

Godel's Theorem - what it implies about religious faith

Godel's Theorem, or the Incompleteness Theorem, appeared in the thirties.

The Theorem proves that no matter what kind of mathematical or logical system you develop, it will contain guesses and assumptions that cannot be proved. Thus there is a chance that 1 and 1 are not 2. Knowledge is then necessarily incomplete. Or you may prefer to say that knowledge doesn't exist and what we call knowledge is simply a well-established belief.

The good thing about the Theorem is that it reminds us to have the humility to be always open-minded and in all things.

The Theorem proves that no human thinker can formally prove her or his own consistency in thinking. You cannot prove you are fully rational or that you are as rational as you think you are. You cannot prove there are no contradictions or errors in your thinking.

We tend to disparage those who disagree with us. We like to think we are so clever that our beliefs are correct and this leads us to such arrogance. We make assumptions and create beliefs to help us make sense of the world so that we feel safer and in better control. That is why we easily hate people in groups other than ours who differ from us in belief. We are afraid they will challenge the beliefs we deploy for a sense of safety.

Born to Believe, Andrew Newberg MD and Mark Robert Waldman, Free Press, New York, 2006 page 278 states that your recognition and acceptance of reality depends on three principle criteria.

First the experience must be vivid and seem real though it might not be. You believe in tables for you have touched them and seen them and had your dinner at them.

Second work out how the experience fits in with your other experiences. For example, in your experience plastic does not turn into gold. If you see a plastic table turning into gold you dismiss the experience as an illusion or a hallucination. God has shown you may be guessing how it fits in more than you realise.

Third others encourage your perception of reality by agreeing with it - interpersonal validation. Their agreeing with you has nothing at all to do with proving your belief right or sufficiently credible but you are programmed to see it as reinforcing it.

Those things support Godel's Theorem.

What we must remember then is that if we believe in God, then God by definition is all that matters. Our belief is idolatrous in so far as we don't know where or when we are guessing in order to help develop the belief. The perception of God we have made is more important to us than him.

And it shows nobody should be accused by Catholic fundamentalists or accuse themselves of committing mortal sin - sin that divorces God wholly. We just cannot have the full knowledge necessary to commit such a sin.

We tend to be grateful to things when they benefit us. We feel a sense of gratitude towards the car that gets us to hospital. We kick and curse the car and swear at it when it breaks down. We treat events and things as if they consciously bless us and curse us. It is no wonder then we so easily and too easily believe in God and pray to God. Our motivation is suspect - we are probably idolaters nearly all the time anyway. Godel's theorem makes it even more suspicious than it is!