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Donald D. O'Neal is an equity portfolio manager at Capital Group, a global investment management firm. He has 37 years of investment experience, doing fundamental research on businesses, evaluating management teams, and analyzing security prices. He views capital markets as places where probabilities require constant evaluation, which gives him on-going practice at assessing what is most likely, the theme of his essay.

Don holds an MBA from Stanford Graduate School of Business, and a bachelor's degree in Nuclear Engineering from University of California, Los Angeles, from which he graduated summa cum laude. He worked as a "rocket scientist" after college. He is currently the board chair of Hope Solutions, a not-for-profit agency that fights homelessness in Contra Costa County, California.

Which is More Likely?

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Let's say you come across a piano in the jungle. Either someone created it, or the parts randomly assembled themselves, because they had an infinite number of attempts. The latter is at the heart of arguments explaining a world without God. But, with common sense, which is more likely?

Consider the fundamental constants of the universe (gravity, speed of light, elementary charge, etc.), which are complex, and interact to give us the reality we observe. Amazingly, they are "tuned" just right. Like a piano. Either God set these constants, or somehow, it randomly worked out perfectly. Because the second is obviously unlikely, a current popular theory is that there must be an infinite number of alternate universes (a.k.a., the multiverse), each with its own laws of physics, and we just happen to know about one. So, we rely on infinity to bail us out of considering God, and we stretch for something highly improbable, so that we can have an explanation.

Consider also the theory of evolution/ natural selection to explain every single living thing on earth. At a micro level, once you have birds, it is observably true that beaks, colors, etc. change minutely over time in response to their environment. But the macro case is not so clear. How did we get a bird in the first place? Here's the Darwinian logic: Start with a single cell (of unknown origin), add infinite genetic mutations, then anything can happen. That again relies on infinity to bail us out of considering God. In addition, it's dubious to claim that anything can happen in the physical world. Sometimes, complexity is irreducible. Charles Darwin himself said "If it could be demonstrated that any complex organ existed which could not possibly have been formed by numerous, successive, slight modifications, my theory would absolutely break down." Thus, as an example, I give you a bird wing, complex indeed, so that by evolution there must have been tens of millions of years of animals with pre-wings. Not only is this not evident in the fossil record, but it seems to violate the rules of natural selection. How could a non-functional, energy-inefficient blob on the side of a pre- bird be favored? Yet today, no one questions evolution as the explanation.

Scientists take God out, because that is popular in current society, and because historically, religions endorsed some embarrassing primitive beliefs. That doesn't mean there is no God. Illustratively, the current Big Bang theory fits perfectly with God's existence, but we just can't say that. Personally, I find the multiverse theory as embarrassing as any primitive belief.

Some questions, like the existence of God, are poorly suited for science, because no repeatable testing is possible. For these, common sense and probabilistic thinking matter. If we allow for God, we get sensible arguments for pianos, fundamental constants, and complex organisms. If we do not, we merely substitute infinity for God and pretend we've eliminated uncertainty, while enduring weak explanations. Which is more likely?