investigative process.

00:52:00

It's just a direct investigation of one's own identity.

John Donovan:
Heather.

Heather Berlin:
There's so many things. Okay. First, let me just talk about just this pure, subjective experience that you're sort of talking about as God. When we talk about consciousness, it's true. We don't need language. We don't need to be able to call this a cup or a hand. Babies have it. It's pure subjective experience. It's feeling pain, seeing the color red. We don't even need a sense of self for it, okay? So, that's what we're talking about when we we're talking about pure subjective experience. And we all have it. The question is, how can we get more of it? We experience the world via consciousness. Period. That's how we humans experience the world. So, how do we get more of it? We can have different aspects of it. We can see it in a different way. We can have a deeper understanding. All that is great. But that doesn't mean it exists outside of us. And I can even give you that consciousness may be fundamental. It's a property of the universe. We have theories in consciousness -- the integrated

information theory of consciousness, that says any system that has a high degree of integrated information that's differentiated -- integrated meaning it has an effect on each other -- will have a property of consciousness. Yet, it is still instantiated in matter.

00:53:02

That means brains happen to be one of those systems. But other things that have a high degree of integrated information -- degree of integrated information might have the property of consciousness. I can even --

Deepak Chopra:

All of the theories of consciousness are in consciousness alone.

John Donovan:

All right. I want to go to audience questions at this point --

Heather Berlin:

[laughs]

John Donovan:

Give us your name, please.

Female Speaker:

Hi -- Bonnie Jan [spelled phonetically] from New York. To my ear, this side of -- who is against -- has reframed the question. So, I ask the people for the motion, if it were the more we evolve, the less we need consciousness, would you get up and go over there?

John Donovan:

[laughs] That was a pretty clever question. I like that.

Male Speaker:

That's a -- that's --

[applause]

Michael Shermer:

That is a good question. No. [laughs] I think the problem is is the --

Heather Berlin:

We are conscious. We --

Michael Shermer:

-- the word is too broad. I mean, we -- you know, as Vicinsein [spelled phonetically] pointed out, we just -- you know, we have -- we only have language to express our words -- our thoughts between each other.

00:54:01

So, we look for synonyms. You know, consciousness is experience. It's the immeasurable potential. It's invisible. It's all modes of knowing. These are just different ways of saying the same thing. And it -- so, it doesn't really get us anywhere. There's no specific actionable points. Like, what do I do? So, the motion on the table is, you know, what difference does it make? What does it matter? And so, we have to have some definition. That was why I started off with the, you know, survival and flourishing of sentient beings. So, what does it take to do that? And now we have some idea about that. Now if -- now, I should say, just parenthetically, that I kind of went hard on religion. I know that the Quakers and Wilberforce advocated for the abolition of slavery and so on. There are, you know, certain individuals that help the process along. But their biggest opponents were their fellow religious people, their fellow God-believers. So, it's not God itself that's going to get us there. It's some rational argument, some secular reasonable argument. So, the fact that Christians sometimes say, "Well, I've reinterpreted Mark 3:9, and Jesus really meant women should vote" -- okay, fine.

00:55:05

[laughter]

But you're getting there after the movement has already made it progress due to secular rational arguments.

John Donovan:

And I think your partner wants to join in?

Heather Berlin:

Yeah. And I would say, you know, if we think -- if you want to re-define consciousness as saying all of these things -- compassion, and being kind to others, and doing things that are actually real in this world to help people -- again, you don't need the concept of God, or a higher spirit, or something that happened before the Big Bang in order to do those things, in order to live helpful, kind lives, to make everybody's lives better. So, in a sense, I don't think that the more we evolve, the more we need God in this definition as well, because we can find it in other ways. We can get better and improve humanity in other ways without having some either real or false belief system. Either way, we can be compassionate. We can have a deep understanding. We can think about the infinite. We could do the right thing, and we don't need God.

John Donovan:

Okay. I do want to let -- the question wasn't put to the other side --

[applause]

-- but I'd like to let you respond, if you'd like to.

00:56:03

Deepak Chopra:

We need God, or consciousness, to have a thought. We need God, or consciousness, to have insight, intuition, imagination, creativity, introspection. We need God to do science. The secular worldview, with science, has given us climate change, extinction of species, racism, bigotry, hatred, and modern technologies for destruction. Right now, we are --

Michael Shermer:
Science didn't do that.

Deepak Chopra:
-- risking our extinction --

Heather Berlin:
People do that.

Deepak Chopra:
-- because of a science that is incomplete, a science that ignores the source of science, which is consciousness.

Anoop Kumar:
One thing that's hard about this conversation is that when we say what we're calling God is consciousness, it doesn't necessarily oppose anything they're saying, because science is a function in consciousness.

00:57:00

Reason is a function as consciousness. I use science and technology all the time. I think science has done great things. That's not counter to my idea of consciousness. All I'm saying is, it's also more than that. It's not only what we call objective -- which, by the way, there's no such thing. All we mean by objective is less subjective; there are more people that agree on what the subjective is. So, I'm not opposed to anything they're saying. What I'm trying to do is reframe it so that we're not limited to only those ideas, but consciousness or God is much more than that and much more than that, and much more is possible than we already think is possible.

John Donvan:
Sir?

Male Speaker:
Thank you. My name is Jerry Orstrom [spelled phonetically], and I hope that the next questioner is able to depart from our paradigm of consciousness, because I am not able to do that. My question is for the side opposing the resolution. And if -- principally for Anoop. And if you'll bear with my premise for a moment: from a strictly scientific point of view, it was the big bang which gave rise to matter.

00:58:01

And yet, you've asserted that matter is derivative from consciousness. So, then, what kind of consciousness, therefore, came into existence at the moment of the big bang, given that there was no life, from which the matter derived? How do you balance --

Anoop Kumar:
So, one --

Male Speaker:

-- life, consciousness --

Anoop Kumar:
-- of the things --

[applause]

-- that's a great question. One of the things we're assuming here is that consciousness is a product of life. And that's what I said earlier, in the beginning. I think I said birth and death are opposed to each other, but life is unopposed. And here, we could use consciousness, again, as a synonym for that. So, again, by consciousness, I'm not saying that consciousness came into existence when we as humans -- or even when any sentient being came into existence. Just like in a dream, all of the characters may die, but that doesn't mean that the dream itself has to die.

00:59:00

So, similarly, the big bang is a human construct -- I'm not saying it didn't happen. What I'm saying is the way we perceive that big bang -- whatever factors were involved when that big bang started, we're seeing that through a human mind's lens. What is actually was, we don't know. We know how we derive it through the human mind and let that be. So, whatever that is -- but what I'm saying, whatever it is, whatever concept we give to it, that is still a concept of consciousness -- not mine, not yours, not necessarily human. But it is still a concept in consciousness, or some kind of form of consciousness, which we -- then -- humans call, "Oh, it was the big bang, and it was these factors involved."

Heather Berlin:
Can I say something?

John Donovan:
Sure.

Heather Berlin:
I mean, this is just a circular argument, because all you're saying is that --

[applause]

-- all you're saying is the only way we can know anything is via our subjective experience, through -- via our consciousness. And therefore, everything is flawed -- or you're saying, therefore, then, consciousness is fundamental, and that's all there is.

01:00:02

But you just -- I mean, you can't say we can only know the big bang happened because it's subjective, and therefore, subjectivity occurred before the big bang, or that's what made the big bang. I mean, it's - none of it makes sense. And I'm also wondering where you're getting this knowledge from, this grand knowledge that all of us don't seem to have. It's like you're almost preaching it to us, like, "Oh, please. Tell us, what's the answer?" When I don't see where you're getting these answers from.

Anoop Kumar:
I'm getting it from the same place.

[applause]

I'm getting it from the same place you're getting the idea that the idea that the brain is all there is, and it's from the brain that all this stuff occurs.

Heather Berlin:
Oh, so from objective scientific method?

Anoop Kumar:
It's a circular argument --

Heather Berlin:
That's where you're getting it from?

Anoop Kumar:
No. You're getting it --

Heather Berlin:
Because that's where I'm getting it from.

Anoop Kumar:
-- from your own experience. No, you're not. You're getting it from consciousness first. In consciousness, you've experienced a brain, and then you've created concepts --

Heather Berlin:
My only way to experience the world is via consciousness.

Deepak Chopra:
Consciousness is not a concept. Consciousness is the source of all concepts, including the big bang.

[applause]

John Donvan:
We have a question from a viewer on YouTube, Ryan Sterm [spelled phonetically]. This is a question for the team arguing for the motion -- that the more we evolve, the less we need God --

01:01:01

"Seeing as God, in this debate, is being defined subjectively, could you please speak to whether or not the necessity of God" -- in quotation marks -- "Is actually a question on the necessity of subjective experience?"

Michael Shermer:
Well, I think what most --

John Donovan:
Michael Shermer --

Michael Shermer:

-- people in the Western world mean by God is an omniscient, omnipotent being that brought the universe into existence and created us, and loves us, and created an afterlife, and so forth. That's kind of a standard version of that. And the belief in that is really what we're talking about. Do we need -- Dan Danna [spelled phonetically] calls this belief in belief. Do we need to believe that people should believe, because it's good for society? No. I've pretty strongly made that case. Whether there really is such a god is a separate debate. And so, but if you just broaden it and say, "Well, it's just consciousness" -- well, all of this that -- we're just repeating what I call the weak consciousness principle, by definition. It's just circular.

01:02:00

It's -- to be conscious -- to experience consciousness, you have to be conscious. Yeah. No kidding.

[laughter]

As opposed to what? Where else would the concepts come from that we have of the big bang? Of course, they come from our brain. So, what? That doesn't advance us any further to knowing something more about it.

John Donovan:
Okay. Another question.

Female Speaker:

Well, thank you so much for giving me the opportunity to ask a question. I am Nish Amarnal [spelled phonetically]. I'm a journalist writer. And I'm going to be rather futuristic at the moment. So, I have read various studies, and you know, even people saying, you know -- sort of trying to predict how the human race would behave, and look, and function 100, to 500, to even a thousand years from now. And I'm citing professors from the London School of Economics and so on, where, you know, it is believed that the majority of the human race will be more synthetic, more abiological than biological, and so on and so forth.

01:03:00

So, in that context, against that backdrop, do you feel that consciousness would become more fragmented and more of a subjective experience than being a component of --

John Donovan:
Can --

Female Speaker:
-- a universal --

John Donovan:

Can I -- I'm attempting to get us away from, again, arguing the competing metaphysics, because I think -- first of all, we've reached an impasse on that.

[laughter]

I'm -- I mean, you two can meditate again and work it out, but I would want to know if you can phrase your question in terms of this question that we're actually debating tonight. So, would you be willing to -- and if not; I don't want to put words in your mouth -- but would you be willing to say, "In terms of this evolution, if we look 500 years down the road from where we are today, would we be in a situation where this team is -- their point has been proven -- that the less we need God will be proven, or that this team would have their point proven?"

01:04:01

Would that --

Female Speaker:

Well, I guess that's my question. You know, as we evolve --

John Donovan:

Okay.

Female Speaker:

-- as we become, you know, less real versions of ourselves, so to speak. By way of, you know, possibly being -- becoming more abiological, more synthetic, or multi [unintelligible] species and so on --

John Donovan:

Yeah. Okay. I --

Female Speaker:

-- [unintelligible] -- yeah.

John Donovan:

I need to cut you off just so that we can get as many questions in as possible. But I want to -- I do want to take the point that I think you're making -- first to the side arguing for the motion. I'm guessing that your point of view is that since evolution of the species and civilization does not impact on the necessity of God, that 500 years from now, you still don't think that things will have evolved to the point where God is more or less necessary than today.

Deepak Chopra:

We need to understand who wants to understand. We need to understand the nature of understanding. You know, when you propose doing neuroscience, who or what is doing neuroscience? I asked Michael the other day, "What's a thought?" He said, "It's an electrochemical activity here," which means that the electral [spelled phonetically] -- which is a thought in itself, right?

01:05:06

So, the electrochemical activity in here is making an existential statement about itself, which is totally ridiculous.

[laughter]

Heather Berlin:

I -- so, you know, I think --

John Donovan:

Heather, how totally ridiculous?

Heather Berlin:

Well, we have these huge egos, and we think consciousness is so important. But actually, when you really look at it, most of what's happening that's affecting our behavior, the decisions we're making, and even helping us survive is happening outside of awareness, unconsciously, okay? And that's what much of the brain is doing. I'm actually more interested in the neural basis of these unconscious processes. And I think as we evolve, it's inevitable that unless we kill ourselves first -- hopefully we don't -- that in 500 years, we're going to start integrating with technology, we're going to have neuro-prosthetics. They're going to increase our ability to have memory capacity, need for sleep, maybe make our dreams more vivid. We can actually record from your brain and see what you're dreaming now, you know? We can see these images. It all is happening in the brain, as far as we can see. But we don't even need consciousness.

01:06:01

You know, I think that ultimately, if the world -- the machines might take over, and maybe everything is just running on auto-pilot. But the fact that we put so much emphasis on this one little bit of the way that we experience the world, I think, is very egotistical.

Deepak Chopra:

Earlier, I started by saying that consciousness is all modes of knowing and experience in all sentient beings, not "we." Okay? What do you mean by the word "we," by the way? When you say the word "I" -- who or what are you referring to?

Heather Berlin:

A collection of my experiences over time. I don't even think there's a real me. I think the concept of me is another invention of my brain, and it can change. And I could knock it out in people where they have no sense of self. So, I'll give you that. There is no I. I'm a collection of molecules that organized itself in such a way -- like Carl Sagan said, you know, we are the cosmos --

Deepak Chopra:

Who came up --

Heather Berlin:

-- [unintelligible] to know itself.

Deepak Chopra:

Who or what came up with the construct molecules?

Heather Berlin:

I'm not going to get into this debate, but it's basically --

John Donovan:

I think it was Ezra Molecule.

01:07:01

[laughter]

Heather Berlin:

It's --

John Donovan:

Named it after --

Heather Berlin:

-- all -- the only way I can --

Deepak Chopra:

A molecule is --

Heather Berlin:

-- know the world is through my subjective experience.

Michael Shermer:

Yeah. We're just back to where we were.

Heather Berlin:

Yeah.

Michael Shermer:

Yeah.

John Donovan:

Okay. Yeah.

[laughter]

Right down in the front, here.

Male Speaker:

So, I hope this question for the opposition will cut through the metaphysical impasse. So, you're defining God as consciousness, and ultimately, all of reality. It's kind of hard to argue against consciousness and reality. So, let's go with that, and say, within that consciousness, there's a component or a concept of God as sort of the deity in Christianity, or Islam, or Judaism -- what most people think of as God, probably. Do you think we need less of that?

Deepak Chopra:

Well, if you look at our longings and aspirations for truth, for love, for compassion, for joy, for equanimity, for transcendence, then all these deities are symbolic manifestations of that aspiration in human consciousness.

01:08:11

So, they have a role. You know, when I think of a higher being as an idol -- Krishna, or Shiva, or Mahesura [spelled phonetically], or whatever -- actually, that's a symbolic representation of a longing for the inseparability of existence where there is no separation, and automatically, there's the emergence of platonic values such as love.

John Donovan:

Right down in the front here. Thank you.

Female Speaker:

Hi. I'm Kerry Sheffield [spelled phonetically] from New York. And Deepak said something interesting about how some of the worst horrors in human history have come from because of the rejection of God.

01:09:00

And you, Michael, you talked about secular societies, as, you know, paradise on earth. But the Wall Street Journal ran a really telling op-ed recently about the 100th anniversary of the Soviet Revolution, and how, you know, not only Soviet experience, but also communism in China. Basically, 100 years and a 100 million deaths by regimes that repressed religion, they repressed the notion of God -- that repressed human expression as it relates to thinking about God. So, how would you respond to that? And also then, also, you mentioned --

John Donovan:

I'm going to stop you at that one question --

Female Speaker:

Oh.

John Donovan:

-- it's good. And thank you for some recognizable facts brought into the conversation.

[laughter]

Michael Shermer:

Yay, so the whole, you know, Marxist, Leninist movement was a faux religion, in essence. They didn't do these things in the name of atheism. Atheism isn't even a thing to be. It's just lack of belief in God, full stop. They believed in certain economic doctrines and ideological doctrines that were, in fact, quite anti-Enlightenment, not at all in favor of equal rights, and free speech, and all the things that we think of when we think of civil liberties and civil rights.

01:10:10

They were quite against that. So, actually, your example is one I make, it -- to show how what happens when you go off the rails of these core principles of Enlightenment values, particularly rights.

John Donovan:

I'm wondering, Anoop, do you feel that that question gave some evidence for your side -- helps to make your case?

Anoop Kumar:

You know, I think, if you hold a belief too strongly without investigating it, it doesn't matter what the belief is. You can believe in a scientific principle. You can believe in a religious principle. It can have nothing to do -- it can be artistic. But if we're just believing things without doing some kind of research, whether -- I think we disagree on what qualifies as research. That's fair. But I think we both agree on that. So, I think, you know, whatever side you're on -- if it's an uninvestigated belief and we're holding it tightly, that's going to lead to problems.

[applause]

Male Speaker:

Hi. So, my name is Philip Ruddy [spelled phonetically]. I'm a Xavier High School student.

01:11:02

And so, my question is specifically to the opposition. So, we've spoken a lot about -- or you've spoken a lot about consciousness, and less of it is -- if I'm understanding this correctly, which -- debatable -- but consciousness, it's not necessarily an individual perception; rather something that we're all involved in, is that -- and God is consciousness, which is what you claimed -- so, specifically in reference to the motion, do we need -- is there more of a need for God or is this simply just a continuum? I mean -- because understanding the --

John Donovan:

Okay. You -- you got to the question. There was a question mark there.

Male Speaker:

Yes.

John Donovan:

So, let's let Deepak take that one.

Deepak Chopra:

We need to understand ourselves as consciousness in order to evolve, because every other identity you have, whether it's of the body, of the mind, or anything else, is a provisional identity. The only true identity that you have is the awareness in which you're experiencing your body, your mind, and everything else.

01:12:00

So, in order to progress, in order to create even AI -- artificial intelligence -- augmented reality -- we need to understand this reality, which is a virtual reality to begin with.

Male Speaker:

So, my name is Keith Camino [spelled phonetically] from the non-profit LifeSpan [unintelligible]. So, I want to focus this on the motion, because I do think we are [unintelligible] a little bit, so --

John Donovan:

You think?

[laughter]

Male Speaker:

We're working with, basically, broadly speaking, two different definitions of God, here. Over here, we're talking about God as sort of a societal tool and how that might not be great and all the flaws with here. And over here, I think --

John Donovan:

It's a pragmatic explanation of God.

Male Speaker:

Yeah.

John Donovan:

Okay.

Male Speaker:

And over here, there is -- it's more of a discussion -- if I'm understanding this right -- of -- there may be a limit of what is in the sphere of human scientific knowledge, in which -- you know, like consciousness, God, may be more than that --

John Donovan:

Okay.

Male Speaker:

-- and we are a subset of it. My question, to focus it on the motion, is -- assuming that definition, that there's something outside, potentially, of human reasoning, is that idea societally useful in the sense of inspiration in the sublime and that sort of thing?

01:13:12

John Donovan:

I love that question. Thank you.

[applause]

That's a question more aimed to this side, I think. So, why don't you take that?

Heather Berlin:
Well --

John Donovan:
Do you want to take that, Deepak?

Deepak Chopra:
Absolutely. In order to investigate the nature of reality, you have to ask who or what wants to know that? Science is very good. It's a method of investigation, but it's half of the equation. Who or what is doing the science? So, science is about the world out there. And what we call spirituality, or consciousness, or God, is that which is doing the science. You need both. Otherwise, we are a fragmented world, a fragmented science, that leads to problems. It leads to problems because we look at science as, "There's me and there's the rest of the universe."

01:14:05

But actually, that which I call my -- me is also part of the wholeness.

John Donovan:
You know, I went to high school on 84th Street. I was a Jesuit high school. And the Jesuits drove us crazy by answering every question with a question.

Deepak Chopra:
[laughs]

John Donovan:
And I -- are you actually a Jesuit?

Deepak Chopra:
[laughs] I went to a Jesuit school.

John Donovan:
Did you?

Deepak Chopra:
Yeah.

[laughter]

John Donovan:
And that concludes Round 2 of this Intelligence Squared U.S., where our motion is The More We Evolve, The Less We Need God.

[applause]

And now we move on to Round 3. And in Round 3, we have closing statements by each debater in turn. To make her closing statement, please welcome, once again, cognitive neuroscientist, Heather Berlin.

[applause]

Heather Berlin:

Okay. So, can we have a sense of purpose without God?

01:15:00

And for me as a scientist, that's not hard to answer. The excitement of discovery, the story of how we humans have used reason and science to illuminate the universe around us, while improving the quality of life for billions of people. That story is far more inspiring than any story told in a religious text or here on this stage. At -- and that story has the benefit of evidence behind it. It has the benefit of perhaps being true, at least to the best of our knowledge. The fact is, people do find other sources of meaning and purpose when they lose their sense of religion, or even God. Atheists, as a group, are not wallowing in depression or existential angst, and they're no more likely to behave immorally than believers are. And we scientists are enthusiastic, engaged, and optimistic about the real-world benefits our work is generating. For instance, the U.N. Sustainability Goals -- none of which require a belief in God -- include ending hunger, and poverty, providing education, and clean water for everyone, protecting the environment, reducing inequality.

01:16:08

If that's not a sense of purpose, I don't know what is. And insofar as competing visions of God or what God is, are still a motive for violence in the world, or for oppressing women, homosexuals, or non-believers -- then belief in God is currently holding us back. Now, many people still believe in God, and they need God in their lives, and that's okay. But that's not the motion you're being asked to vote on. The motion isn't does less of each of us needs God, the motion is the less we need God -- we, as a human species, all of us together. And I'm sympathetic to the comfort that belief in God can give people, and I wouldn't be arrogant to claim that everyone needs that comfort, especially when more and more people clearly do not. It's an empirical fact that we humans, on average, need God less than we used to for explanations, for community, and for comfort. And if you agree, or even if you think the modern world has diminished any of the needs that God has once filled, then logically, the motion is correct.

01:17:03

We need God less. And I urge you to vote for the motion.

[applause]

John Donvan:

Thank you, Heather Berlin. And that motion again -- The More We Evolve, The Less We Need God.

[applause]

And making his closing statement, Deepak Chopra, integrative medicine advocate and founder of the Chopra Foundation. Ladies and gentlemen, again, Deepak Chopra.

[applause]

Deepak Chopra:

So, I'd like to start with two quotes -- one from Ritkenstein [spelled phonetically], that Michael Schurer quoted. Ritkenstein said, "We are asleep. Our life is a dream. But once in a while, we wake up enough to know that we are dreaming." The second quote is from the Buddha, who said, "This lifetime of ours is transient as autumn clouds. To watch the birth and death of being is like looking at the movements of a dance. A lifetime is like a flash of lightning in the sky, rushing by like a torrent down the steep mountain."

01:18:05

So, my friends, I ask you, what happened to your childhood? It's gone. What happened to this morning? It's gone. What happened to five minutes ago? It's gone. What happened to one second ago? It's gone. Everything that we think of as the past, the big bang, it's a blurred concept with mathematical imagination and human consciousness. The past doesn't exist. The future doesn't exist. And that which we call now moves on before you can grasp it. So, I'm going to ask you to do just one thing right now. As you're listening to me, just turn your attention to that which is listening.

01:19:02

This presence is awareness, and you need this presence to evolve, to do science, to do any other investigation. Wake up.

[applause]

John Donvan:

Thank you, Deepak Chopra. The motion, again, The More We Evolve, The Less We Need God. And here making his closing statement in support of the motion, Michael Shermer, publisher of Skeptic Magazine. Michael Shermer.

[applause]

Michael Shermer:

Well, I think our side made a compelling case, that the more we evolve, the less we need God. So, let me take a crack at our questioners -- where are we going to be in 500 years? Now, with the proviso that the super forecasters, after five years' predictions, fold at randomness [spelled phonetically]. So -- this is the best I can do. I think what we've been experiencing over the last several centuries will continue.

01:20:01

That is, the expansion of the moral sphere to include more sentient beings, more of our own species, as deserving of equal rights and equal treatment. When I wrote my book on this, "The Moral Arc" in 2015, the gay marriage thing hadn't yet been settled. That's done. We can tick that box. Next, I think, probably, will be animal rights, and then possibly, probably within a century or two, that of rights for AI - for intelligent beings -- for data, so to speak. You know, beyond that, it's hard to say. I think the idea of consciousness, if we use it in the terms like our -- the civil rights activists did, consciousness raising -- what does that mean? We're expanding our consciousness to include the perspective of other people. What would it feel like if I was treated that way? So, to this extent, something like the Golden Rule,

which was discovered long before any organized religions, it's a principle of reciprocal altruism and evolutionary theory. It makes perfect sense that I have to make my case for you to treat me that I would want -- for me to treat you the way I would want you to treat me.

01:21:00

That's about as fundamental of human psychology as it gets. And I think that's what we've been getting better at over the centuries. And despite the little down-ticks we have occasionally, of negative things that make the news, the good news -- follow the trend lines, not the headlines -- continues to go in our own time and will continue for centuries to come. I think that the -- and the fastest growing religious group in the world are the nones, the people that have no religious affiliation. And atheism is growing, and so on. I think we don't need that. The tools -- the things that we call religion and belief in God are actually just certain tools. We need love, and family, and meaningful work, and productivity, and the basic necessities of life, and once we have those, we don't need the superstitions from our Bronze Age ancestors. Thank you.

[applause]

John Donovan:

Thank you, Michael Shermer. The motion: The More We Evolve, The Less We Need God. Here to make his closing statement against the motion: Anoop Kumar, emergency physician, author of "Michelangelo's Medicine." Ladies and gentlemen, again, Anoop Kumar.

01:22:00

[applause]

Anoop Kumar:

You know, I had some closing remarks prepared, but seeing the nature of the conversation, I feel like I have to say something else. I'm not sure what that is yet, because I think most of us would agree that we're kind of talking past each other. We're offering different world views, and how can we bring that together? You know, fundamentally, I don't know if we can. And maybe that's part of the debate, is to say that too. I think the way that we experience the world -- I think most of us would agree on this -- the way that we experience the world and ourselves is entirely dependent on our minds. And, we can say, brains. I don't have a problem with saying that too. The way we experience ourselves is dependent on our minds and our brains. So, if we're having fundamentally different experiences, how do we capture that? How do we come together on that? What I would say is that each of us has a sense of identity that is extremely fickle. When we dream, our identity shifts from this character to that character.

01:23:03

When we sleep, our identity disappears. And what we're saying is that this identity can become more and more subtle. It can delocalize. And as it does, what we're calling the ultimate aspect of that -- the endpoint of that, perhaps -- is consciousness. That's what we're calling as God, and maybe we just differ on that, and that's okay. However, if you agree that the sense of identity is something that's constantly changing, that can become more subtle -- and ultimately, even theoretically, can be boundless, can be infinite -- then that is you. That is you. And the more we evolve, the more we need to recognize that.

That's why I urge you to vote against the motion. The more we evolve, the more we need to understand the infinite.

[applause]

01:24:01

John Donovan:

The first thing I want to say is this was a challenging debate. There's no question about it. It was really fascinating and interesting, and one of the more interesting and fascinating things was the respect in which each side held the other, actually. I only heard the word "ridiculous" once --

[applause]

It came from my Jesuit-educated friend here. And also, I just want to -- I want to say, in your opening statements, you made a joke that you are God. And now I realized you weren't kidding. I mean --

[laughter]

Deepak Chopra:

I say everybody is God --

John Donovan:

Yeah.

Deepak Chopra:

-- in drag.

John Donovan:

Yeah. But I want to congratulate the debaters for the way they conducted themselves, because it was really good. So, thank you for that.

Male Speaker:

Thank you.

[applause]

John Donovan:

And I'm curious, as the evening unfolded, did you hear -- did any of you hear from your opponents -- and I'll start with you, Heather -- the answer does not have to be a kumbaya "Yes." I just want to know, did you hear anything from your opponents that made you, in fact, think twice?

01:25:00

I actually thought that I heard you, in the course of the evening, you know, make some concessions to some points that they made, but maybe I'm wrong.

Heather Berlin:

I mean, these are things that I've thought about before --

John Donovan:
Yeah.

Heather Berlin:
-- you know, if I can expand my consciousness, and it can be outside of my body, and I could be one with everything, that would be fantastic. It sounds great. I love that idea. I'm not against it. But as far as I know, and the years of people trying to understand this, and using consciousness -- we've had it the whole time. Right? We haven't yet come to any -- not even a shred of evidence.

John Donovan:
So, no. The answer is no.

Heather Berlin:
No. I mean, I wish. I wish --

John Donovan:
Okay.

Heather Berlin:
I want it.

John Donovan:
Fair enough.

Heather Berlin:
But it's unfortunate that we just haven't gotten there yet. And I hope that we will at some point, but I just --

John Donovan:
Okay.

Heather Berlin:
-- think we haven't --

John Donovan:
From the other side, how about you, Deepak?

Deepak Chopra:
How many people in this room have experienced transcendence or oneness?

Heather Berlin:
Yeah.

John Donovan:
Just for the people who are not able to see --

Heather Berlin:
And that's an experience --

John Donovan:
-- I see about a third of the audience --

Heather Berlin:
-- of your brain.

John Donovan:
How about you, Anoop?

01:26:00

Did you hear anything in the evening that made you think twice about your position?

Anoop Kumar:
Yeah. I did. You know, the big thing that I see, when I hear many of the things you're saying -- I don't want to disagree. You know, I don't -- it feels weird to feel like I'm against this, because I'm not -- I don't feel like, in my own heart of hearts, I don't feel like I'm disagreeing with most of what you're -- there are some things I clearly disagree with. But I don't really feel like I'm disagreeing with most of it. I'm just seeing it in a different frame. I -- it's in a different context to me. So, I appreciate all the arguments about the brain being necessary, and then the brain seems to produce concepts. I get all that. I felt --

John Donovan:
Yeah.

Anoop Kumar:
-- that same way as well. I see it in a different light now.

John Donovan:
How about you, Michael?

Michael Shermer:
Yeah. I think the idea that consciousness through -- discovery of consciousness, through, say, meditation is an excellent technology or tool for understanding yourself better, understanding other peoples better -- perhaps even this consciousness raising thing I was talking about.

01:27:01

I don't think you need any of the metaphysical backdrop to get the benefits of the technologies or tools you're proposing. And to that extent, I think if everybody meditated instead of whatever they do in Vegas or whatever causes people to go crazy, that would be good. You know --

John Donovan:
All right. A little bit about Intelligence Squared right now. There are a lot of people who are supporting Intelligence Squared U.S., and we would like to increase that number. For those of you don't know, we operate as a philanthropy, and we rely on donations. And I know that many of you bought tickets, and

that helps, but if you liked what you saw, would like to see more of this, we are working on growing. We're growing successfully. But we need more support, and there is a way for you to contribute to us through -- by going through our app again. And you'll find ways to donate. And we would greatly, greatly appreciate to keep that going. You can get more information on everything that we're doing on our website, IQ2US.org.

01:28:01

And now it's time to learn which side you believe has argued the best. We're going to ask you again to vote. Remember how we do this. It's the difference between the first and the second vote that determines our winners. Our motion is this -- The More We Evolve, The Less We Need God.

In the first vote, 47 percent of you agreed with the motion, 31 percent of you were against the motion, 22 percent were undecided. Those are the first results. In the second result, the team arguing for the motion, The More We Evolve, The Less We Need God, their first vote was 47 percent. Their second vote was 67 percent. They picked up 20 percentage points.

[applause]

That's the number to beat. The team against the motion, their first vote was 31 percent. Their second vote was 26 percent. They lost five percentage points. That means the debate goes to the team arguing in favor of the motion -- The More We Evolve, The Less We Need God.

[applause]

Our congratulations to them. Thank you from me, John Donovan, and Intelligence Squared U.S. We'll see you next time.

01:29:00

[end of transcript]

This is a rough transcript. Please excuse any errors.